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CHAPTER 17

SINGLE LADIES, PLURAL: RACISM, SCANDAL, AND “AUTHENTICITY” WITHIN THE MULTIPLICATION AND CIRCULATION OF ONLINE DANCE DISCOURSES

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Abstract

This chapter seeks to explore how cultural texts disseminated online are made and remade, challenged and championed by audiences, with the mutability inherent to all texts becoming highly visible in this environment. The entry point of this inquiry is the music video accompanying Beyoncé Knowles’s 2008 hit *Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)*, which quickly became an Internet phenomenon, spawning numerous homages, parodies, and reinterpretations. Additionally, this popular cultural phenomenon was the subject of a social media scandal invoking issues of racism, “authenticity,” appropriation, the democratization of technology, and “expert knowledge.” This chapter will touch on a few key moments of online engagement with this event in order to try to flesh out the tangled politics inherent in cultural consumption, participation, and online identity building.

Keywords

audiences

authenticity

Beyoncé Knowles

identity

Internet

participation

popular culture

racism

scandal

social media

Introduction

The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one.

Walter Benjamin (1968)

In his classic thesis *From Work to Text*, Roland Barthes outlines what he sees as the difference between a “work,” which “can be held in the hand,” and a “text,” which “only exists in the movement of a discourse” (1977b, 157). As such, the text is produced relationally between the viewer/reader/listener and the material work. If a text’s being is inseparable from its action, one never sees, reads or hears the same text

twice (Genette 1997, xvii). As Barthes exclaims: “the Text cannot stop . . . its constitutive movement is that of cutting across” (1977b, 157).

Visually distinctive, catchy, stylish and fun, the music video accompanying Beyoncé Knowles’s 2008 hit *Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)*¹ quickly became an Internet phenomenon, spawning numerous homages, parodies, and reinterpretations, which I shall refer to here for the sake of clarity as *editions* of the *Single Ladies* text. Additionally, the first edition was the subject of a media scandal invoking issues of race, “authenticity,” and appropriation. This chapter seeks to explore how cultural texts disseminated online are made and remade, challenged and championed, with the mutability inherent to all texts becoming literally visible in this specific environment.

It is not the Internet that transforms “works” into “texts”; we do that every time we engage with them. However, the Internet brings the traces of others’ readings visibly before us, in the comments beneath postings, “likes,” re-posts and other practices of marking our passage through online material. So, how can one negotiate the layers of information generated in response to online material? These fragments of text, which bookend a work, re-positioning and perhaps interrogating it, are what literary theorist Gérard Genette calls “paratexts” (1997).

Theorizing literary paratexts such as book covers, prefaces, reviews, and afterwords, Genette casts the paratext as a “threshold”; “an airlock which helps the reader pass without too much respiratory difficulty from one world to another” (1997, 408). Arguing that “a text without a paratext does not exist” (1997, 3), Genette claims that conversely, paratexts can exist without the texts they refer to, thus, it is possible to claim to *know Single Ladies* through rumors, reviews, and comments without having seen the video. Further, it is possible to know only the scandal and *be* scandalized without recourse to the disputed works.

It is important to recognize that readers of texts do not see the illusive “whole picture,” rather, we select from “a complex of interrelated meanings,” tending to interpret these as a “discrete, unified whole” (Couldry 2000, 70-71). I posit that this partiality is what allows discourses of “authenticity” back into a space of fracturing and mutability. Similarly, the Internet encourages multiple viewing positions and distances: of the +276 million² viewings of *Single Ladies* on YouTube alone, some will be accounted for by viewers who’ve watched it repeatedly; some viewers will watch only once or a snippet out of curiosity, some because it was featured on a friend’s social media page or a blog they subscribe to, some because they want to listen to the song,

some because they are conspiracy theorists hunting for occult symbolism,³ or even some so that they can debate the gender of a performer.⁴ As Les Back points out, the Internet has no inherent ideological orientation, rather “the relationship between form and content is to be found at the interface between particular technologies and their utilization” (2002, 633).

