ARTICULATING FEMINISM AND POLITICS:

THIRD WAVE FEMINISM IN POP MUSIC

by

THAILAN PHAM

(Under the Direction of Jay Hamilton)

ABSTRACT

This study examines pop music in context of third wave feminism. The songs selected as material text are: Gretchen Wilson's "Redneck Woman," Avril Lavigne's "Sk8er Boi," Christina Aguilera's "Can't Hold Us Down," featuring Lil' Kim, and Missy Elliott's "Work It." The songs and corresponding music videos were analyzed for their responses and solutions to the issue of gender inequality. The songs were also examined for contradiction among songs and in relationship to third wave feminism. Results indicated similarities along ethnic lines and visual displays of sexuality rooted in patriarchal gender construction.

INDEX WORDS: Pop music, Third wave feminism, Contradiction, Songs, Music videos, Sexuality, Patriarchy

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DEDICATION

For my grandmother

Nelle Morgan Burton

August 10, 1917 – February 21, 2005

who taught me strength, love, and laughter

My parents

Dr. An Van Pham and Lienhoa Pham

who have always demanded the most and expected absolutely nothing less

My brother

Binh Pham

who has always offered a sympathetic ear and valuable advice

even from halfway across the world

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Feminism...has always focused on popular culture because feminists are interested in the impact of modern life on women. But if there have been general agreements over the importance of popular culture to mapping ideologies and desires around modern women, there have been just as many heated debates internal to feminist analyses of popular culture.
--Catherine Driscoll, 1999

This quote captures the complex relationship between feminism and pop music, which I have sought to explore in undertaking this study. The concept for this study originated from an interest in the cultivation of feminist perceptive among young girls. In my research, the girls traced a path to third wave feminism, the feminists proclaimed music as a site of activism, the activist musicians made me reevaluate pop music, while the pop musicians fascinated me with their own “feminist” messages.

Exactly 30 years ago, McRobbie and Garber (1975) noticed a conspicuous absence of girls in the area of youth subculture research--girls were not recorded in ethnographic studies, pop histories, personal accounts, or journalistic field surveys. Their discovery marked a beginning in research devoted to understanding the inner workings of girl culture. McRobbie and Garber addressed the ways in which young girls created a distinctive culture among themselves. One such example of this was the commodity-oriented “teenybopper” culture, which was invested in the safe fantasy of young *male* pop stars (McRobbie & Garber, 1975). The authors deemed the teenybopper to be an “active” personality type, distinguishable from previous

perceptions of girls as wholly "passive." The teenybopper expressed activity both in her role as a consumer and through her self-definition.

As culture climates changed, teenyboppers came to embrace female pop musicians as sources of fantasy and emulation. When the music video made its debut in the 1980s, the new pop music mainstream that developed in North America was geared toward the audience of teenage girls, thereby creating a new wave of teenyboppers (Straw, 1993). In girl and pop culture studies, teenybopper culture became often cited as a "conformist mode of resistance" (Driscoll, 1999: p. 177). Driscoll (1999) describes this culture as exhibiting "a strangely unsettling conformity which carves out a space of excess within limitations on girl-life; within the good girl's life" (p. 177).

This girl type--presumably wealthy, characterized by her contribution to consumer society--was once identified as an example of empowerment and agency. Ironically, characteristics of the teenybopper have been portrayed as undesirable in recently released pop songs such as Avril Lavigne's "Sk8er Boi" and Gretchen Wilson's "Redneck Woman." Observing this bizarre relationship between star and fan has raised questions about the characteristics of current female pop musicians. This group's diverse race and genre preclude any simplistic comparisons, although a number of artists appear to distinguish themselves through songs of female empowerment or ideas of solidarity. Whether simply confident, overtly sexual, or aggressive, the pop musicians observed presented a variety of perspectives on the female experience.

Perhaps *because* the messages of these artists appeared at times to be inconsistent or potentially problematic, I became interested in studying them in context

of third wave feminism. Third wave feminism attracted me with its “messiness”--its universal, inclusive solidarity, its self-proclaimed “contradiction,” and its struggles fueled by emotion. As mentioned above, third wave feminist writing claims music as a site for activism. The Riot Grrls were part of a group of punk rock bands who musically represented the tenets of the third wave. They are significant because their presence as radical feminist musicians likely paved the way for the eventual integration of such messages into mainstream society. Furthermore, their work as musicians provides an interesting avenue for comparison with current female pop artists.

The decision to study music and video texts from American popular music implies a general familiarity with the developments of popular music studies. Though the artists and songs selected will be considerably different from each other in genre and style, their broad categorization as “pop” implies subtle similarities in structure, sound, or presentation. The terms “pop music” and “pop culture” themselves connote varying associations, from “tools of hegemony” to “forum of enterprise.” Considering the political positioning of pop culture and feminist theory, this study could be summarized most basically as an examination of dominant and marginal culture and the way that interaction changes them. On the other hand, the similarities between pop music and third wave feminism serve as a reminder that both social structures have evolved most recently from within the same cultural climate. This subversion of “dominant” and “marginal” establish the potential problems of using dichotomy as a guide to understanding the mobile, cyclical nature of discourse.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review aims to give a cursory, though expansive, background to topics that are pertinent to a complete understanding of the context of the present study. The project not only reaches the subject areas of feminism, pop music, and popular culture, but it also depends on a multicultural perspective on each of these complex areas. The first section will cover the development of the third wave of feminism, with reference to the accomplishments of previous feminists. The second section addresses the relationship between music and popular culture. The medium of the music video is discussed, as well as its depiction of female expression. The third section analyzes the structural components of pop music, followed by references to recent studies that have employed a feminist perspective on pop music by female artists. The fourth section addresses the struggles of female rappers emerging from within black rap culture, focusing on their use of sexuality. Last, the fifth section discusses the use of contradiction in previous studies, establishing it as a primary technique for the current project.

The Development of Third Wave Feminism

Though the success of the 19th amendment is now embedded in the nation's collective memory of feminist activism, the face of feminism has altered and expanded over the last 40 years. The very definition of "feminist" has been subjected to

interrogation and re-definition. The second wave of feminism of the 1960s and 1970s was characterized by the attempt to gain full human rights for women. Dicker and Piepmeier (2003) summarized some of its demands as "equal opportunities in employment and education, access to child care and abortion, the eradication of violence against women, and the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment" (p. 9).

Within the past decade, a third wave has developed from criticism of the last wave, which argued against the assumption of a white, middle-class, heterosexual subjective women. The third wave has produced literature and ideas with a focus on individualism and multiplicity of women. According to Dicker and Piepmeier (2003), "the third wave operates from the assumption that identity is multifaceted and layered. Since no monolithic version of 'woman' exists, we can no longer speak with confidence of 'women's issues'; instead, we need to consider that such issues are as diverse as the many women who inhabit our planet" (p. 10).

In *Third Wave Agenda*, Heywood and Drake (1997) characterize two previously published third wave feminist anthologies (*Listen Up* and *To Be Real*) by their use of personal anecdotes to describe definitional and argumentative strategies. The writings are described as "autobiographical and experiential, giving the insiders' 'view from the heart,' a glimpse of the social preoccupations and problems facing this 'next generation' of feminists" (Heywood & Drake, 1997; p. 2). Barbara Smith described the "multi-ethnic, multi-issue approach" that should define feminism, emphasizing the idea that "Feminism is the political theory and practice to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, physically challenged women, lesbians, old women--as well as

white economically privileged heterosexual women." (Smith in Dicker & Piepmeier, 2003: p. 8).

