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On Coopted Feminism and The Normalization of Hyper-Sexualized Female Music Artists

Sexual objectification of female music artists has become a normalized component of popular media, and the cultural “gaze” appears to have divided us into two camps: Those who consent to (including those who accede to power as a result of) female sexualization as mere entertainment, and those who criticize it as damaging to women, girls, and society as a whole. This divisiveness sparks feminist discourse and, in our comment-friendly, social media saturated society, popular media producers and spectators eagerly lend their voices to the debate. A crucial point is that female musicians are hyper-sexualized while their male counterparts do not receive the same treatment. Underlying this problem is the music industry itself, which not only manufactures music for artists, it constructs their image brands, as well. For these reasons – feminist and cultural discourse around the issue; differences in representations of female and male music artists; and the hegemonic forces of the music business – further analysis of the normalized hyper-sexualization of female music artists is warranted.

Given the unique historical development of portrayals of sexuality among popular female music artists, it is my view that, rather than just the product of natural, cultural evolution or the outcome of female agency in expressions of empowerment, the rapid hyper-sexualization of women is a conscious appropriation by white, male, heteronormative, hegemonic forces, in this case, the Hollywood entertainment industrial complex. Due to the power of the entertainment industry and its media outlets, the essence, the vision, and the progress of women’s struggles for equality have been consciously coopted by the industry and repackaged as a drug-like, hyper-sexualization of female power to create a voracious need for amusement here in the US. This amounts to a renewable diversionary tactic designed to further divide and conquer both males...
and females into unsatisfied, unsatisfiable content creators and content consumers. This byline to an article by Max Berger (2015) sums it up for me: “We’ve been here before, and we know that a violent backlash is at its fiercest when movements for racial and gender justice are winning.” Every time feminists make gains, entertainment powers-that-be change the look of suppression, and it gets uglier. Women music artists who buy in to the franchise become saleable packages that stand to make millions of dollars, giving them economic freedom, public influence by way of their celebrity status, and the sense of creative control in their careers. What more could a woman want?

The upshot is largely deceitful. This entertainment fantasy “emancipation” is little more than a coopting and commodification of feminism in all its waves, played out in a continual revamping of increasingly sexual postures, clothing and makeup, song lyrics, and other texts specific to music performance. The audio/visual erotica is designed by the industry to thwart and subvert authentic female power and equality of performers and everyday women and girls, who are offered fake notions of “empowerment” and “freedom” that ultimately serve industry moguls and other music business investors. This is done effectively and efficiently through a self-generating industry model that convinces female music performers and their audiences that they have agency by simply stating that they are feminists or advocates for “girl power,” and that taking charge of their own sexuality is their form of empowerment. But who gave them this idea? Was it feminists, or was it the male-dominated power structures running the music industry?

A 2012 scholarly article, “Women in Popular Music Media: Empowered or Exploited?”, summed up the feminist side of the debate: Radical libertarians support female hyper-sexualization as way of expressing personal agency and freedom, while others claim that power systems use female sexualization for their own purposes without regard to real-world women’s social and economic needs (Glantz 11). Whether in formal feminist circles or in everyday discussions on blogs, there are, it seems, no “neutrals” when it comes to sexualizing female human beings: we either rail against it or accept it. Shrugging off the deleterious effects of this
hyper-sexualization might even be a cultured response, as explained by DeLuca and Peeples (2002), who point an accusing finger at television as the medium that has “transformed our social context,” which, among other evils, “places a premium on... the glance over the gaze” (133) [italics added]. In this sense, our culture has become inured, that is, normalized, to each revealing level of female sexualization via the entertainment industry’s capitalization of television for communicating its agenda. I hesitate to call DeLuca and Peeples’ position “neutral” when they claim that the responsibility of culture critics is “neither to adopt a moral pose nor to express yearnings for a mythical past, but to explore what is happening and what is possible under current conditions” (134). And yet negating history and current conditions while minimizing our collective “so what?” attitude is troubling, because beneath both debate camps lies the same ground, which is the appropriation and commodification of women’s sexuality – their very, and often veridical, femininity operates as currency in all aspects of the industry. If we as a society blindly accept that women music artists are deigned to use their sexuality as a sort of entrance fee into our cultural power structures, aren’t we ignoring the dehumanizing consequences for all female humans? What does it cost for a female to be a member of culture? The latest iteration of third wave feminists and their radical libertarian followers, whom I call into question, might dismiss my investigation, asserting that women who take control of their sexuality, whether in private or in public, are, indeed, empowering themselves. In the early nineties, I might have agreed.

In order to create a visual impression of the problem for the reader, I will offer descriptions of the images, lyrics, and artistic philosophies of three of the most popular female artists of 2015: Nicki Minaj, Beyoncé, and Miley Cyrus. Then, for the sake of establishing a historical context for the problem, I will provide a brief overview of popular female music artists throughout the three waves of feminism. This will include a discussion of physical image (clothing, makeup, movement) and lyrical content in light increased sexualization of female music artist. The aughts up until now offer unique conditions that highlight what I consider a music industry-created crisis in feminism; I will include discussion about female music artists as
role models. This will lead into my analysis of token female music performers, like Minaj, Beyoncé, and Cyrus, and how they problematize cultural absorption, normalization, and self-generation of hyper-sexualization of females. Further frustrating the situation is the female music artist *short-term person-brand* model, which is designed to maximize music industry entertainment value and profit – I will discuss this as tethered to tokenism in forming a cultural conundrum that leads to a crucial moment in feminist activism. Finally, I offer more interpretation of female sexuality as currency in the industry. Together, these analyses and interpretations form my overarching claim that the male-dominated music industry and the sensation-seeking media work as hegemonic co-conspirators in coopting explicit femaleness for their profit while exacting payment from female performers in renewed forms of hyper-sexuality and simultaneously given them license to claim status as “feminists” and to attain fame and fortune, thus continually thwarting feminist progress by twisting and turning it on itself.