In order to think about how online texts are shared and invested in by diverse groups, I use the term “public” throughout this text in preference to “audience” or “viewers” to denote Michael Warner’s conception of “a social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse” (2002, 62). A “public” is a group that is self-organizing, and has a way of being “interpolated” (Althusser 1970) or hailed, by which you become part of that group through recognizing yourself as the subject of address. So, a public (unlike a group, or audience) does not exist apart from this discourse, they are in a constant relation with each other only by virtue of their relationship to the text (Warner 2002, 51). This relationality engenders a more active notion of audience, and one that can be split rather than presumed to be in unison and acted on, for example the bored-public or fan-public (although these can still overlap). Warner argues persuasively that “counterpublic” claims made for

subordinate or marginal groups should not assume that these counterpublics have ways of organizing their knowledges that would necessarily be seen as oppositional to the dominant publics.

The website YouTube.com is central to the development of this textual narrative, so it is important to consider it as co-producer of these editions of *Single Ladies*. YouTube is an independent subsidiary of Google.com. In 2008, the website was not a broadcaster; it framed and packaged content, but did not produce any content of its own⁵. Third parties (both individuals and corporations) provide this content for free, either directly for use on YouTube or recycled from existing media content. YouTube videos are stored on central servers rather than operating as a peer-to-peer network, it is partly for this reason that Robert Gehl refers to YouTube as an archive, a digital “wunderkammer” (“closet of wonders”) (2009, 45). Gehl’s figuration helps us think about the ways that YouTube manages its flows of visitors, who move through much as they would any other archive or collection, their paths varying widely, their intentions equally so (Gehl 2009, 45-46). In conceptualizing YouTube as an archive, one is able to appropriate the problematic concerns addressed to paper archives; the labor involved in creating and maintaining the archive, and how this labor is then exploited by those who

mine the archive in order to display the objects for their own profit (Gehl 2009, 46). At the time of writing,⁶ in addition to the search bar my YouTube home page (www.youtube.com) offers grouped suggestions on what to watch based on my location and search history such as “Popular on YouTube – United Kingdom,” “Gaming,” “Movies,” “Music,” “Sports,”. Once you have chosen a video or entered a search term, the next page on display will offer up “Related Videos” to the user. The ranking system is based on hits on Internet search engines (primarily Google) and the deft use of “tags” to signal content.

There is nothing democratic about the way that YouTube arranges its content for view. As in a paper archive, some artifacts will never be seen, with claims that approximately 30 percent of uploaded videos account for 99 percent of views on the site (Zern 2011). As Michel Foucault famously argued, there is nothing neutral about the archive (1972). Ultimately, power comes not from the act of collecting, but from the act of arranging archival objects into “facts” about the world.

Barthes characterizes the text as *metonymic*, a sort of symbol “concerned with the activity of associations, contiguities and carryings-over” (1977, 158). As such, the text poses problems for systems of classification, hierarchy, and summarization, and this flurry of ceaseless

activity is where texts draw their energy from—the explosion of irreducible plurality. It is in this spirit of opening-out and embracing the irreconcilable that I shall explore the work *Single Ladies* as a text throughout my paper. I would also advise that this text be read alongside the videos to which I refer; links are provided in the endnotes.

Single Ladies First Edition: The Original Single Lady

The video for *Single Ladies* was directed by Jake Nava and conceived in collaboration with Knowles.⁷ Filmed in monochrome, Knowles and her two female backing dancers are presented in simple black leotards in an empty studio, dramatically lit but otherwise free of distractions, which firmly signals that the dance is the central feature of this work. Similarly there are relatively few close-ups and primarily seamless edits, the screen generously allowing space around all three bodies, which are presented in a triangular formation (Knowles center stage). The camera follows the continuous up-tempo routine to the end, finishing with a medium close-up of the three performers looking triumphant, breathing audibly from their exertion. The video was shot in tandem with the video for her single *If I Were a Boy*, and its minimalist form was the creative solution for the expenditure on this prior video (Cairns 2009). *Single Ladies* straddles the two prevailing formats of music video as both a “performance” and

“concept” work (Austerlitz 2006, 1). As such, the video is equally dependent on Knowles’s commanding performance and on the concept that underpins it and distances it from the sphere of live performance. In the video’s renunciation of montage as the highest form of communication, it is part of a continuum of music videos that address the medium’s visual excesses.⁸