In 1992, Rebecca Walker (editor of *To Be Real*), Amy Richards (co-author of *Manifesta*), and others started the Third Wave Foundation, the only organization devoted to feminists between the ages of fifteen and thirty (Dicker & Piepmeier, 2003). In doing so, they set a precedent of activism that would come to characterize the third wave. Literature is abundant on the activity of the Riot Grrrls, a "young, protofeminist movement" that grew from the early 1990s punk scene in Washington state. The Riot Grrls, found a way to "breathe new life into feminism by marrying it with…the youth movement known as punk rock" (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000; pg. 80). The Riot Grrrl movement was characterized by an anti-media stance, which peaked with their press blackout in 1993 in response to repeated misrepresentation of their community (Kearney, 1997). According to Kearney (1997), the early Riot Grrrl rallies of women-only shows and mosh pits were generated to draw awareness toward the problem of sexual abuse. The "Girlies" were another group that developed during this time. They celebrated formerly disparaged characteristics of girl culture and femininity that had become culturally divorced from the last generation's construction of feminism, such as "knitting, the color pink, nail polish, and fun" (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000; p. 80). They also created countless "'zines," such as *Bust* and *Bitch,* which satisfied young women's desires for edgier publications that represented their lives in ways that other, older magazines could not (Dicker & Piepmeier, 2003).

Young feminists have grown up benefiting from the results of second wave activism, almost without realizing it. As Baumgardner and Richards (2000) explain, "For

our generation, feminism is like fluoride. We scarcely notice that we have it—it's simply in the water" (p. 17). Therefore, their greatest hurdle to this era of feminists will come as a task of reconciliation, as they face a world that will argue the death of feminism despite such inequalities as women's dramatic "underrepresentat[ion] in decision-making, power-broker positions" (Dicker & Piepmeier, 2003; p. 4). Kinser (2004) asserts that the current generation will be forced to confront a "schizophrenic cultural milieu which on one side grants that they have a right to improved opportunities, resources, and legislative support, and on the other side *resists* their politics which enable to them to lay claim to, embody, and hold onto same" (p. 133, my emphasis).

Music and Pop Culture

A depth of scholarship exists on the impact of musicology and feminism (Villani, 2001; McClary, 1993). Pop music, in particular, holds a substantial share in the cultivation of popular culture, with its increasing strength due to expansion into multimedia outlets, such as music television, the recognition of musicians as celebrities, internet downloading, and online videos in addition to the old-fashioned radio. Music has become a uniquely influential force due to its ability to pervade multiple media outlets. As the popular music industry has inundated society, critics have acknowledged its role as a significant contributor to the construction of popular culture. According to McClary (1993),

> [U.S. musicologists] tend to assume although popular music is unquestionably a commodity, it isn't just a commodity but is also a public medium that helps shape our notions of self, feelings, gender, desire, pleasure, the body, and much more. Thus, instead of focusing exclusively on the exploitative dimensions of the

industry, we also discuss what is being articulated through the performative and musical aspects of the enterprise. (para. 18)

Villani (2001) quoted an American Academy of Pediatrics 1996 policy statement, which reported that although there were no studies documenting a cause-and-effect relationship between sexually explicit or violent lyrics and adverse behavioral effects, "there is ample evidence given the content to be concerned about desensitization to violence, promotion of sex-role stereotyping, and acceptance of risk-taking behaviors" (para. 27). Thus, the lyrics and messages encapsulated within songs of the popular music genre are critically linked to concepts of gender, sexuality, and identity in its target audience, the American youth.

The multiple outlets of music must be addressed to help account for its importance. Music television, including MTV, VH1, BET, and CMT, provide associations of images and their lyrical counterparts. According to McClary (1993), MTV has also become the source of a thriving area of study within the past decade, because it is "crucial to know what images circulate, how they are articulated, and how fans interpret them" (para. 19). Since music videos have become mainstream, they have also become inextricable from the song itself.

Consequently, a scholarship on music video analysis has emerged within the past couple decades. A behavioral approach notes purported effects: Martin's (1993) survey of 247 high school students reported that 74% of girls prefer pop music to 71% of boys' preference for hard rock music. This statistic establishes the primary gender of the audience who are actively consuming the types of music addressed in this study. Another approach based on film theory and also highlights the gendered nature of pop

music. In her study of female address on MTV, Lisa Lewis (1993) describes "access signs" as

> those in which the privileged experience of boys and men is visually appropriated. The female video musicians textually enact an entrance into a male domain of activity and signification. Symbolically they execute take-overs of male space, the erasure of sex-roles, and demand parity with male privilege. In this way, the video texts challenge assumptions about the boundaries which gender, as a social construct, draws around men and women. (p. 136-137)

To a degree, the fans exemplify the second textual sign described by Lewis (1993), "discovery signs," which "reference and celebrate distinctly female modes of cultural expression and experience" (p. 137). Thus, women shown rejoicing in uniquely female leisure and cultural expression is intended to set a tone visually celebrating female resourcefulness and cultural distinctiveness (Lewis, 1993).

Analyzing Pop Music

Definition and structure

Popular music studies continuously seek to examine the relationship between pop music and pop culture. Inherently, theorists have been forced to acknowledge the difficulty in defining a subject matter that, as a whole, has had so much impact and influence on society. Shuker (1994) addresses the criticism he received for his prior use of the term "rock" as shorthand for the diverse range of popular music genres produced in commodity form toward a youth market. As he notes, "fans of genres such as rap, techno, and reggae would hardly equate their preferences with 'rock'" (p. ix). The use of any shorthand phrase appears problematic, as it inevitably neglects some

portion of the broad range of popular music. Hesmondhalgh and Negus (2002) address the issue that popular music is “impossible to define coherently, because of the many conflicting meanings clustered around the word ‘popular’” (p. 2).

However the need to establish a definition becomes less important when one focuses on structural similarities of pop music. In his studies of pop music videos, Goodwin (1992) addresses the “modes of address deployed in video clips” as reflecting “highly ordered generic conventions.” He further examines commonalities in the musical patterns themselves, identifying three types of closure that are characteristic of pop music: repetition, structural closure, and harmonic closure. These elements are all prevalent to some degree in all of the songs analyzed in this study in form of the repetition of the chorus, song pattern of verse and chorus, and instrumental pattern and eventual softening or alteration to signify the resolution of the song. Goodwin (1992) delineates properties of pop song structure, originally articulated by Adorno: “the title will usually be contained in the chorus; the chorus and/or bridge will be the most ‘catchy’ part of the song...; the verse will *lead up* to a chorus (or hook), which generally appears within the first twenty-five seconds of the song; and the chorus (containing the song title--i.e., *the name of the product*) will be repeated at the end of the song” (p. 82, original emphasis). All of these elements combined ultimately reveal the formulaic predictability of the pop song. The chorus, structural focal point around which the song revolves, then becomes significant in the analysis of the song.

A feminist perspective of pop music

Pop music's political potential can be seen in everyday life. Lowe (2003) examined "tweens" and their complex relationship with Britney Spears. At the mention of the singer's name, she describes their reactions: "'Slut,' 'Whore,' and 'Slore' (an elision of slut and whore) were the first words out of their mouths" (p. 124). Lowe references a study by Cowie and Lees, conducted in 1981 on young girls in working-class London, in which the use of epithets was also addressed. As Cowie and Lees recognized, labels such as "slut" and "slag" were constructed within a discursive dichotomy used to describe all female behavior, with words such as "virgin," "pris," and "drag" on the opposite end of the spectrum.

Lowe concurs with Cowie and Lees' point that the girls' subscription to such behavior perpetuates the discursive process within which they work. As the girls illustrate the persistence of the virgin/whore dichotomy within such a young generation, they enforce limiting notions upon the constructs of "femininity." With such simple identification of what is "good" and "bad," the girls prevent more complex female personalities from emerging.