So how exactly do hyper-sexualized female music artists present themselves in the real world? As the popular retort says, “It’s complicated.” Consider, for example, Nicki Minaj, known for her rapping mastery – and for wearing over-the-top, colorful, cartoonish costumes that highlight her large, perfectly round breasts and her buttocks, both of which appear augmented by cosmetic surgery. In a 2012 interview on ABC’s *Nightline* (Nicki), Minaj wears a black mesh shirt over a plunging black bra, showing her entire cleavage, just shy of her nipples, down to her waistline. Various ringed and riveted leather belts and chains decorate the outfit, making it suggestive of sexual bondage clothing. As far as Minaj’s artist philosophy, she shows her true colors early on in the interview. Viewers see clips of her concert footage, with her wearing outfits that reveal and feature her breasts, buttocks, legs, and crotch, while she moves in sexualized ways (e.g., thrusting her pelvis forward and backward, as during sexual intercourse). She is also shown with her young female fans, perhaps three to five years old, who dress like her, talk like her, and even perform her rap songs that have explicit lyrics. Then viewers see a music video clip that shows her entering a multimillion-dollar mansion, wearing an elegant gown that features her pushed-up breasts. At this point, interviewer Juju Chang offers this off-camera line
about the artist: “Songs like [Minaj’s] “Moment for Life” could be an anthem for feminism” (Nicki). Then, on-camera, Chang says to Minaj, “But there’s also a ‘girl power’ flavor to it”; Minaj replies, “Yeah, it makes girls feel…like they can do anything” (Nicki) [italics added]. Minaj’s sponsor, the music business, is responsible for promoting their female music artists as products. In the case of Nicki Minaj, the industry pits her as a cartoon, a girl-friendly rapper who dismisses her overtly sexual clothing, movements, and lyric content as meaningless but talks about wanting to “empower” girls. Minaj, via the industry and the media, literally says one thing and does another, and this is common of female megastars today. All female music artists at the mega-superstar level of Minaj are subject to the “gaze” of the music industry through the media, and later I will address how the industry’s model for success for female music artists creates this gaze. For now, in the interview described above, I see that Chang successfully shifted the conversation from one about feminism to one about “girl power,” perhaps elevating the idea that girls see Minaj as a worthy, powerful role model, but minimizing that feminists do not. Further complicating the shift, neither Chang nor Minaj define what they mean by “it;” thus leaving viewers to fill in their own notions. In a third twist within the same interview, Minaj says, “But – but – I didn’t come in the game to be an artist that appealed to kids, either” (Nicki). This handily refutes the footage (cleverly shown before her statement), of 3- and 4-year-old girls fawning over Minaj, dressed like her, and rapping her explicit lyrics. The interview both mocks Minaj’s influence and calls out her equivocation. Looking at this segment of the interview critically, one could argue that ABC’s producers framed the interview to highlight Minaj’s lack of clarity on feminism, painting her as a feminist poseur – and this feeds into what I call the current “wavelessness” of the feminist movement. With nothing solid to hold onto, viewers of Minaj and other female music megastars are left to draw their own conclusions about what feminism “is” and how to claim agency. They likely rely on the easy-to-recall mediatized images bombarding their senses.

Another example of this industry-created conundrum in feminism is female R&B/Pop music artist is Beyoncé, whose 2014 appearance at the MTV Video Music Awards (VMAs)
ceremony featured her silhouetted against a massive stage backdrop with the lighted word “FEMINISM.” Ms. Magazine took on the issue of Beyoncé’s theatrical feminist stance, stating, “…when women like Beyoncé proudly proclaim feminism, they tend to invite more debates than affirmation” (Hobson). In a recent video, she dances, wearing panties and a sweatshirt, and later is joined by other female dancers. They all wear men’s underwear while dancing and drinking sloppily from red plastic Solo cups as she sings, “Don’t you drop that alcohol / Never drop that alcohol” (Beyoncé). Beyoncé off-stage is a wife and mother, and yet she performs in men’s underwear, a reference to so-called feminists who adopt traditionally male attitudes, clothing, language, and dominating personalities in order to gain access to the hegemonic inner-world run largely by rich white heterosexual males. She shows up in the final segment of the video wearing a Playboy sweatshirt. The whole video looks like a small party of college girls and, judging from the lyrics, they are playing the drinking game “7/11 Doubles” (Piwowarski), while wearing panties with the word “smack” on the derriere side. It all seems harmless enough, but consider that in 2001 as a member of the girl group Destiny’s Child, Beyoncé was shown scantily clad in their “Survivor” music video, in which she crawled on hands and knees in sexual poses, regularly touching her breasts and crotch. The video also features close-up shots of her legs, breasts, buttocks, and crotch – when her face is shown, the camera focuses in on her mouth. These kinds of sexualized images are typical in media representations of female music artists. Young adult women who see and read about the 2015 “FEMINIST” version of Beyoncé also have access via the internet to see her fourteen years earlier in the “Survivor” video. I think that this creates a normalized notion of female empowerment through hyper-sexuality, while feeding the self-generating cycle, from music industry to artist to viewer back to the industry that claims only to respond to the culture of hyper-sexualized females. As such, the music business can be more easily seen as the creator of this cultural situation. And although her physical image differs from that of Minaj, Beyoncé represents another contradiction in terms, as witnessed in her own statement in a 2013 British Vogue interview, “I am a modern day feminist” (Ellison). According to interviewer Jo Ellison, Beyoncé is “baffled by the criticism that her on-stage persona, a
sexually voracious, semi-clothed glamazon, is in any way antithetical to her message of female empowerment” (Ellison). As I will explain later in this paper, the music industry process of branding female music artists relies on the juxtaposition of female hyper-sexualization against claims of feminism. I argue that such contradictions foster ambiguity on what “feminism” stands for, leaving room for personal interpretation, and maintaining or even furthering the divisiveness that thwarts steady, observable progress for everyday women and girls, and for society as a whole.