As a work it also foregrounds one of the key aspects of Knowles’s star persona: the hyper-visibility of her (often dancing), laboring body. Beyoncé always “works it,” this is what Richard Dyer might term the “coherent continuousness” (1986, 11) of her self-presentation, which becomes the popular public conception of who Beyoncé Knowles *really* is. Knowles rose to international public awareness first as a member of the successful girl group *Destiny’s Child*, which was managed by her father, Matthew Knowles, a university-educated businessman and entrepreneur. Via this child-star trajectory, her image has been protected from the start, progressing from talent shows, to a wholesome girl-group member, to a well-respected solo artist. Advantaged by the knowledge of the fraught route negotiated by African American girl groups from *The Ronettes* to *En Vogue*, she has not ascended via the teeth-and-nails glamour-girl route or that of the backing dancer catching the eye of a

producer. Interestingly the “well-brought up” middle-classness of Knowles might have endangered her chances of popular appeal were it not for her famously puritan work ethic. This work ethic, grace, and desire for perfection of her art, places her within the group of “professional” stars complicit in the production of their own stardom (Dyer 1986, 14). The star image is then in Marxist terms both “congealed labour” used in the creation of each new song, album, or related cultural product, and the *thing* that their labor produces (Dyer 1986, 7).

Marx wrote that “labour is the worker’s own life-activity, the manifestation of his life” (in Wayne 2003, 33). As such, labor is not only the thing that transforms the world, an essential practical creativity, but it is utterly vulnerable to capture by the capitalist system. Stars both “play out the way that work is lived in capitalist society” (Dyer 1986, 7) and are massively lucrative commodities themselves, tacked onto the bodies of living human beings. Although this corporeal link makes us seek moments of the “real” human within, stars tend to guard their privacy unless the real (i.e., vulnerable) version of themselves might help sell their product. Michel de Certeau writes that statistics can only “grasp the material used by consumer practices—a material which is obviously imposed on everyone by production—and not . . . their surreptitious and

guileful 'movement', that is, the very activity of 'making do'" (1984, 35). Fans "make do" with the images they have of their stars, subverting and embellishing to suit their own purposes.

Contemporary racism dictates that black artists come under much more scrutiny than their white counterparts for their involvement in, and appropriation by, the culture industry (Cashmere 1997). The implied assumption is that it is somehow more distasteful for a black artist to realize the market potential of their artistry. Derek Conrad Murray argues that although hip hop is no longer revolutionary in the main, it is still transgressive in its facilitation and celebration of black achievement in the global economic arena (Murray 2004, 5). Indeed, it attained its legitimacy not through assimilation but through rugged individualism and "guerrilla capitalism" (Murray 2004, 8). As Matthew Knowles grew up during the 1960s and 70s, he could not have been unaware of President Nixon's call for African Americans to create a mainstream enterprise culture that would yield "Black Capitalism," and have the added advantage of decapitating the civil rights movement (Cashmere 1997, 153). This call is echoed throughout the pseudo-equality of the developed world, the fantasy of "don't dream it, be it" within an enterprise culture wherein if

you don't succeed, it is only because you just didn't *want* it enough, and not attributable to social inequity.

Single Ladies Second Edition: *Single Ladies* vs. *Mexican Breakfast*

Single Ladies posting on YouTube was quickly followed by a user version created by painstakingly editing together parts of the footage of Beyoncé's single with footage from legendary choreographer Bob Fosse's *Mexican Breakfast* (1969) as performed on *The Ed Sullivan Show*.⁹ The motivation and message of the user who created this edited version was one of extreme consternation; he claimed Knowles had no right to sample Fosse's movement in her work. The comments posted beneath were similarly outraged, calling Fosse a genius and Knowles a thief. The story was picked up by the international press, despite the fact that at the video's debut on public television Knowles had explicitly credited Fosse's piece, which, ironically, she first saw on YouTube, as the inspiration for the *Single Ladies* routine¹⁰

As Ralph Ellison noted, "usually when you find some assertion of purity, you are dealing with historical, if not cultural ignorance" (in Dixon Gottschild 2003, 284). This outraged "counterpublic" is indicative of the online democratization of "specialization" and its attendant problems. For

example, if the YouTube user who denounced the video as theft had any specialist knowledge beyond an intimate knowledge of Fosse's repertoire, he would have understood that Knowles is utilizing jazz, a dance form in which historically whites have emulated the stylistics of African American social dance without giving due credit or renouncing their "white privilege." White privilege, it should be emphasized, comprises of psychological privileges as well as material benefits. Fosse brought an affected coolness,¹² polyrhythm, and articulated torso to jazz dance that was deeply indebted to African American vernacular movement forms. However, this being America in the 1950s, he was neither obliged nor expected to credit his inspiration; racial segregation and prejudice allowed for cultural ignorance or amnesia in support of a fantasy of white innovation and genius. Fosse used black vernacular movement with the explicit purpose of unlocking the sensuality of his dancers' own bodies, albeit in a tamed and titillating version, which would appeal to white audiences (Dixon Gottschild 2003, 46). The legacy of this puritan attitude about appropriate ways to articulate the body endures in the complaints of YouTube viewers who deride performers of dance hall moves for "dancing like sluts."