In contrast to Lowe's efforts to identify sparks of potential feminism in response to a primary pop musician, Shugart, Waggoner, and Hallstein (2001) used a textual analysis to examine pop culture icons Alanis Morissette, Kate Moss, and Ally McBeal in context of third-wave feminism and postmodern media techniques. They argue that the "sensibilities of third-wave feminism are appropriated in context of postmodern media such that they are commodified, reinscribed, and sold to audiences in a hegemonic fashion" (p. 196). In an analysis of Alanis Morissette's album, *Jagged Little Pill*, the

authors note that her collection of songs centers on the narrator's personal exploitation, which is "profoundly significant in the fact that this theme never occurs in isolation of the attendant theme of aggressive confrontation, entirely reflective of third-wave sensibilities" (p. 199). Thus, Morissette and artists who engage in emotional revelation primarily associated with anger concurrently express anger as a right or as characteristic of a "strong woman." Furthermore, Shugart, Waggoner, and Hallstein juxtapose overtly angry lyrics and those that present traditional stereotypes as valid and desirable, such as, "You treat me like I'm a princess / … You held your breath and the door for me," from her song "Head Over Feet." Morissette projects anger associated with a seemingly vindictive, vengeful, and unstable female source, thereby becoming a weak representation of feminist-motivated, productive anger (Shugart, Waggoner, & Hallstein, 2001). In summary, their claim suggests that her tactics are reflective of feminist nature and intentions, but they backfire in their lack of restraint.

As the above studies suggest, the analysis of music is quite pertinent to feminist study, because third wave feminists have specifically addressed music as a valuable medium in sharing the feminist perspective. Heywood and Drake (1997) describe music as a "potent motivator [that] can be used effectively as a political tool in the contemporary context because of the communities and frameworks of meaning it seems to offer in a social and cultural context in which lives can often seem devoid of meaning" (p. 203). Anger in music is acknowledged in its success in inciting empathy from likeminded feminists, when they feel the need to know that their "sense of reality is valid, that [they] have a place, that there are people out there who feel like [they] do" (p. 204).

Sexuality and Empowerment in Black Rap Culture

Also pertinent to this study is an examination of the ways that empowerment has been articulated by female musicians in rap music and hip-hop culture, a culture evolved from strong patriarchal roots. Women rappers have faced the need to emancipate themselves using the same musical and topical tools of expression. Shuggart, Waggoner, and Hallstein (2001) state that "Being empowered in the third-wave sense is about feeling good about oneself and having the power to make choices, regardless of what those choices are" (p. 195). Forman (1994) covers such choices that women in rap made in voicing their oppressed perspectives, specifically regarding their use of sexuality. She states,

> Though rarely considered as such by the predominantly male writers who work the Rap "beat," the music also provides an important medium through which women's sexual desires and fantasies can be defined and shared, disrupting the often recurring scenario where women are cast as passive objects of an active masculine libidinal drive. (p. 42)

The vocal use and reference to sex, then, is seen as an active extension of the politics of the sexual revolution. Forman's validation of the use of this tactic grows from the apprehension that sexual frankness has become the defining characteristic in the popular conception of "feminism."

Rose (1994) identifies the three central themes predominating the works of black female rappers to be "heterosexual courtship, the importance of the female voice, and mastery in women's rap and black female public displays of physical and sexual freedom" (p. 147). Shelton (1997) summarizes this historic conflict: "African American

women in rap music find themselves in a unique position in terms of the production of music and image; they must struggle for control and expression in a predominantly white and patriarchal culture industry on one hand and a system of management controlled predominantly by African American males on the other" (p. 107). Perry (2003) cautions against the weakening of a feminist message among those women who become more frequently "presented in visual media as objects rather than subjects" (p. 140). Frith questions girl culture activities (such as dance and dressing up) in their ability to transgress beyond social objectification: "All this female activity, whatever its fun and style and art as a collective occupation, is done, in the end, individually, for the boy's sake. It is the male gaze that gives girls' beauty work its meaning" (Frith in Lewis, 1990; p. 38). Such deliberation over the significance of the sexual display of a woman's body will be addressed in this project. The use of sexuality has become a complex issue considering feminist perspectives, and it is used in varying ways within the context of the materials analyzed.

The Technique of Contradiction

Previously, Shugart, Waggoner, and Hallstein stated contradiction to be a weakness in the musical message of Alanis Morissette. Their selection of the contradiction technique is significant due to the specific embrace of contradiction within third wave feminist literature. Heywood and Drake (1997), editors of *Third Wave Agenda*, argue that "contradiction—or what looks like contradiction, if one doesn't shift one's point of view—marks the desires and strategies of third wave feminists" (p. 2). Specifically, they highlight the contradictions encapsulated within the third wave, defining it as a movement that "contains elements of second wave critique of beauty

culture, sexual abuse, and power structures while it also acknowledges and makes use of the pleasure, danger, and defining power of those structures" (p. 3). Shugart, Waggoner, and Hallstein (2001) quote an essay by Lamm (1995) from the collection, *Listen Up*: "And I know a hell of a lot of what I say is totally contradictory. My contradictions can co-exist, cuz they exist inside of me, and I'm not gonna simplify them so that they fit into the linear analytical pattern that I know they're supposed to" (195).

Although the girls in Lowe's focus group had presumably minimal feminist training, their wide range of reactions to Britney Spears provided a study of contradiction. Despite their initial reactions degrading the singer, Lowe concludes eventually that the girls have "tremendous respect for her and her accomplishments" (p 129). Furthermore, the girls' dialogue extensively covered their speculation of Spears' breast enhancement, explaining that "by 'bouncing' around, showing off her 'fake boobs' and body, Britney Spears is sending a terrible message to the young girls in the audience" (p. 132). In a later portion, the girls acknowledge and do not condemn the choice to use one's sexuality for empowerment. The girls in the focus group also appear to take issue with "a clash of two personae," or the overuse of the virgin/whore dichotomy to point of confusion. According to Lowe, they appear overwhelmed by excessive and overt contradiction, yet they are products and representative of the same idea.

This study aims to use contradiction as a key point in examining the relationships between articulations of feminism within selections of pop music, as well as in relation to third wave feminism as a movement. As shown, contradiction has been employed as a useful technique in studying complex relationships. The problem with contradiction is

that adherence to one side seems to weaken conviction to another. On one hand, the use of contradiction appears to be less viable as a feminist tactic when used in pop music due to the limitations of the medium. In order for songs to be considered “pop,” they must appeal to a broad audience and therefore exhibit some generic similarities in structure. Thus, the limited explanatory power of several collective verses and choruses implies a greater need for listener interpretation, and therefore potential conflation of details that appear contradictory. On the other hand, contradiction can also be seen as resourcefulness and versatility, thus a source of strength and empowerment.

Conclusions

As these previous studies have shown, feminism has become unevenly integrated into pop music and popular culture, and in doing so, it has developed a variety of voices. This variety is reflective of third-wave feminism. Understanding the types of feminist messages that have emerged within pop music can be valuable in grasping the breadth of feminism itself. As mentioned previously, the tool of contradiction is one that is embraced by third-wave feminists. Identifying the use of contradiction and its effects within pop music may also provide an indication to the potential success or failure of alternate political tactics when implemented within pop culture.

CHAPTER 3

THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

As established, this project seeks to examine contradiction among articulations of feminist agency in pop music selections, as well as collectively between these productions of pop culture and the social movement of third wave feminism. In this chapter, I will address theoretical and methodological frameworks that will provide a systematic study of these issues. In the "Theoretical Framework" section, I will cover three types of analysis commonly associated with popular music, with a focus on textual analysis. Next, I will describe Hall's (1980) theory of "encoding/decoding," essentially detailing a method of semiotic analysis in mass communication research. Last, I will address Hall's (1982) theory of articulation, which is pertinent to the development of my research questions. The "Process of Analysis" section addresses concepts pertinent to the study of pop music, including "voice," authenticity, and the significance of genre. In describing the "Materials Examined," I will outline the factors involved in selecting the materials for this project.