Before moving on to a historical look at the evolution of hyper-sexualization of female music artists, I would be remiss to leave out an examination of yet another contradictory figure, Miley Cyrus. Like her pop predecessor Britney Spears, Cyrus is a child of the entertainment industry, and it is common knowledge that both of these iconic artists started out as Disney “Mousketeers.” Cyrus’ career has followed a typical entertainment industry path, beginning as a child actor who transformed into the likeable “tween” television character Hannah Montana, then moved to the music stage as a conservative-looking teenager who sang pop songs. When Cyrus turned 18, just as with Spears, her image changed to that of a highly sexualized young woman. Her controversial 2013 music video, “Wrecking Ball,” shows her crying, wearing skimpy white underwear, licking a sledgehammer in overtly sexual manner; then, naked, she rides a large construction wrecking ball and writhes amid the rubble, legs spread (Miley Cyrus). She serves as an example of how the industry normalizes young insiders to becoming token hyper-sexualized female artists and, as I will revisit, how female music artists must pay their way with their sexuality into the adult version of the white male-dominated heteronormative entertainment insider club. In addition, Cyrus props up the self-generating nature of this hyper-sexualization by way of the Mouseketeer fans who maintain loyalty to her brand as it evolves to suit the bottom line of the music business – and as the old adage says, “sex sells.” But how did we get so far so fast?

History can teach us a great deal about progress in technology, language, science, and more. In the case of female music artists, recent history can reveal for us how, as women gained
social and economic freedom and power, the male-dominated music industry along with its mainstream media mouthpiece twisted that progress into ever more overtly sexual models of “success” for women who wanted to participate as performing artists in that entertainment industrial complex. To understand the progression, it is important to review mainstream entertainment industry presentations of female music artists through the different waves of feminism in order to understand the historical development of the commodification of female sexuality in mainstream media. In the first half of the twentieth century, as first wave feminists continued their collective push for civic reforms that focused on women’s economic mobility including suffrage, top female music artists included Belle Baker, Marion Harris, and Esther Walker, followed by Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, and Sarah Vaughan. These women were portrayed similar to today’s pop star, Adele, wearing elegant gowns and makeup reminiscent of upper class women in Western society. The extent of “revealing” outfits on stage or in photographs was perhaps a strapless dress, or one with a modest décolletage, but below-the-knee in length. Issues that hard-core feminists took with these artists may have centered around lyrical content: Most of the songs were about loving, needing, and longing for men, and even about lovemaking.

This era was also pre-television, when the largest audiences of these performers would have been nationwide radio program listeners who heard but did not see the artist. And for those who did, unlike audiences at vaudeville shows and American versions of Moulin Rouge balls, people who attended live concerts saw “classy” female fronted musical entertainment. The exception to these mainstream artists, according to Dorothy Marcic, is the animated character, Betty Boop, who she says “touched some deep values about how the culture . . . wanted women to be: sexy, provocative yet childlike, and dependent” (27). Not surprisingly, Betty Boop was created by a man, Max Fleischer (“Betty Boop”). Marcic elucidates, noting that other highly visible popular female singers may have evoked a kind of “sexual allure . . . but they showed a stronger woman, one who might challenge a male’s ego. Boop, on the other hand, would be not threat to the existing power structure” (27). I would add that, unlike a flesh-and-blood human
female celebrity, a famous cartoon character might present less of an overt threat to those women who did not want to challenge the power structure that was intentionally creating popular culture. Thus, women might have seen Boop as a silly titillation that was harmless because “she” was not “real” and therefore could not cause disruption of the status quo. However, because Marcic makes the claim that “culture . . . wanted women to be: sexy, provocative yet childlike, and dependent” (27) [italics added], I will argue that it was the entertainment industry, as part of the white male heteronormative hegemony, that wanted women to be that way. The industry produced a cultural construction of women as sexualized, infantile, weak human beings. Why? So that audiences would diminish women to those specific qualities in an attempt to “keep women in their place” while effectively dismissing the female strengths that formed the first wave of the feminist movement to begin with. In this light, Boop’s nature as a cartoon might actually have been more threatening than any of the female performing musicians to feminists who would have seen the character as separating female sexuality and vulnerability from the real female body. Boop would have symbolized male authority and control of the female. If this was the case, it was a grand ideological leap for feminists. But the first wave lasted a long time compared with the second wave.