Barthes's final approach to the challenge of the text is that of pleasure (1977, 164). Crucially for Barthes, part of the bittersweet pleasure in reading is acknowledging that one cannot rewrite the very text one is reading. One can write something else that speaks to it, attempt a copy or homage, but this will always be different, because the context is different. As the text itself is a network, a combinatory system, Barthes argues that there is no vital "respect" due to the text; it can be "broken." Moreover it can be read without recourse to the authority of the "Author" (1977b, 161), a sentiment he prefigures in his famous text *The Death of the Author* (1977a). This is not to suggest that the figure of the author may not resurface in the text, but Barthes argues that when this occurs it is as a "guest" (1977b, 161) and as such "his life is no longer the origin of his fictions but a fiction contributing to his work" (1977b, 161).

So, what is at stake if we consider Bob Fosse as the Author of his choreographic style, or as the "true" author of *Single Ladies*? Fosse was an exceptionally famous choreographer, who substantially contributed to the fiction of his own creative genius. This was thanks in part to his prolific output in varied roles as choreographer, film director, actor, and dancer. He even directed a fantasy-biopic of himself entitled *All that Jazz*

(1979). There have been numerous homages to Fosse's aesthetic¹³ and much of the material has been absorbed into "cultural memory."

However, what separates Knowles's performance is that she doesn't set Fosse's material in a familiar setting, reminiscent of his own works. Instead she carries the movement away from the reference, creating a new artistic work in its own right. The works under consideration are very different. Her fellow performers are powerfully built women, technically excellent and formidably fierce. The routine skillfully fuses Fosse's vintage material with contemporary urban dance hall and gay club craze waacking, bringing an athleticism and power to her performance totally absent from Fosse's cute, soft-core jazz. The formal structure of the movement is performed either with all three dancers moving simultaneously or with an Africanist j-setting format with Knowles leading the others—and by proxy, the video's public—into a community of movement.

I read a cultural coup here, in the way in which Knowles has accentuated the Africanist underpinnings of jazz dance, an art form that had been sanitized and standardized by artists like Fosse. To borrow from Cornel West's elegant phraseology, she "pull(s) from past and present, innovatively producing a heterogeneous product" (West in Storey 1998,

391). This is the same method of revolt that Charlie Parker used against the white artists who had colonized jazz and turned it into the middle-class “jazz of the museum” (West in Storey 1998, 389).

Jean Baudrillard suggested that in our contemporary moment we are powerfully drawn to simulacra (1994), alternatively, one could highlight our contemporary search for origins or roots, and our fetishistic fabrication of them if none are apparent. A key feature of vernacular culture is its Authorlessness, its blatant delight in textual “poaching” (de Certeau 1984, xxi). Similarly, popular culture engenders an emotionally resonant and often thrilling sense of shared ownership: “I love that song!” “Me too!” It is important to establish that my concern in this chapter is not to establish the “truth” of the cultural origins of *Single Ladies*. Rather my criticism is of the drive toward fixedness inherent to that approach. However, it is equally important to address the historical, cultural politics of reification of white male genius and inspiration, and to continually trouble the canon. In seeking to emphasize Fosse’s “genius” and damn Knowles’s “copying,” I can’t help but be reminded of the Cartesian duality that still haunts readings of raced, sexed, and dancing bodies. That in this narrative of authenticity Fosse represents the head—as white, male, genius—and Beyoncé the body—as black, female, cipher, is depressingly

familiar. That this scandal even occurred attests to the inequality in the social exchange of appropriation-approximation-assimilation (Dixon Gottschild 2003, 21) by dominant cultures. Expressed differently, if online media artifacts function as “prosthetic cultural memories” (Landsberg in Gehl 2004, 48), then they are as faulty and partial as real memories, and additionally only as rich as what is selected and uploaded.