Theoretical Framework

Tagg (2000) states, "It is clear that a holistic approach to the analysis of popular music is the only viable one if one wishes to reach a full understanding of all factors interacting with the conception, transmission, and reception of the object of study" (p. 78). Swiss, Sloop, and Herman (1998) list the three primary categories of analysis that

scholars of popular music have emphasized. *Institutional analysis*, the first type, is situated among the production of popular music and its political economy. According to Swiss et al. (1998), work in this area may cover “political-economic and organizational analyses of the music industry,” including technological aspects, government policies, or musicianship itself (p. 4). *Textual analysis*, the second type, has been most useful in my present study of pop music. This analysis concentrates on “the structure of popular music, interpretation of lyrical content, or the examination of the visual iconography of music in the form of music video” (Swiss et al., 1998: p. 4). *Ethnographic analysis*, the third type, deals primarily with a focus on the fans—essentially, focusing on the determinate moment of decoding in order to understand the communicative process. Works using this analysis study the “rituals of everyday life through which popular music is interpreted and used” (Swiss et al., 1998: p. 4). This work delves into the musical scenes and subcultures and their active creation of meaning or identity (Swiss et al., 1998). For a study that aims to assess the presence of contradiction in pop music in relation to third wave feminism, a textual approach has the most to offer. What remains is the linking of such an approach to a theoretical framework that makes sense of the relationships between meaning and social life.

The theoretical framework I will employ in my analysis of contemporary pop music is based on Hall (1980) . The original 1974 version of this study established the development of reception studies in mass communication research (Alasuutari, 1999). Hall’s work critiqued prior research that viewed mass communication as a process through which messages are sent and received with certain effects. His contributory significance lies in a shift to a semiotic approach. According to Hall (1980), the

communicative exchange takes place in a series of “moments,” such that the moments of “encoding” and “decoding” are considered “relatively autonomous.” As Alasuutari (1999) summarized, “the idea that a message is encoded by a programme producer and then decoded (and made sense of) by the receivers means that the sent and received messages are not necessarily identical, and different audiences may also decode a programme differently” (p. 3). According to Hall, after the message is “appropriated into meaningful discourse,” it must then be “meaningfully decoded” in order to have any effect, regardless of the degree to which the resulting effect reflects the message originally intended by the producer (p. 130).

Integral to the encoding/decoding construct is the potential asymmetry of each respective code, providing space for degrees of understanding and misunderstanding in the communication exchange. Hall addresses the ways by which direct symmetry might fail to occur, specifically regarding the interpretation of televisual codes and signs. Each insight provides an explanation for polysemy, the recognition of complexity and contradiction in all signs. A denotative level of understanding, once combined with a receiver’s given connotative associations, has the potential of producing any number of results from determinant decoding moments.

To organize thinking about polysemy and its social implications, Hall identifies three hypothetical positions from which decodings of a televisual discourse may be constructed. The first is a *dominant-hegemonic position*, through which the viewer distinguishes the connoted meaning and “decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded” (p. 136). From this position, the decoding process operates within the hegemonic structure of the dominant, or global, code. The

second position is the *negotiated code*, which "contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements," meaning that the viewer may develop an understanding based on some elements from the dominant ideology, other extractions may come from "local" or "corporate" positions (p. 137). Significantly, decoding via this negotiated version of ideology may likely lead to contradiction, as the viewer may express conflicting inferences at different levels. Hall suspected that "the great majority of so-called "misunderstandings" arise from the contradictions and disjunctions between hegemonic-dominant encodings and negotiated-corporate decodings" (p.137). The third position is the *oppositional code*, which occurs when a viewer perfectly "understand[s] both the literal and the connotative inflection given by a discourse" but continues to "decode the message in a *globally* contrary way" (p. 137-138, original emphasis). Through this code, a viewer still manages to understand the message in the preferred code, but asserts the will to adopt "some alternative framework of reference" (p. 138).

The use of television in his study relates to my study of music in both visual and audiovisual forms. Based on Hall's explanation, the apparent contradictions that arise from attempting to decode pop music actually result from a conflict of dominant and corporate logics. Furthermore, the analysis of multiple messages—encoded individually—traveling among multiple overlapping pathways may produce a great number of varied interpretive possibilities.

The usefulness of a broadly semiotic approach to feminist research has been noted by Franklin, Lury, and Stacey (1991), among others, who state that such an approach has "provided important critiques of some kinds of reductionism and essentialism, and facilitated the analysis of contradictory meanings and identities" (p. 9).

However, some recommend supplementing with various cultural theories based in psychoanalysis in order to address the reproduction of patriarchal relations, which according to Franklin et al. (1991), "provide an account of how difference is fixed as inequality through the acquisition of a gendered identity" (p. 10).

My study inherently draws on an understanding of "articulation," as established by Hall (1982). This theory was based within a Gramsci's concept of hegemony, and it is used to explain the processes of ideological struggle. Summarized by Storey (1996),

> Hall's use of 'articulation' plays on the term's double meaning: to express and to join together. He argues that cultural texts and practices are not inscribed with meaning guaranteed once and for all by the intentions of production; meaning is always the result of an act of 'articulation' (an active process of 'production in use'). The process is called 'articulation' because meaning has to be expressed, but it is always expressed in a specific context, a specific historical moment, within a specific discourse. Thus expression is always connected (articulated to and conditioned by) context. (p. 4)

The current project will actively examine the articulation of feminism in the current historical moment, as captured in pop music songs. A methodological emphasis is placed on the context of the materials examined, which aims to effectively draw meaning from these products of pop culture.

Research Questions

The resulting purpose of this study is to assess how contradictions regarding agency are articulated in pop music in relation to third wave feminism. In order to adddress this purpose, my main research questions are:

1) In what specific ways is contradiction regarding feminist agency articulated in a selection of current pop performances?

2) What patterns exist in this articulation within the performances chosen?

3) What are key implications of the articulation of contradictions for the progressive potential of third-wave feminism?

Process of Analysis

I will use the techniques of textual analysis to examine the articulation of signs of contradiction in relation to feminist agency. I plan to first identify key signifying elements of each performance (recorded song, lyrics, and video). Such elements can consist of observations about the music (fast or slow tempo, loud or soft, presence/absence of specific instruments), the vocal performance (loud or soft, high pitch or low, precise or loose phrasing), the lyric content (first-person or third-person, formal or colloquial), and about the video visuals (direct address or indirect address, placement of sets, actions taken, framing, and camera placement).

Although I intend to employ a textual analysis to analyze pop music, I will first acknowledge the institutional complexity of pop music production. I am aware of the nature of pop music, which produces icons and songs that are rarely (or never) pure in individual agency. Considering the extent of pop music production, the process of identifying the exact origin of encoded meaning structures becomes increasingly

complex. However, the search for “origin” arguably irrelevant in the analysis of pop music, and for the purposes of this study, I will consider the limited authorship of the artists in context of their articulation of feminist agency. Doing so reflects pop culture’s traditional cultivation of the star identity. Shuker (1994) broadly defines “auteurs,” authors or creators who enjoy respect for their professional performance, and “stars,” who enjoy wider public interest and public fascination with their personal lives. As Goodwin (1992) notes, “pop culture itself continues to celebrate authorship and to promote cultural products through the parallel discourses of stardom and auteurism….More so than any area of popular culture, pop and rock music is explicitly involved in the consumption of auteurism, through the foregrounding of the artist / singer” (p. 108-109).

The four pop artists examined—Gretchen Wilson, Avril Lavigne, Missy Elliott, and Christina Aguilera—were selected in part because each of them either wrote or co-wrote the majority of songs on their last album. Feminists have historically attempted to assert a voice, message, or perspective into dominant discourse, and this concept of “voice” is paralleled in pop music. Hennion (1990) observes, “Having a ‘voice’ in pop music terms does not mean possessing a vocal technique or systematically mastering one’s vocal capacities. Instead, a voice is an indication of one’s personality….it is not the voice for its own sake that matters but its expressive power” (p. 109).

The multimedia nature of music video provides additional creative space for such expression. Straw (1993) disputes the argument that the video “enacts a dispersion of the authorial voice or performer identity,” but rather adds depth to the song’s meaning in the way it “displaces and reconstitutes the voice” (pp. 11-12). He uses Madonna’s

"Open Your Heart" video to illustrate "the disjunction between a verbal narration which is first-person and the specularization of that narrator within a particular fictional space" (p. 11). Goodwin (1992) expands on this complex characteristic of the music video in explaining that "the break with a 'realist' system of address is not aesthetically radical, it is a *convention* of pop performance" (p. 76, original emphasis). Understanding the properties of narrative and perspective in pop video necessitates an awareness of the technical methods used in order to convey a direct mode of address, such as "when singers and musicians look into the camera and perform directly for us" (Goodwin, 1992: p. 77). My formal analysis of song and video involves these techniques as one among many ways that feminist messages are conveyed.