Second-wave feminism, or what is known in academic realms as liberal feminism, of the late 1960s into the early 1970s, has been categorized by the slogan, “the personal is political.” During this period, feminists sought to bring the problem of discrimination against women into the light of day by recording sexism as witnessed privately as well as publicly, and the conversation included “criticism of gendered patterns of socialization” (Kroløkke and Sørenson 11). Activism, therefore, was both individual and collective, as demonstrated in the highly publicized feminist protest of the 1969 Miss America Pageant, a demonstration meant “to show how women in pageant competitions were paraded like cattle, highlighting the underlying assumption that the way women look is more important than what they do, what they think, or even whether they think at all” (Freeman, 1975, qtd. in Kroløkke and Sørenson 8). In this respect, second wave feminists had called out the kind of sexism that was once an unshared
personal “dirty secret” made ever more public via the media and entertainment industries that created and hyped events such as the Miss America competition. It should come as no surprise, then, that entertainment industry capitalized on the deep divide between feminist activists whose sacrifices differed from those of women who dared not challenge the patriarchal system: The industry offered popular female music artists on both sides of the chasm. Hit songs ranged from Leslie Gore’s “You Don’t Own Me,” a “rebellious stand for freedom for long-deserved independence” (Marcic 103), to powerhouse vocalist Janis Joplin’s “Piece of My Heart,” which epitomizes the idea that “…men were held to different standards [regarding love and respect in relationships]. They were supposed to be jerks, but women were supposed to love them anyway” (Marcic 93). This juxtaposition is characterized in the visual presentations of the era’s female music artists as well. “Girl groups” like the Shirelles wore conservative dresses, sang stylistically “classical,” and restricted their movements, while model-turned-actress/singer Marilyn Monroe donned more revealing outfits, sang in overtly sexual tones, and moved in ways that the American Psychological Association (APA) today would say are sexualized (I will discuss the APA in detail later).

In the early 1980s, cable technology introduced MTV, upping the media ante by delivering industry-produced music videos into millions of homes, bars and restaurants, and retail outlets across the nation. Now, the music industry had captive visual audiences in public and private realms. As the head of the pack of female music artists on MTV, Madonna mesmerized these audiences – including the music industry itself – with her unconcealed female sexuality and unabashed displays of sexualized clothing and dance. She was quickly dubbed “The Queen of Pop” as her memorable songs continued to place high on industry sales charts, and her concert and studio videos were ever-present on MTV. Next to Madonna, viewers saw Olivia Newton-John dressed in work-out spandex, singing “Let’s Get Physical,” and Stevie Nicks, wearing her signature gypsy/bohemian style, belting out “Edge of Seventeen.” Marcic (2002) characterizes the 1980s: “The themes that dominated this period were sex and assertiveness. . . . Awareness of the power of spiritual healing and women friends resonated
through many songs as women gained strength through growth” (158). But just as she makes this point, reality shows there was more going on: codependency and cynicism. After all, Marcic wonders, “What was left for women except to feel cynical about life and love?” (161). The music industry was offering a little something for everyone, just as the television and film industries had been doing for decades, featuring seductive, scantily clad, codependent “Bond girls,” sexy yet confident, pants-suited Charlie’s Angels, and the modestly dressed, trendy-but-insecure girl played by Molly Ringwald in Sixteen Candles. This broad yet categorized variety may have led to both cynicism and the impending individuation within the conversation about issues of women and sexual exploitation. Cynics may have been drawn either to a firmer stance on early second wave feminist principles or may have simply withdrew from participating as regular consumers of popular culture, furthering the divide between themselves and those who accepted without question the entertainment industry’s offerings. The divide created a cultural tug-of-war over mediated representations of female sexuality.

By the early 1990s, the rope had snapped – at least temporarily. Backlash to music industry appropriation and commodification of female sexuality came from the Riot Grrrls, musicians who openly sang and talked about their animosity toward the music business; their disdain for the increasing intensity of hyper-sexuality in industry portrayals of female music artists; their need to collectively explore emotions that are typically suppressed in women, such as anger and rage; and their guileless expression of challenges in relationships, in gender and stereotypes, and in sexuality. The mixed gender punk rock band Bikini Kill was seminal in forming a consistent, loud, and clear message denouncing music industry-sponsored sexism and female hyper-sexuality. The band wrote “radical feminist lyrics,” performing intense concerts, and “shunning major labels and the mainstream rock press” (“Bikini Kill”). Riot Grrrls, including all-female bands and mixed-gender groups staged musical protests in live concerts, in their music videos, and in their artwork and writing. Additionally, the internet opened opportunities for individuals to connect through websites and blogs, sharing Riot Grrrl authenticity and continuing its movement and message. In fact, there is a Riot Grrrl Manifesto
online (“Riot Grrrl Manifesto”). Among the sixteen statements in the declaration, two stand out to me as indicative of the seething anger in the messages they seek to communicate:

BECAUSE we are unwilling to let our real and valid anger be diffused and/or turned against us via the internalization of sexism as witnessed in girl/girl jealousism and self defeating girltype behaviors. . . . BECAUSE we recognize fantasies of Instant Macho Gun Revolution as impractical lies meant to keep us simply dreaming instead of becoming our dreams AND THUS seek to create revolution in our own lives every single day by envisioning and creating alternatives to the bullshit christian capitalist way of doing things (“Riot Grrrl Manifesto”).

Riot Grrrls openly discussed rape culture, double standards (as in, “Why don’t they call boys ‘sluts’?”), and the need for women and men to reject the mainstream media’s ideas about everything: gender and sex, clothing and beauty, success and happiness, equality, and so on. Riot Grrrls in general did not wear revealing clothing that could easily be misconstrued as sexualized; quite the opposite, they dressed mostly in street clothes, baggy t-shirts, loose dresses, and comfortable footwear. However, some Riot Grrrls used sexualized clothing, language, and artifacts in performance art to display their rage and disgust with what they saw as problematic mediations of women and girls. It was only later that major label artists like Liz Phair effectively coopted (or, perhaps, appropriated?) for herself the trendy brand “Riot Grrrl” as a coded passphrase, all the while marrying mainstream expectations of female hyper-sexiness as seen in her shirtless exhibition on the cover of her breakout album, *Exile in Guyville*. The graphic treatment may have given the cover photograph a distinctly Riot Grrrl grittiness, but the sexual suggestiveness of her bare chest, showing a bit of her nipple, falls squarely in line with sexually charged music business models for female artists. Mid-decade, female artists in the dance-pop genre fully complied with the industry’s go-to campaign of “titillate and shock” (Marcic 205).