Single Ladies Third Edition: We Are Sasha Fierce (in Competition)

In 2009, Knowles’s label, Columbia Records, launched an online competition for fan dance video versions of *Single Ladies*, with a prize of \$2,500 and inclusion in Knowles’s “I Am” World Tour (2009). Participants had to adhere strictly to the rules of the competition, including the stipulation that “Contestants should adhere precisely to the iconic *Single Ladies* dance routine performed by Beyoncé and her two dancers in the original clip—no new choreography should be added.”¹⁵ This stipulation has the effect of “fixing” the choreography of *Single Ladies* as an (iconic) object to be replicated rather than embellished. The resulting effect is what Harmony Bench terms a “viral choreography,” as distinct from a “dance craze” in which one learns a few basic steps with which to

improvise. The fan-editions of *Single Ladies* are faithful copies of the entire routine (Bench 2010).

As well as profiting Columbia, Knowles, and YouTube, user-generation creates free content for television chat shows in the form of human-interest stories and pre-generated media buzz. Not only do publics want to *know* stars, we also want to know those who achieve a kind of supplementary fame. For example, the queer re-imagining of *Single Ladies* undertaken by Shane Mercado catapulted him into minor celebrity with interviews and performances on talk shows such as *The Bonnie Hunt Show*. Stars operate by making us yearn for the *real* person behind the star image, the hints of a stable personality behind each vehicle. In a sense we look for clues in each new work produced, stars personifying Marx's adage that "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, it is their social existence determines their consciousness" (Marx 1904, 11). Further, identity is constituted not outside but within representation (Hall 2006, 19). Perhaps there is an act of substitution involved in our fascination with those made momentarily famous—they are just like us (and therefore knowable), but suddenly illuminated through relation to the unknowable, "auratic" star. These user editions of *Single Ladies* are judged and filtered

by other users on a number of indexes of value: the skill in execution (often aided by the use of split-screen to watch the new version against the original); fidelity and commitment in learning the routine to performance standard; the bravery to make it public; adoration of Beyoncé; voyeuristic pleasure in grotesque or unusual bodies; or mockability. It is interesting that there were both queer male performances and heteronormative drag interpretations, of the latter notably a *Saturday Night Live* skit featuring Knowles herself, and a version by tween heartthrob Joe Jonas of the Jonas Brothers.

The necessary process of learning the routine for the competition through repeated viewings of the online video also ensured that the original would be at the top of the viewing tree. In addition, competitors would watch the videos uploaded by their competition and would keep checking back to read comments on their interpretation. One could argue that what we are currently participating in is a marketization of our online practices, part of what David Harvey describes as a neoliberal endeavor to “bring all human activity into the domain of the market” via technologies of information creation, accumulation, and storage, which then guide decisions in the global marketplace (Harvey in Dean 2009, 26). For this capture of consumer desire to be effective, we all need to feel that our

personal opinions count, and interact with the Internet as producers rather than just users/consumers (Dean 2009, 24). In other words, we need to subscribe to the belief that “enhanced communications facilitates democracy” (Dean 2009, 25), although in this superabundance of comment and content it becomes even easier for messages to get lost, to disintegrate and warp like the secret in a game of Telephone. The marketing textbook *The Soul of the New Consumer* argues that the central obsession of today’s information-bombarded consumers of non-essential items is for “authenticity” and “difference” and a search for quality that fascinates, rather than simple value for money (Lewis and Bridger 2001, 10). Lewis and Bridger are characterizing a type of developed-world, middle-class, concerned, ethical consumer with the required Internet access to fully participate online. Perhaps there are links between our online participation and our consumer behavior within “the discovery of difference, the establishment of difference and the appropriation of difference” (Yiannis Gabriel and Tim Lang in Lewis and Bridger 2001, 15). It is important to state that the flip side of this is the search to expose copying, inauthenticity, or cheating.

At the start of the twentieth century, Walter Benjamin wrote of the urge of the masses to “bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly . . .

everyday the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction” (1968, 223). Ironically, in the endless consumer-led uploading of fan-versions of cultural events like *Single Ladies*, while bringing the self into a relationship with the “original,” the copy only enhances the “auratic” status of the original. Myriad *Single Ladies* do not circulate “unmarked” by their status as copies. The original is marked by several features, notably the presence of Knowles herself, the superior quality of production, quality of sound, number of views, and its position firmly at the top of the YouTube viewing tree. In other words, there is an underlying modal specificity to the Web life of *Single Ladies* and subsequent editions.