Clusters of signs help constitute a genre, which is also an important signfier. Brackett (2002) describes the use of genre as a way to categorize popular music so as to create a connection between musical styles, producers, musicians and consumers, noting sample labels such as 'pop', 'rock', 'R&B', 'country', 'hip-hop', 'alternative', 'techno', etc. The boundaries of American pop music have grown to encompass music from multiple genres, so that noting the generic roots of the songs helps explain their significance. According to Brackett (2000), "By trying to understand individual musical texts (songs, recording, performances) in the context of genres and their relationships to one another, one places the meaning of an individual song within a larger field of meaning" (p. 66). Genres are inherently associated with connotations about music and identity, and they may encode a variety of social characteristics including race, class, gender, place, age and sexuality (Brackett, 2000).

Both mediated signs and genre constitute important points of observation and analysis. Lacey (2000) addresses the relationship between genre and semiotics, reading genre as as a connection between the sign system of iconography and the paradigmatic repertoire of elements located within the given texts. He also describes the development of the genre as a response to the auteur position, articulating the inherent conflict of the ideology of genre and the "limiting" analytical perspective of the auteur theory. This work intends to use the techniques of both types of analyses in a complimentary way, focusing on the cultural and social history from which individual musicians and their musical genres have derived.

Materials Examined

For this study, I selected four female musicians with relatively diverse styles: Gretchen Wilson, Avril Lavigne, Missy "Misdemeanor" Elliott, and Christina Aguilera. These four female musicians were selected based on their relative diversity in the popular music field, in addition to the salient personas and messages promoted in each of their songs. Each of the musicians is a woman who has either publicly identified as feminist or who has produced music that supports the freedom of activity or voice among women.

Each of these artists and their songs have produced high rankings on Billboard's pop charts within the last two years. Billboard's year-end charts are determined from the same specific data used to produce their weekly lists--primarily sales measured by Nielsen SoundScan and radio information culled by Nielsen Broadcast Data Systems (BDS) (Mayfield, 2004). Lavigne ranked 7th on Billboard's 2004 "Top Pop Artist –

Female" music chart, and Wilson ranked 9th. On the same chart for 2003, Aguilera ranked first, followed by Lavigne at 4th, with Elliott at 9th.

All of the songs chosen clearly reference gender inequality in some fashion. At the same time, they are indisputable pop music commodities; products of the highly structured pop music marketing "machine." The products of such a formulaic international industry would conceivably be the *last* place one might find a message of any political value. Thus, in undertaking a project that seeks specifically to examine pop music songs, I hope to emphasize the significance of my analysis of these songs and their responses to sexual inequality.

As mentioned, the four artists selected have produced music with relatively disparate origins. Two of the artists selected occupy space in both pop music and another genre. A song or artist of a divergent genre that gains popularity on the mainstream pop chart is deemed a "crossover" (Sernoe, 1998). Wilson ranked first on Billboard's 2004 "Top Country Artist – Female" chart in addition to placing in the top ten as a female pop artist. Her song, "Redneck Woman," which won "Best Female Country Vocal Performance" at the 2004 Grammys, became a crossover hit on the pop charts as well. In the same year, she ranked 4th on Billboard's "Top New Pop Artist" chart. While Wilson's roots are planted firmly in country music, Elliott characterizes herself as a hip-hop artist. In 2004, Elliott ranked 9th on the "Top Hip-Hop/R&B Female Artists" chart after ranking in the same position one year earlier on the "Top Pop Artist – Female" chart.

While Aguilera and Lavigne cannot be placed entirely in other genres in addition to pop, their styles show a marked diversity within the pop genre itself. A comparison

between Aguilera's self-titled first album, released in 1999, to her 2002 album, *Stripped*, reveals a clear gravitation from traditional pop music toward R&B. In an interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine, Aguilera said, "I wanted the first record to be a little bit more on the R&B side, but [the producers] wanted to keep it pop….. It would drive me insane, because [my executive producer] was always saying, 'Stick to the melody, keep it pop.' So the second album will be my time to let loose, finally" (Aguilera in Strauss, 2000). Lavigne's music has also been located within the pop arena since her emergence. Her music and style appear to be punk-inspired or punk-pop, despite the fact that she does not claim to label herself punk. In an interview with CanWest News in Vancouver, she identified the source of the misnomer: "It's the media who said that. Maybe people see an edge. I mean, I'm not the typical bubble-gum pop girl and my music's a bit harder, so people labelled me that way" (Lavigne in McCoy, 2003).

In selecting the songs that would receive the most intense scrutiny, I based my decisions on several factors. First, I selected recent songs that had been released between the years 2002 and 2005. Among these, I focused on songs that appeared to promote a feminist message or songs that included lines referencing gender comparisons or some form of female empowerment.

For the purposes of this study, I have chosen to scrutinize one song by each artist. Music videos were used as primary source materials in addition to the songs themselves. I have determined to foreground the narrative arcs of the music videos in my analysis of these songs due to their pertinent visual treatment of gender conflict and perceived oppression. Lyrics to all songs analyzed were readily available at a free online website: <www.lyrics.com>.

As addressed in previous sections of this study, music videos have become inextricable visual counterparts to songs, adding a complex analytic dimension via the projection of iconic visual signs (Hall, 1980). The analysis of the music video has spawned an extensive area of study unto itself. Initial attempts to read the music video adopted concepts of film and television studies with necessary modification with regard to the video's musical function (Shuker, 1994). Vernallis (2004) emphasizes the unique "language" of the medium due to its multimedia nature, stating that "music, image, and lyrics each possess their own language with regard to time, space, narrativity, activity, and affect" (p. 13). Considering that the video and song work together to create a form, an analysis of pop music that neglects the music video would be incomplete (Vernallis, 2004). I am able to access the videos online at <www.music.yahoo.com>. The digital video archives allowed me to select and play the videos at no extra charge beyond an internet connection capable of transmission.

Thus, I will analyze the music of four pop musicians whose musical styles reflect relatively diverse backgrounds in terms of genre. One song will be chosen from each musician; the music video and the song itself will be assessed using a textual analysis. I will primarily employ Hall's semiotic approach to the materials, with acknowledgement to pop music's emphasis on "star" and "auteur" theory. Using these methods, I intend to assess the complexity of contradiction regarding the articulation of feminist agency in these four samples of pop culture production. I ultimately hope to use these articulations to draw conclusions to the political potential of third wave feminism.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS

Pop culture of the last decade has developed in an environment informed by feminist influence and progression. The female pop musicians included in this study convey in their songs responses on the issue of gender agency and its relationship to a political movement. The four performances I will analyze are: Gretchen Wilson's "Redneck Woman," Avril Lavigne's "Sk8er Boi," Christina Aguilera's "Can't Hold Us Down" featuring Lil' Kim, and Missy Elliott's "Work It."[1]

The analysis proceeds from Hall's semiotic understanding of polysemy. The intention is to detect and analyze the articulation of contradiction regarding feminism and politics. Each performance will be assessed in the following manner: An overall interpretation of the song's relationship to gender politics will be addressed first in context of the song's genre. Next, I will conduct a diachronic analysis of the music video's plot in conjunction with the song's musical elements. Then, I will implement a synchronic analysis of the primary oppositions that are addressed in the performance. Last, I will draw connotative conclusions from the elements that have arisen from these analyses. Addressing musical interpretations of feminism in context of third wave feminist conventions maintains a necessarily critical eye on the constitution of difference, opposition, and empowerment.

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[1] Parenthetical reference to songs will be cited after only the first appearance of corresponding lyrics in this chapter.