For example, the Divinyls’ explicit music video for their song, “I Touch Myself,” features the female lead singer dressed in a variety of sexually provocative outfits and touching her body in
sexual ways while singing “I’d get down on my knees / I’d do anything for you” (Divinyls). Further, says Marcic, “there was a new kind of oppression. . . . In fact, it was hard [for you as a female music artist] to get anywhere unless you made yourself a sex object” (205). Sadly, at the end of her 2002 book, Marcic capitulates by paraphrasing the old Virginia Slims cigarettes media friendly “pro-feminist” motto, “You’ve come a long way, baby,” as if to say women have come far enough and so they can stop working for improvements in the collective female socioeconomic condition.

The aughts ushered in a new level of “titillate and shock” to graphic representations of female music artists just in time for Millennial girls to effortlessly discover artists like Britney Spears on television and the internet, in concerts, and even shopping at their favorite retail clothing store. Some of her youngest fans are women now in their twenties and early thirties, and their views of feminine empowerment neatly align with the sexualized images of their music role models. As another complication that gained momentum in the aughts, plastic surgery became a common “beautification” choice in the entertainment industry. Then as now, viewers now see female pop musicians who not only wear increasingly sexualized outfits but opt for breast augmentation, like Christina Aguilera, and buttocks implants, like Iggy Azalea, to appear even more visually erotic; rhinoplasty to “perfect” their noses, like Cher; and Botox and collagen injections to smooth wrinkles and plump up lips, like Geri Halliwell of the Spice Girls (Brielle). To note, prior to the aughts, such cosmetic surgery procedures were commonplace reconstructions for pornography stars and medical patients, not graduation gifts for 18-year-old high school females who wanted to emulate their favorite entertainment stars. Few people would disagree that “adolescents compare their bodies to those of their peers as well as those portrayed in popular media,” a statement that has scientific backing in a 2013 article by the National Institute for Health (NIH) (Jordan, Sumanas, and Corcoran). And yet it is imperative to make the connection between young women and the female music performers who serve as their physical as well as psychological role models. Featuring recent, reliable, and verifiable medical and scholarly work, the NIH article affirms this link in no uncertain terms, by identifying celebrity
worship as “a parasocial, or one-sided relationship, wherein an individual admires or identifies with a celebrity” (Martin, Volkmar, and Lewis 2007). The link is strong enough that “there exists a positive correlation between celebrity worship and the acceptance of cosmetic surgery among female undergraduates (Swami, Taylor, and Carvalho 2009).

Celebrity worship involves “token” female role models such as Aguilera and Azalea who are heavily mediatized by the entertainment industrial complex. This concept of tokenism is a cultural phenomenon:

Tokenism is the means by which the dominant group advertises a promise of mobility between the dominant and excluded classes. By definition, however, tokenism involves mobility which is severely restricted in quantity, and the quality of mobility is severely restricted as well. The Token does not become assimilated into the dominant group but is destined for permanent marginality. The Token is a member of an underrepresented group, who is operating on the turf of the dominant group, under license from it (Laws 51).

Given Laws’ definition, I want to make explicit that Hollywood, and in particular its music business faction, is a business of tokenism: Not everyone becomes a star. In fact, not everyone even has a fair chance at stardom, and so those who do “achieve” stardom or mega-stardom serve as tokens. Further, stars as “tokens” exist to serve the entertainment industry first; otherwise, musicians would still be making music only in their family living rooms. Laws goes on to write that “tokenism has advantages both for the dominant group [the music industry] and for the individual who is chosen to serve as Token [a female performing artist]. These advantages obtain, however, only when the defining constraints are respected” (52). Female performers who opt for cosmetic surgery to improve their chances at meeting the “defining constraints” of the male-dominated music industry are then used by their “worshippers” to validate and even normalize such life-changing decisions as modifying their own bodies. Fans would find it far easier to simply model the tokens’ erotic clothing and makeup and adopt their sexualized postures and language – and they do. This modeling has increased over the history of
the feminist movement to our current point in time, when token female music performers must wager ever more in order to stay in the limelight and reap the advantages of their tokenistic relationship to the music business. Meanwhile, and importantly, their “worshippers” complete the self-generating cycle of believing they have agency because of their fandom.

Combining with tokenism is a concept in the music industry that the careers of female performing artists are formulaic, pre-categorized as short-term person-brands. Female pop star management has two “organizing principles,” says Kristin Lieb, author of Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry: The Social Construction of Female Popular Music Stars: 1) a “sales typology exists for female performers,” and 2) “female musicians are short-term person-brands who must endeavor to protect their core brands, carefully managing art-versus-commerce considerations as they extend their brands into other entertainment realms” (38). Lieb’s study is thorough, and what she uncovers is unsettling at best:

Overall findings suggest that female popular music stars are objectified, productized brands who are considered high-risk investments given their relatively short-term careers and the tremendous amount of money it takes to market them successfully (31).