Single Ladies Fourth Edition: *Single Ladies* of Piccadilly Circus

I was hugely excited when a friend sent me the link to a video¹⁶ that seemed to show a flash mob in Piccadilly Circus “spontaneously” enacting the *Single Ladies* dance. However, on closer inspection one realizes that the participants are all female, all dressed uniformly, and all proficient enough dancers to perform the routine. In fact, this event was staged in order to inspire audience delight, be captured on mobile phones, and disseminated as cheap viral advertising for Trident Gum, who was

sponsoring a Beyoncé concert in the O2 arena at that time.¹⁷ The campaign certainly performed, as the video debuted on the weekly Visible Measures Viral Video Chart as the second-most-watched video on the Internet, with 373,706 hits in its debut week.¹⁸

Although cautious notes have sounded of late, much of the initial, influential discourse on the Internet focused on its utopian potential,¹⁹ its promise of disembodied democracy, new forms of learning, and knowledge production. In these narratives, the Internet is imbued with uncanny powers of representation, as if it were a magical glass that preserved and presented the voices of those not powerful enough to speak the language of official power. However, Henry Jenkins draws attention to the (often overlooked) paradox inherent in the continuing development of Web 2.0, as although the user is able to “archive, annotate, appropriate and re-circulate media content in powerful new ways” (2004, 33), there is an ever-shrinking pool of conglomerated media corporations that produces a huge amount of this content. This process of media convergence “alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres and audiences” (Jenkins 2004, 34). For example, a Beyoncé fan might look at the star’s dedicated

YouTube channel and find ads for her clothing venture *House of Dereon*, teasers for her new videos and album, charity appeals, the trailer for her 2008 film *Cadillac Records*, etc.

Why do Internet users re-edit, re-frame, and create paratexts for the cultural texts they consume? James Lull suggests that today we are all net-savvy “cultural programmers,” who busily construct our own “customized clusters, grids and networks of personal relevance” (2001, 132). Lull calls this the individual constructing of “supercultures” (2001, 132), in which the “multi-accentuality” (Volosinov 1973, 23) of cultural texts becomes submerged in the narrative of that particular “programmer.” Lull seems rather myopic in arguing that these supercultures “promote self-understanding, belonging, and identity while they grant opportunities for personal growth, pleasure and social influence” (2001, 132). It is vital to add here that all “supercultures” are not created equal. For example, what kind or level of “social influence” does participation ensure? What are the consequences of non-participation—a furtherance of the stratification of haves and have-nots in the world? Jodi Dean cautions: “what if the so-called facts circulate tribally, consolidating communities of the like-minded even as they fail to impress or even register to anyone else?” (2009, 147).²⁰ The Internet

does seem to be enabling new forms of community that cut across localities and mobilities to coalesce around common intellectual, ideological, spiritual, or emotional investments. These knowledge cultures, however tactical or momentary, are held together and reaffirmed through co-production and knowledge exchange (Jenkins 2004, 35). However, research conducted into the directedness of online browsing suggests that the Web is broken into four major “virtual continents” each with their own navigational priorities. It is therefore totally possible that following links in one continent may never bring you into contact with data from another (Dean 2009, 43). This means that actually what happens online is further segmentation and isolation, rather than an opening up to other spaces and perspectives.

Conclusion: A Hedonist Aesthetics?

One must be careful when making claims for dance as a tool for political self-empowerment. Dance may well provide a kinaesthetic kick and make you “feel good,” but in its muted representation it is an especially fertile area for cultural and political misrecognition. Black musicians and artists historically have used their bodies because it was often the only cultural capital they had (Stuart Hall in McClary 1994, 79). Obviously this is no longer the case, but black sports stars and

entertainers live with the burden of a powerful and indelible archive of images of blackness. Moreover, for a black artist, dance's emphasis on physicality doesn't counter the suggestion that in negotiations between blacks and whites, the black "culture of expressivity" has been seen as their most valuable resource (Houston Baker in Cashmere 1997, 2), with the workable, desirable black body as commodity. Ironically, one significant value of black culture may be in providing whites with (premature) "proof" of the end of racism, that is, black culture is allowed to flourish while we retain the racial hierarchy intact (Cashmere 1997, 2)—something Paul Gilroy refers to as "redemptive diversity" (2002, 1). If it is true that whites are eager to employ and assimilate black language and culture, yet they fear black bodies and their experiences, what a complex set of entanglements for a pop star to negotiate.