“Redneck Woman”: Utopian Community

Gretchen Wilson’s anthem for the “redneck woman” reconciles the struggles of such women by focusing on their individual actions. The women of the video and in the lyrics utilize pride and self-assertion as an expression of power. The individual ignorance or behavior of men can be escaped with a simple reprimand. Thus, even a woman in a relationship divided by traditional or unequal gender roles can attain a state of liberation if she can cultivate a sense of pride in herself and her actions.

Gretchen Wilson’s success as a both a country and pop artist has established her as the most recent addition to a long line of country crossovers. According to Starr and Waterman (2003), three general styles of country music developed during the postwar era: country crooners, who specialized in a smooth, pop-oriented style, bluegrass musicians, who focused on the adaptation of traditional southern music in a package suitable to the times, and honky-tonk musicians. The last was described as a group who “performed in a hard-edged, electronically amplified style, and wrote songs about the trials and tribulations of migrants to the city and the gender roles and male/female relationships during a period of intense social change” (Starr & Waterman, 2003: p. 182). Starr and Waterman (2003) emphasize the close association of country and western music to live recording and performance. The song analyzed here is recorded specifically to highlight the aspects of live performance. The video reflects the same goal, and the song features sounds of a cheering crowd.

“Redneck Woman” opens with an electronically amplified guitar, “fiddle,” and piano. The beat of the cymbals is prevalent throughout the entire song, reflecting honky-tonk music’s “percussive, insistent beat (sometimes called ‘sock rhythm’) well

suited to dancing" (Starr & Waterman, 2003: p. 185). Honky-tonk music's synonyms of "hard country" or "beer-drinking music," reflect the history of the venues themselves as drinking establishments that multiplied after the end of Prohibition (Starr & Waterman, 2003).

"Redneck Woman" follows a pattern of verse 1 / chorus / verse 2 / chorus / chorus. The repetition of the chorus indicates an emphasis on the message in the chorus while confirming the pervasiveness of the pop music song structure. In addition to repetition, instrumental techniques are also used to distinguish the chorus. The duration of Wilson's pitches becomes longer, and its final line is highlighted when most of the instruments pause, drawing focus on the vocal message. The chorus includes women voicing their solidarity via "Hell yeah!" as a part of the hook in response to Wilson's: "Let me get a big hell yeah from the redneck girls like me / Hell yeah!" (Wilson & Rich, 2004, track 2).

The "Redneck Woman" video opens with a shot of Wilson enthusiastically "off-roading" on an all-terrain vehicle (ATV). She rides through a creek and "mud-bogs" (speeds through muddy ground) in a truck. These scenes, which feature Wilson dressed in ripped, mud-splattered jeans, and large aviator sunglasses, establish the initial outdoorsy image of a tomboy. Her long hair is under a baseball cap, and large hoop earrings and heavy eyeliner are the only indicators of femininity. As soon as Wilson's vocals begin, she is shown in the foreground of the mud pit singing directly toward the camera as the action continues in the background.

As the chorus begins, however, the scene shifts literally with a swish of her hair. A more glamorous Wilson is performing on stage at a honky-tonk. The oversized t-shirt

from the rugged outdoor scenes is now a fitted shirt, and her ponytail is loosened into a flowing mane. The spotlight focuses on Wilson while the band and audience in darker hues. Accompanying her onstage in addition to musicians are the exotic dancers who flank her, one behind chains and the other in a cage. Other members featured are the front-row female groupies singing along to “Hell yeah!,” the title, and primary line of the chorus. The featured group of female fans is generally young and attractive; one is wearing a midriff-revealing fitted t-shirt and another wears a trucker hat with a stylish tilt. Tanya Tucker is acknowledged with visual/aural synchronization when her name is mentioned.

At the second chorus, the viewer returns to the everyday life of other “redneck women,” who are engaged in domestic work. These women are less attractive, clad in overalls, bandanas over their hair, and baggy camouflaged clothing. They are shown gathering their kids on the streets, hanging laundry on the clothesline, or sitting in a car in front of small-town shops. The shots end when the women face the camera, with arms raised, to join in at the hook:

> I'm a redneck woman
>
> I ain't no high class broad
>
> I'm just a product of my raising
>
> I say, “hey y'all” and “yee-haw”
>
> And I keep my Christmas lights on
>
> On my front porch all year long
>
> And I know all the words to every Tanya Tucker song

So here's to all my sisters out there keeping it country

Let me get a big 'hell yeah' from the redneck girls like me, hell yeah!

(Wilson, 2004, track 2)

The "redneck women" who are shown outdoors exhibit a diversity of body shape and appearance, whether pregnant, overweight, or youthful.

Viewers then see Wilson return from her muddy outdoor activities to a messy trailer home. Thus begins the section in which her two personas—one outdoorsy and masculine, the other glamorous and feminine—begin to weave together. She discovers a slovenly Kid Rock and Hank Williams, Jr., seated on the couches, watching television. The two men greet her with mock intimidation, but she reprimands their behavior by removing Kid Rock's feet from the coffee table, picking up empty beer bottles, and confiscating Hank Williams, Jr.'s cigar. She then slips into a back hall toward the laundry machine. The scene becomes shadowed, as she undresses in the laundry room with her back turned. The camera follows the items of clothing as she removes them and places them into the washing machine, finally unhooking a colorful bra. At this point, the final chorus begins and the venue shifts back to the packed bar. More of the active members—Wilson, the musicians, the exotic dancers, and the group of women—are featured together in the same shots toward the end. The crowd becomes more rowdy, raising their beers, as the men in her house join other audience members coming to light. More males are specifically shown in the crowd at the end, as the entire audience once again sings along with the hook.

"Redneck Woman" presents an opposition between the social and economic class associated with a "redneck woman" and that of a "high class broad." This

distinction is reflected in lines such as, “Well, I ain't never been the Barbie doll type / No, I can't swig that sweet champagne, I'd rather drink beer all night.” Through “Redneck Woman,” Wilson lyrically and visually expresses two very different sides of herself. The bright, outdoor scenes of rugged activity contrast starkly with the dark, indoor concert. Her physical appearance while outside is dirty and unkempt, as opposed to her more glamorous presentation as a performer. She is among male friends when riding through the mud on her ATV, while the audience members featured in the bar are initially a supportive group of young women. The “redneck women” featured outside and on the streets are not nearly as trendy as the young women in the bar.

Wilson introduces her first persona in muddy jeans and a baseball cap. She expresses her preference for spending time drinking beer in a “honky-tonk or on a four-wheel drive tailgate.” Her second persona is characterized by confidence in her sexual and social abilities regarding men. Outdoors, she is “one of the boys,” on par in activity and attire with her male counterparts. Indoors as a performer, she is significantly more feminine. Her use of sexual appeal onstage is heightened through her provocative dance movements. At a point during the song, she joins one of the dancers in a cage. In the second verse, she sings,

> Victoria's Secret, well their stuff's real nice
> But I can buy the same damn thing on a Wal-Mart shelf half price
> And still look sexy, just as sexy as those models on TV
> I don't need no designer tag to make my man want me.

Her lyrical desire to manipulate her “man’s” sexual attraction affirms her sexual presence as in the bar scenes, especially in elevated position as the primary performer.

The diachronic resolution at the end, men joining women, works with the synchronic remapping of men's space and women's space. In taking part in mud sports, she redefines sex roles by taking over traditionally male space, "demand[ing] parity with male privilege," (Lewis 1993). However, her shift from the outdoors to the inside of her home marks a parallel shift in the assumption of sex roles. In her retreat to the laundry room, locus of domestic work, she appears in a state of undress that recalls the sexuality of her performance persona. Wilson's confidence with men, her direction over the audience in the bar, and the command of her music video audience are all linked through the use of sexuality. Ultimately, the opposing parts of herself become united. The chorus itself reflects an aural interpretation of female community. The emphasis on the caller / response of the "redneck women" at the chorus of the song issues an active call for the literal and figurative unity of women's voices.