The short-term person-brand model is based on the notion that female music performers don’t have much of a shot at stardom; that if they do achieve celebrity status, chances are they won’t stay there for long; and that if they do last, it’s because they and their handlers learned to successfully manage their person-brand. Tragically absent from the organizing principles of short-term person-brands: Requirement of significant musical talent. Perhaps even more disturbing is that women music performers (ostensibly) knowingly trade their hyper-sexualized bodies as a productized money-making person-brand in order to maintain their status within the music business, which largely benefits a patriarchal system that stifles women while exalting, and excessively rewarding, mostly males and a few token female performers a la Minaj, Beyoncé, and Cyrus. Of course, this hyper-sexualized image trade does not apply in the same way to female artists like Felicia Collins of the CBS Orchestra (she was featured alongside
musician Paul Shaffer on *Late Night with David Letterman*, 1993-2015). Women like Collins are considered “professional musicians” who rest on another echelon altogether that involves receiving the same respect and treatment as their male counterparts – even if they are also tokens within their field. Collins and her female peers do not wear sexualized clothing or move in ways that force female sexuality on display. What these female professional musicians lack is status as mega-stars. But on the upside, they also don’t have to deal with what Lieb calls the “five person-brand maintenance considerations,” the last of which asserts that “Artists and their brand managers cannot control culture, but they can work with it to get what they want” (31). As an industry insider, Lieb characterizes the music business as merely reflecting or re-creating in their productions certain aspects of culture – this places the business in a passive light. I would clarify that when artists and their brand managers are “working with” existing culture to “get what they want,” they are indeed creating a culture that in turn expects to see female music performers who pay their way to the top with their hyper-sexualized images and music. The music business is, after all, a culture industry. And so how else to make enormous amounts of money? It’s like Frito-Lay Corporation hiring teams of chemists to develop seventeen artificial “umami” flavors in addition to nature’s six, then adding all twenty-three to Doritos so they taste incomprehensibly delicious and the company rakes in billions of dollars in sales. In fact, the music industry raked in nearly $7 Billion in 2014 in retail sales alone (Friedlander). The year before that, Beyoncé’s music income was a staggering $24,429,176.86 (Music’s Top 40 Money Makers), proving that the short-term person-brand that she and her handlers manage has helped her to achieve and maintain token status as a mega-superstar in the industry. It may also be proof that the “shock and titillate 24/7/365” strategy works.

Shock value is ever on the rise, pushing limits of public female sexualization as witnessed in performances by Miley Cyrus, whose mid-November 2015 stunt included wearing a concert outfit showing full naked female breasts (it is difficult to tell from the photograph whether the breasts are hers or are part of the outfit / façade) and an extremely large prosthetic male penis with testicles strapped to her crotch. Add to this rapper Nicki Minaj, shown in her
comic book, *Fame*, “posed in sexually suggestive ways, including licking her lips [and] placing her hands in her mouth,” effectively becoming “a fetish object ready to be consumed” by viewers in this “voyeuristic space” (Williams and Tyree 59). Minaj is a self-proclaimed “superheroine” by way of the comic book, which she introduced after achieving significant music industry success. Authors Williams and Tyree sum up her business:

Nicki Minaj has used her beauty and body as central part of her career. She is often seen onstage and offstage in tightfitting clothing, nipple pasties, and even half naked. Her performances include lap dances, grinding, and other erotic moves. Her discography is ripe with sexual references and content” (51).

Williams and Tyree go on to say that Minaj’s “superpower” as a rapper is in her “use of multiple voices and personas” (51), which is to suggest that the artist has talent beyond her female physicality. But by owning her sexuality as a commodity, and using her female anatomy as capital within the music industry, Minaj appears to place both her real self and her personas above traditional tenets of feminism, just as a fictional superheroine has some kind of supernatural power or ability that positions her above the rest of humanity. She, like Cyrus, uses the industry’s model of female hyper-sexualization to justify her success – she can claim that, however tokenistic her career may seem, being “in charge” of her sexuality for the purposes of making a living in the entertainment industry exempts her from everyday feminist concerns like women earning wages equal to that of their male counterparts, or rape survivors receiving fair trials rather than being put on trial themselves. A far cry from the early nineties Riot Grrrl movement that exemplified gritty determination in feminist activism, Minaj, Beyoncé, Cyrus, and other popular female artists are anything but rare; these performers are the rule rather than the exception in today’s cultural milieu.

Does this current predicament of normalized hyper-sexualization of female music artists signal a crisis in feminism? Before answering that question, I think it is important to discover what hyper-sexualization looks like to the American Psychological Association (APA), and how that impacts our society. According to the APA, “There are several components to sexualization,
and these set it apart from healthy sexuality” (Zurbriggen et al). The Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls found that the following conditions occur in sexualization; any one or a combination are indicators when:

A person’s value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics; a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy; a person is sexually objectified — that is, made into a thing for others’ sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; and/or sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person (Zurbriggen et al).

These conditions are indeed present in mediatized images of female performing artists, This becomes further problematized with regard to self-proclaimed “feminists” such as Minaj, Beyoncé, and Cyrus. Considered superstars in the music industry, these three artists use their sexuality however necessary to make money, that is, to create value despite their talents; in fact, their status as short-term person-brands demands this. They are also, as Lieb said, “productized” brands, meaning that they are objectified (31). One could also argue that these three artists are “held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness. . . with being sexy” (Zurbriggen, et al). The APA task force authors also make clear that [female sexualization] has been widely studied in all media and what the overwhelming findings reveal:

…Women more often than men are portrayed in a sexual manner (e.g., dressed in revealing clothing, with bodily postures or facial expressions that imply sexual readiness) and are objectified (e.g., used as a decorative object, or as body parts rather than a whole person). In addition, a narrow (and unrealistic) standard of physical beauty is heavily emphasized. These are the models of femininity presented for young girls to study and emulate (Zurbriggen et al).