Beyoncé doesn't neatly resolve the contradictions of her star-image, but rather appears to revel in it. Reflecting on the polarized and passionate feminist readings of Knowles's work in the press and blogosphere, I posit that her critics might be looking for the wrong kind of political affirmation and failing to acknowledge the complexity of her subject position. Perhaps one should consider her fully as a Forbes feted African American capitalist icon²¹ first, before considering how this

clashes and intersects with other political readings. For example, a woman's assertion that she is financially independent and further, cannot be bought, has a doubly powerful meaning when spoken by a woman whose ancestors were literally enslaved. In an un-nuanced discourse, Knowles is trapped in a "double-bind" (Bateson 2000, 201), figured either as a conflicted woman, a victim of patriarchy and insufficiently feminist, or as a Diva, Bitch, or "disturbingly manly." These are problems that have always beset African American female stars attempting to work out a place in a cultural industry that still privileges and accepts ambiguity primarily from white stars. As bell hooks observes, "it is only as one imagines 'woman' in the abstract, when woman becomes fiction or fantasy, can race not be seen as significant" (hooks 1999, 124). Knowles's ability to employ a knowing irony, a predicate of much positive feminist analysis of white female stars like Madonna and Lady Gaga, is never suggested; instead, her canon is taken at face value.

I am reminded of Raymond Williams's call for a "cultural revolution (which) extend(ed) the active process of learning, with the skills of literary and other advanced communication, to all people rather than to limited groups" (1961 in Couldry 2000, 26). What are the limits of this online "participating democracy" (1961 in Couldry 2000, 26), if we do

not similarly widen access to critical thinking about our increasingly net-mediated culture?

There are hundreds of websites and blogs devoted to processing and scrutinizing the moment's media events, with an emphasis on criticizing the official account and discerning "hidden patterns" across stories. Additionally, there are numerous gossip, spiritual, and occult websites with large numbers of participants discussing Knowles and other entertainers' demonic possession. Sites like vigilantcitizen.com combine media analysis with gossip and conspiracy theory; such sites are rampantly popular. Titles like *The 2009 VMAs: The Occult Mega-Ritual* might seem amusing at first glance, but the socio-political conclusions to draw are depressing. On answers.yahoo.com one young Canadian girl writes: "everyone is saying that Beyoncé and Jay Z are devil worshipers, is it true?" A respondent affirms, "you can tell they are because all her dreams have come true." No possibility, then, of success due to effort, ambition, or talent for this "counterpublic." Although these confused fears bespeak a healthy suspicion of the media industry, one should be wary of overly positive accounts of this kind of popular knowledge; after all, these cohesive conspiracy beliefs show a woeful naivety concerning the creation of cultural artifacts (e.g., the suggestion that Knowles is

signaling that she is a Satanist via a video she did not style, direct, or solely author), and more importantly mistake the inequalities that are integral to the capitalist system. Dean suggests that the international appeal of the 9/11 Truth Movement “manifests a shift in conspiracy thinking . . . from questioning to certainty” (Dean 2009, 148), which will have important implications for questions of knowledge and power. The Internet makes more transparent than ever the plurality of conceptions of what constitutes both “reality” and “truth,” further dismantling Universalist claims.

Expounding on the plethora of user-led blogs, Jenkins argues that cultural theorists need to abandon our romance with the idea of audience resistance, and acknowledge that “contemporary consumers may gain power through the assertion of new kinds of economic and legal relations and not simply through making (resistant) meanings” (Jenkins 2004, 36). However, what are the limits to this empowerment if we are still primarily providing free labor for the corporations that are the infrastructure of the Internet? The ease with which media and information circulate on the Internet ironically means it is easier than ever for things to lose their specificity and merge with larger flows of data (Dean 2009, 26)—or as in the case of *Mexican Breakfast*, to be suddenly pulled out of the stream by

the corporate owner, leaving all the paratexts floating adrift without reference to an “original.”