Wilson has also integrated herself into men's culture as "one of the boys." The transition between her masculine and feminine selves reflected in the video comes across as an attempt to reconcile the types of power associated with each. Instead, The need for collective political action is bypassed in favor of the pervasive harmony of the closing scene. The presence of men becomes more recognizable in the bar, as both men and women alike join in repeating the chorus, "Hell yeah!" The visual folding of men into the crowd heighten the energy and social unity. The bar's utopian community is presented as a microcosmic success story, absolving the need to deliberate inequality between gender.

"Redneck Woman" is a rally to build individual pride in women. The presentation of two personas, in addition to he lyrics, acknowledges the process by

which such women may attempt to reconcile the assumption of gendered duties through individual fortification. By the end of the song, the strong emphasis is on the benefit and possibility of collective unity. The struggles of women can be overcome through individual initiative and action. If women simply stand up for themselves, the divisions and oppositions noted in a feminist critique can be bridged if everyone can simply unite in harmony.

"Sk8er Boi" : Androgyny in Rebellion

"Sk8er Boi" focuses primarily on the conflict between groups of different lifestyles, associating one with authenticity and the other with the superficiality of consumer culture. In context of this song, gender struggles are defined within interpersonal relationships, thus, such struggles are less important than a degendered, subcultural resistance against a dominant social group. In the song, an upper-class teenage girl refuses to publicly admit her attraction for a "punk." In the video, Lavigne and her band invade the physical space of the pervasive "authority" that abstractly appears in the form of a looming helicopter. Thus, the issues of gender are largely absent compared to the ongoing of struggle of an androgenous group with a depersonalized authority.

Lavigne's music evades convenient categorization, having developed a niche within pop music. She has received some amount of backlash from critics and other hardcore punk fans who dispute her image as a "punk-pop hero" (McCoy, 2004). As previously mentioned, she resists definition, particularly the label "punk." Despite the fact that she did not emerge directly from the rich history of punk culture, her music and style nevertheless contain immediately recognizable references to such culture.

Starr and Waterman (2003) inform that "punk was as much a cultural style--an attitude defined by rebellion against authority and a deliberate rejection of middle-class values--as much as it was a musical genre" (p. 346). Punk developed during the 1970s, when America was embroiled in the Vietnam War, women and gay rights movements were underway, and newspaper headlines were consumed by the Manson family murders (Raha, 2005). The mainstream music hits of the time were primarily composed of "soft rock and folk acts," which gave birth to a genre characterized by "revulsion at the success of one-dimensional music and its hesitancy to deal with pressing issues of poverty and urban decay" (Raha, 2005: pp. 4-5). Punk's active disdain toward the studio dependence of pop music manifested in early artists' determination to record songs in one take to create the experience of a live performance (Starr & Waterman, 2003).

The relatively harder "edge" of Lavigne's music in context of pop is one characteristic that has spurred comparisons with punk. Even the spelling of her song, "Sk8er Boi"--an intentional deviation from the English spelling--creates an immediate link to the subversive roots of punk. Traditional pop elements are just as prevalent on her album, however, as evidenced in the soul-searching ballad "I'm With You" and the melodic verses of "Don't Tell Me." The verse and repeated chorus of "Sk8er Boi" falls into a satisfying pop pattern. "Sk8er Boi" opens with an energetic combination of electric guitars, backed by a heavy beat on the drum set.

From beginning to end, the video depicts energy and youthful rebellion derived from punk culture. Although punk may oppose the standards of traditional commercial fashion, "it was also a fashion system in its own right, with a very particular look: torn

blue jeans, ripped stockings, outfits patched with ragged bits of contrasting materials, and perhaps a safety pin through the cheek” (Starr & Waterman 2003). Lavigne’s variation on traditional punk fashion parallels her musical compromise between punk and pop.

The video performance of “Sk8er Boi” opens with a pile of spray paint cans on a city street, flanked by tall buildings. The scene moves toward the boy who has freshly painted a message on the side of a building of Lavigne’s illegal street concert: “7th & Spring / NOON.” The graffiti is completed by a large red anarchist star, also painted on the street itself. A rapid montage of images reflects both the determination of the teenagers involved and the energetic pace of the song. The scene shifts to a boy’s room in an apartment directly facing the painted building, his computer monitor revealing the same red star now imprinted on the building and on fliers. Teenagers and college-age kids are shown at a variety of locations, gluing posters on walls, sliding down manholes in the middle of the street, sending the announcement through their cell phones, and covertly passing the message on coffee cups for unknowing customers. A couple on a bike are throwing handfuls of fliers into the air as they ride through a large arcade.

The title character appears as soon as Lavigne’s lyrics introduce him:

He was a boy, she was a girl

Can I make it anymore obvious?

He was a punk, she did ballet

What more can I say?

He wanted her, she'd never tell

Secretly she wanted him as well

But all of her friends, stuck up their nose

They had a problem with his baggy clothes

(Lavigne, 2002, track 3)

We see him riding a skateboard alongside a convertible, intently recording the blond girl driving with a digital video camera.

Lavigne jumps into a chair when her vocals begin. She wears heavy eye make-up, a trucker hat turned backwards, black forearm bands with metal spikes, a striped tie, Converse high-top shoes, striped knee socks, and baggy pants. Her bright green t-shirt and eye-catching attire distinguish her from the rest of her all-male band. She and her band are in constant movement, traveling together on skateboards down tenement stairs and through a parking garage. They stow instruments in the trunk of a car and pile into the back seat, presumably heading toward the corner of 7th and Spring.

At the street intersection, workers plug in massive speakers on the street, park old cars side by side to form a makeshift stage, and throw backpacks of equipment and rope from the tops of tall buildings. When Lavigne's performance begins, (picking up and staying in synch with the video's music track,) people form a crowd, which quickly becomes a mosh pit. Residents lean out of windows from surrounding tall buildings to watch the commotion. Briefly flashing on the screen is an elevated street sign, "Fashion District," from which a boy is hanging. The boy who had earlier sought the upper-class girl approaches Lavigne at the foot of the car she is standing on, recording her with his digital camera as she briefly directs her attention toward him. The mosh pit surrounding Lavigne becomes more dangerous, as people are shown being nearly trampled. Police

cars arrive on the scene and begin arresting a few rowdy individuals, one of whom is presumably the aforementioned, upper-class “ballerina” of the lyrics. Lavigne smashes her guitar on the windshield of the car she stands on. The sound of a helicopter hovering overhead consumes the final scene, as Lavigne looks upward at it, unflinching, but not challenging.

Lavigne in this video is a central member of an impromptu, energetic organization whose identifying symbol connotes resistance to authority. By contrast, the primary oppositional force has no face, but instead appears in such forms as the looming helicopter and the policemen. This opposition emerges as also between generational classes and lifestyles. The members involved, who appear to be no older than their mid-20s, express their revolt by means of a rock concert. Communication of the event is dependent on modern technology--computer graphic design and text messaging. An arcade, a meeting place common among kids, is a location at which fliers are visually distributed. Lavigne establishes a clear distinction between the skater boy, representing the young punk community, and the ballerina, who belongs to a presumably elitist clique. The girl’s physical beauty is addressed with an accusation of superficiality: “Does your pretty face see what he’s worth?” The hook, “He was a skater boy / she said see ya later boy / he wasn’t good enough for her,” establishes a hierarchical division. The chorus is repeated three times before its final melodic variation, which emphasizes a shift from third-person to first-person narration:

> Sorry girl, but you missed out
>
> Well tough luck that boy's mine now
>
> We are more than just good friends

This is how the story ends

Too bad that you couldn't see

See the man that boy could be

There is more than meets the eye

I see the soul that is inside.

The success of the narrator's relationship with the boy is pitted against the ballerina's lack of depth, a small-scale representation of the faceless oppositional force.

"Sk8er Boi" posits a criticism on a lifestyle that is preoccupied with materialism. The music video amplifies the message of the song by adding a layer of visual meaning (Goodwin, 1992). The video addresses a lifestyle and culture conflict at a metropolitan level, while the lyrics to "Sk8er Boi" address the same issues in context of a grade school relationship. The song provides a personal anecdote illustrating the failings of superficiality, while the video depicts, in effect, the teamwork, planning, and execution of a grassroots revolution.