Troubling as it is that these “models of femininity” are ubiquitous in popular music, men are far less portrayed as sexualized than women. These two realities form a foundation that may be considered a critical moment in feminism, because if being feminist means standing for social
and economic equality, both males and females are missing out on benefits such as those enjoyed by other democratized nations. The powerful ideas of first and second wave feminism have been lost in a tidal wave of female hyper-sexualization. It keeps crashing into hundreds of millions of droplets, robbing females of their willingness to bond with each other in collective action – they are too busy trying to hyper-sexualize themselves to fit into a society that busies itself with entertainment.

And now, with no formally acknowledged “wave” of feminism to surf, one challenge for liberal feminists becomes how to move from the divided-and-conquered individualistic third wave in its current iteration to a movement en masse. A recent collection of feminist voices, The Feminist Utopia Project: Figuring Out the Futures We Want to Build, attempts to use ideas in utopian performance art to make that move by addressing “what work, sex, birth control, parenting, the US Constitution . . . and dozens of other aspects of our lives might look like in a better world” (Macaré). The book contains the contributions of fifty-seven authors, each presenting a unique utopian vision from the feminist perspective. Co-editor Rachel Kauder Nalebuff tells the interviewer: “What we need is day-to-day activism and work that responds to misogyny on the ground, but it’s also important to set our eyes on the horizon to remember and constantly reconsider what we’re working towards (Macaré). No doubt, these authors are working to mitigate the kind of misogyny that has been twisted into a commodified, naturalized display of hyper-sexualized public performances and visual products by female music artists like Minaj, Beyoncé, and Cyrus. But Kauder Nalebuff’s comment gets at the crux: Just as the entertainment media industrial complex keeps upping the ante with new ways to suppress progressive women and coopt their hard-won achievements, feminists today must be vigilant, vocal, and visible in countering the industry’s chameleon-like suppression tactics.

Indeed, the idea of “reinventing” feminism in the face of a now-defunct third wave must compete with swiftness of technology, the über-savvy music business, and the post-Madonna advent of self-proclaimed “feminist” music artists: Minaj, Beyoncé, Cyrus, and now rising star, Marina and the Diamonds. A decade ago already, Sowards and Renegar (2006) stressed the need
to reconceptualize feminist activism in light of cultural changes. And while I concur with Sowards and Renegar that a reconceptualization is necessary, I wholeheartedly disagree with their argument that “... the accomplishments of previous social movements have created a society in which discrimination, sexism, and even homophobia is not as overt as it once was” (60). I see sexism as alive and well when viewing videos of these supposedly self-styled, self-empowered feminists. In fact, not only videos but all images of female music artists are now on display. No longer does the audience see only industry-approved photographs and representations, we see their sexualized personal depictions on Facebook, Instagram, and other social and traditional media. Beyoncé, for example, was shown in casual “lounging around” photos in a 2015 ET online magazine article, on the verge of exposing her anus and vagina, with a title strictly in line with the productized, hyper-sexualized model to which she is beholden: “Beyoncé Shows Off Her Vegan Booty in Super Short Shorts” (Oshmyansky). In the limelight constantly, every aspect of these female performers’ bodies and attire, their stage attendants, their styled voices and often their lyrics, together speak hyper-sexualized volumes for them as they work to maintain their productized brands and increase their levels of success. The music itself – thumping pop/rock/rap/tribal beats that define them as performing music artists – is not different from that of their male counterparts who are not hyper-sexualized either as frequently or in any ways similar to women, leading me to discount the warrants produced by Sowards and Renegar that sexism is not as unconcealed as it once was, and that other social movements “fixed” society.

The significance of feminism and the sexual objectification of female music artists is that the definition of feminism in the twenty-tens has evolved from the third wave nineties version of feminism into another, nameless wave-less non-movement. This allows for the ambiguous and contradictory stances on feminism that I mentioned earlier in regard to Minaj, Beyonce, and Cyrus. In light of the treatment of female music performers within the entertainment media industrial complex (i.e., producers and distributors of culture) and viewers (i.e., consumers of culture), one could argue that the feminist movement has devolved. For example, third wave feminism came about when Riot Grrrls created a visible, audible shift in the trajectory of
industry treatment of women artists. At the time, media constructions largely portrayed females as gorgeous and unintellectual, as nurturing mothers, or as morally loose, and Riot Grrrls sought to destroy these categories, taking the stance of “real” women on the stage as a backlash to the stereotypes. They formed bands that played loud, hard electric rock music, and sang about everyday real-world challenges faced by women living ever in “the gaze” (or “the glance”) of men. For the Riot Grrrls, their actions, their music, their dress, their language all meant personal and sexual empowerment for them and their fans. The bucked the patriarchal system at every turn.

Facing the Riot Grrrls as an obvious threat to hegemony and heteronormative cultural constructions, a music industry that was progressively more risk averse introduced 17-year-old Britney Spears to the pop music world. Her debut album was released mid-January 1999, with the cover picture showing her as a smiling, fresh-faced teenager. Just three months later, her image appeared on the cover of *Rolling Stone* – she was wearing the equivalent of a bra and panties (Spears). The Riot Grrrl image of sexual empowerment disappeared into the cult closet, and when it reappeared, it had been expertly coopted by Liz Fair’s mid-1993 album, *Exile in Guyville*: Her image on the front cover showed part of her nipple, and her mouth was open and in a shape like that of a blow-up sex doll. According to Elizabeth K. Keenan in *Women & Music*, “Phair’s interpretation of feminism included a strong component of sexuality that could be read as either her objectification for male eyes or her subjective experience or perhaps both” (53).