Although the generations who have grown up with Internet access are highly sophisticated in the use of interface technologies, they often seem totally ignorant of how their own online activities market products and operate as free-labor, making enormous profits for companies offering “free” products, such as Facebook, YouTube, etc. This issue is at the heart of my concern with conspiracy readings of contemporary culture-making; they act as a veil to the real ideology at play in the culture industry. We may be seduced by the compelling image of our stars as “Illuminati Puppets,” attending secret meetings, making pacts with the devil, and so forth; but behind the curtain are groups of workers, making deals, creating stars, and manufacturing popular culture.

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Forbes.com: Knowles's profile on Forbes "Rich List"

<http://www.forbes.com/profile/beyonce-knowles>

Mediatakeout.com: Gender trouble

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YouTube video: Beyoncé confirmed that *Single Ladies* video was indeed inspired by Broadway choreographer Bob Fosse (a fan addressing the scandal)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-SlfHHd3ql&feature=related>

YouTube video: Shane Mercado

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lORjc7HStOE>

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<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Urbbn--My2A> (no longer available)

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YouTube video: *Single Ladies* flash mob (this is the official recording uploaded by Trident)

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¹ The song first debuted on the radio on 10/08/08, and the video debuted on MTV's *Total Request Live Show* on 10/13/08. *Single Ladies* is a double A-side lead single with *If I Were a Boy*, from the 2008 album *I Am . . . Sasha Fierce*, released by Columbia Records.

² 276,290,651 recorded views at 02/10/14, +75 million views within the first year online.

³ Many of Knowles's recent music videos have been obsessively analyzed for "clues" to her satanic possession on the website www.vigilantcitizen.com, among others.

⁴ There were numerous postings, wiki questions, blogs, and so forth about the video that suggested one of the backing dancers was a man in drag, for example:

<http://www.mediatakeout.com/2010/27818->

[investigative report is one of the dancers in beyonces single ladies video a](http://www.mediatakeout.com/2010/27818-investigative-report-is-one-of-the-dancers-in-beyonces-single-ladies-video-a)

[ctually a dude details and close ups inside.html](http://www.mediatakeout.com/2010/27818-actually-a-dude-details-and-close-ups-inside.html)

⁵ Since 2011, YouTube have been experimenting with the provision of original content.

⁶ Accurate at 02/10/14.

⁷ Choreographed by JaQuel Knight and Frank Gatson Jr.; the dancers are Ebony Williams and Ashley Everett.

⁸ For example, *Nothing Compares to You*, by Sinead O'Connor (1990), directed by John Mayberry; *Untitled*, by D'Angelo (2000), directed by Paul Hunter and Dominique Trenier; *Cold War*, by Janelle Monáe (2010), directed by Wendy Morgan.

⁹ Frustratingly, the original user-uploaded video of *Mexican Breakfast* spliced with *Single Ladies* has been removed by SOFA Entertainment (the owners of *The Ed Sullivan Show*), as has the video of *Mexican Breakfast*, however, periodically new versions emerge such as this one: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kjm8Wr22i3k>

¹⁰ Knowles made this public announcement on the television shows *106 & Park (I Am! Season 2010)*, the flagship show of the Black Entertainment Network (BET). In the vlog below a fan attempts to counter the Beyoncé “haters” with video evidence recorded from this show: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-SlfHHd3qI&feature=related>

¹² Commentators have emphasized that behind the appearance of Coolness is the politics of disaffectation (Cashmere (1997), 44) and (Dixon Gottschild 2003, 44).

¹³ For example: *Billie Jean* (1982), Michael Jackson, directed by Steve Barron; *Maybe* (2004), Emma Bunton, directed by Harvey and Carolyn; *Get Me Bodied* (2007), Beyoncé Knowles, directed by Knowles and Anthony Mandler.

¹⁵ <http://www.beyonceonline.com/us/news/beyoncé-announces-official-single-ladies-dance-video-contest>

¹⁶ This is the official recording uploaded by Trident/ Pretty Green, but other versions circulate: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OLj5zphusLw>

¹⁷ Trident Gum is a brand of Cadbury, the stunt was created by Pretty Green, and the concept by Initials Marketing.

¹⁸ <http://adage.com/article/viral-video-charts/viral-video-trident-s-beyonce-dance-debuts-2/136473/>

¹⁹ For example: Castells (2000), Coleman (2006), Trier (2007), Harroway (1991).

²⁰ A charge that can similarly be leveled at this chapter in this academic volume.

²¹ See Beyoncé Knowles's profile on Forbes "Rich List":

<http://www.forbes.com/profile/beyonce-knowles/>