Having lived, myself, through both second wave and third wave feminism, Keenan’s assessment is accurate: Phair seemed to be playing both ends off the middle by loosely aligning herself with the Riot Grrrl movement while allowing a sexualized image of herself on the album. However, Phair borrows a line seemingly from a Madonna script, claiming, “My sexuality was going to be packaged for me, so I did it myself” (Keenan, 53, qtd. by Chris Mundy, 24). But Madonna was the first: She started the trend of women musicians taking control of their sexuality in public, a genuine expression of female agency in claiming power, and so Phair was hardly breaking new ground. Again, Britney Spears was three years her predecessor in the industry – the cat was
already out of the bag, and the music business was trotting out that cat onto every public forum available in order to make money. What is unique to Phair’s decision is that it exemplifies what Keenan describes as the defining idea of third wave feminism: The movement’s “engagement with and integration of mainstream popular culture [that] set it apart from the second wave” (48). Phair the artist became a product of the music business that coopted her sexually charged music and image because they could: They had the power to make her a rock star, she knew that, and she colluded in the process. This collusive appropriation of third wave feminism coupled with our individualized and individuated culture actually props up the unethical, systemic hyper-sexual objectification of female music artists. The system demands that they trade themselves and each other like currency for fame and fortune as payment for following rules established by the male-dominated industry. The protean nature of short-term person-brand female pop stars – on stage, in videos and photos, and disbursed throughout pop culture – disguises these deeply problematic processes, products, and cultural productions of the system. In fact, when artists like Phair and Beyoncé claim to be empowered feminists, while feminists outside of the music industry disagree, this conflicting view calls for critical review. Because female music artists are turned into money-making, productized images, their “feminist” proclamations are hardly like boots-on-the-ground activists whose lives are dedicated to the social and economic empowerment of everyday women. In this sense, it is difficult to blindly accept a visual statement like Beyoncé’s FEMINIST stage backdrop. Perhaps even harder to swallow is Minaj’s mantra to women, “Always be successful outside of a man” (Nicki), when her success is defined within both the male-dominated rap genre and the music industry in which males make the rules.

At its core, the sexualization of women is an appropriation of the physical essence of the female human being – taking her sexual body out of private quarters and putting her on public display to induce in viewers a drug-like intoxication. As with all drugs, viewers develop a tolerance, requiring more and more sexiness to “feel” the inebriating effects. Hyper-sexualized female music artists exemplify this cultural entertainment production by an industry that well understands capturing audiences. If Hollywood power brokers didn’t do so knowingly, how
would female music history have evolved from elegant gowns and torch songs to pornographic outfits and rapping the F-word in less than fifty years? The music industry as a culture creating machine has evolved rapidly over the last century due to technological progress driven largely by rich white heterosexual males. At the same time, these patriarchal hegemonic forces have successfully used technology to promote the hyper-sexualization of token female music artists who, in turn, claim agency as feminists or as advocates for “girl power.” The industry profits from women artists who, while using their sexuality as a ticket into the male-dominated power structure, proffer an ambiguous notion of feminism in order to maintain their own fame and fortune. For these artists, the upside is that their celebrity affords them token status and economic and social capital, thus cocooning them in a faux reality that leaves out everyday people who struggle with feminist issues of power, freedom, and equality at the level of paychecks, child care, domestic violence, and social respect. In a sense, by opting in to the music industry’s contract, female music artists, especially in R&B, Pop, and Hip Hop, create a self-generating enactment of hyper-sexuality and female oppression. Hyper-sexuality is on display in what these music artists wear and how they move, what they say and how they say it, and in female stereotypes used in framing their public appearances. Fans emulate these mediatized hyper-sexual images and language, and adopt the “feminist” or “girl power” stance in the public realm, completing the cycle of cooptation and acceptance of female hyper-sexuality. In this process of normalization, the industry effectively distances itself from any and all real-world implications by erroneously claiming that it does not create culture, but merely responds to what culture has created. Regardless, self-generated exhibitions of female hyper-sexualization contribute to a coopting of female social and economic equality, freedom, and power for which feminists in the first, second, and early third waves fought. To be sure, many of these freedom fighters struggle to establish the next wave.

For me, it seems a sad day to acknowledge that examining in an academic paper the hyper-sexualization of female music artists is a) necessary from the standpoint of culture critics, feminists, and a concerned citizenry, and b) not likely to change the system. This cynical
outlook, however, warrants exploring the issue. And, in answer to my earlier question about the state of feminism, yes, I see our current wave-less condition as a critical moment that needs to be addressed by multitudes of concerned people. To ignore the issue of hyper-sexualization and its self-generating ability to nullify female empowerment will not make the problem go away, only make the it worse. If nobody is talking about the sexually objectified elephant in the room, how can one actually understand how it got to this point? And, assuming that sexual objectification for the purposes of commodifying elephants is questionable if not just plain wrong, how would one help the elephant regain respect for its innate elephant values and achievements that benefit society? On the flip side of this moral argument stands those academics and culture warriors who claim that either 1) there is no elephant, and, therefore, no questioning is required, although we might ridicule those crazy feminists who see an elephant where there is none, or 2) there is an elephant, and, Wow!, she’s hot, so let’s just enjoy her sexiness, or 3) there is an elephant, but why does this have to be so negative?; Can’t we just study the elephant and her condition, and call it criticism? My objective in examining this topic is predicated on education leading to communication for the purpose of educating others: One more reader may consider the ever-increasing sexualization of female music artists, pausing to reflect on the implications for females and for society at large. Perhaps this reader will be motivated to learn more and continue the conversation. Ideally, this continued learning and engagement in discussion will lead to a larger chorus over time, and to a potential change in the entertainment milieu where female music artists play on the same field with male artists, where it’s about talent, creativity, and evoking deeper psychological connections as human beings.
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