The high school conflict between the ballerina and the jilted skater boy portray the female as materialistic and the male as unpretentious. However, the song places less emphasis on linking characteristics by gender than it does by lifestyle and social group. Lavigne presents herself in a generally nonsexual manner, compared to most other women who appear in pop music videos (such as in this project's other musical selections). The most musically distinct verse of "Sk8er Boi," quoted above, captures the moral message of the song: "I see the soul that is inside." The song's depiction of resistance via an expansive group—rather than a lone graffiti artist, for example—necessitates the de-emphasis of gender. The song and video forego the use of

sexuality or detailed gender differentiation in order to accentuate class and generational differences expressed through popular culture. The image of the overwhelming crowd is effective in its unity. Thus, the androgenous crowd, not men against women, struggles for equality and power in "Sk8er Boi's" depiction of subcultural resistence.

"Can't Hold Us Down" : Stand Up Like a Man

"Can't Hold Us Down" originates in a recognition that gender struggles constitute the daily, ever-present reality of women. Women must combat an outdated mentality that requires them to be "seen and not heard," thereby stunting their potential for individual growth. The song rallies women to respond to this ongoing struggle by uniting against men, establishing a strong presence, and standing their ground. Women must challenge the male assumption of privilege by organizing resistence in a collective form. The gender battle takes place on the terrain of culture and expression, visualized via a dance competition that pits men versus women, each group challenging the other to execute a more impressive feat. The resistence of women strengthens as they adopt traits of men, matching and surpassing mens' actions and sexual insults.

Aguilera's early music was produced to reflect a traditional pop sound. Her most recent album, *Stripped*, contains songs that reflect a stronger rhythm and blues vibe through instrumentation and vocals, such as "Can't Hold Us Down." The video places Aguilera in a black neighborhood, engaging in a breakdance "battle," an activity rooted in African-American hip-hop culture. Aguilera's music refers to black culture not only musically, but also through the issues addressed, and through the perspective that is assumed in the treatment of these issues. Thus, a cursory examination of the history and associations of R&B is pertinent to the analysis of this song.

The term “rhythm and blues” was coined in 1949 to refer to music that was marketed primarily toward African-Americans (Rye, 2005). The term is also applied to a characteristic African-American musical style that developed around the late 1940s and 1950s. According to Rye (2005), “Critical opinion has never coalesced on whether rhythm and blues in this sense is a genre of jazz or of blues, a hybrid of the two, or a separate musical idiom” (para. 2). The bands of the early 1940s that spawned rhythm and blues developed with an increasing emphasis on an “insistent beat, on blues and blues-ballad vocals, and on solo work emphasizing overt emotion and rhythmic excitement” (Rye, 2005).

One of Aguilera’s most distinctive musical characteristics is her use of melismatic style, which extends several notes on a single syllable of text. Her use of melisma and improvisation at the repeated chorus of “Can’t Hold Us Down” illustrates her vocal style. Improvisation is a technique that is a principal component of jazz, a precursor to R&B. A common improvisational solo typically consists of a “single chorus or a continuous succession of choruses during which the player improvises on the harmonies (maybe also to a greater or lesser degree the melody) of the theme” (Kernfeld, 2005; para. 1). In this way, the soloist is given the opportunity to demonstrate “the freedom of invention, virtuosity and ornamental elaboration,” (para. 1). In the final repetitions of the chorus in “Can’t Hold Us Down,” Aguilera vocally alters the melody, thereby emphasizing the message of the refrain.

Powers (2005) addresses the trend of the late 1990s that involved young African-American singers who have sought to merge the rhythms and tough attitude of hop-hop with the vocal technique of the 1970s’ soul. She describes such woman as

"individualistic, more confrontational….in their songs they tangle with [the hip-hop genre's] cold-blooded male pronouncements" (p. 496). With Lil' Kim as an ally, Aguilera confronts the emotional cost in the battle as a "sexual warrior" (p. 496). In reference to the treatment of sexuality in pop music, black music has "frankly celebrated love's sexual side," giving artists a way of confronting the sexual stereotypes that racism has created" (p. 496).

The video "Can't Hold Us Down" is set in a recreated, somewhat stylized 1970s black inner-city neighborhood. The individuals in the neighborhood are modeling a modern spin on the clothing and hairstyles of the 1970s. The action takes place outdoors on a bright, sunny day. Brick walls and surfaces are covered with colorful graffiti; such as on a particular wall that reads, "Crack is Wack." The volume of people in the street suggests a bustling and active community. Children jump rope on the sidewalk, use disposed mattresses as trampolines, and play among fire hydrants that are spewing water. A group of women sit on the steps of a building, talking and grooming each other, while men mingle on an opposite street corner.

Aguilera emerges from the group of women on the steps and struts down the street. She is dressed in tiny pink shorts, knee-high socks in heels, a form-fitting top, and heavy gold jewelry. She wears dark eye make-up, and her curly black hair is pulled up under a purple hat. A man, wearing no shirt and matching red hat and pants, heads toward her on the street. As they pass each other, he harasses her by grabbing her behind, which sparks her indignation and the beginning of the song: "So what am I not supposed to have an opinion / Should I be quiet just because I'm a woman?" (Aguilera et al., 2002, track 2).

As the conflict between Aguilera and the man intensifies, women and men join each respective side until the genders begin a figurative dance "battle," marked by the large "boombox." The group of women are diverse in size, dress, and skin tone, though all (except Aguilera) appear to be African-American. In contrast, the men are generally thin and athletic. The men perform breakdancing moves as a challenge to the women, who respond with both choreographed and individual dances. The facial features, head movement, posturing, and hand gestures of the women reflect the tone of the song's title. As the confrontation between the men and women continues on the street, other women in the vicinity take notice--a woman who is hosing down a street peers toward the commotion as other women lean from fire escapes.

The men respond initially with a mocking attitude, exemplified by one character who holds out a hat for tributes to their performance. Lil' Kim arrives and immediately removes her draped covering to expose a bikini. A man incorporates a grab to his "package" as he does a one-armed handstand, explicitly emphasizing sexual dominance. The structured distance between the groups collapses when Aguilera positions a garden hose between her legs, spraying the men. A side camera angle of both men and women compares the physicality of the groups, showing women with hands raised and men beginning to disband.

In the last segment, Aguilera struts away, physically rejoicing. The action behind her is shown in shadow, as she walks down a bright street. A large woman, featured earlier taking interest in the commotion, is now walking down the street with a baby in one arm. She mouths, "You go, girl!" toward Aguilera as she raises her hand in similar triumph.

Both the video and lyrics of “Can’t Hold Us Down” illustrate a primary opposition between men and women. The video depicts a nonviolent confrontation between genders, through which the forum for debate is that of a dance “contest.” In this context, members of both genders are able to physically express challenges, replies, and rebuttals. The song’s chorus projects a rally cry emphasizing female unity *against* men:

This is for my girls all around the world
Who've come across a man who don't respect your worth
Thinking all women should be seen, not heard
So what do we do girls?
Shout out loud!
Letting them know we're gonna stand our ground
Lift your hands high and wave them proud
Take a deep breath and say it loud
Never can, never will, can't hold us down.

A significant inversion takes place at the end of the video, with women becoming more individualized as well as more masculine. Men’s characteristics are essentialized through such lines as, “When a female fires back / Suddenly big talker don't know how to act / So he does what any little boy will do / Making up a few false rumors or two.” The song addresses a lying, disrespectful type of man who expects women to be quiet and submissive. The response to such men is repeated in the call encouraging girls to “Shout out loud!”

Such an inversion is an established part of hip-hop culture, as Shelton (1997) notes that even women rappers who have achieved financial stability and autonomy continue to express an "inevitable, inextricable relationship with men and define themselves by their ability to be integrated into a man's world" (p. 111). Aguilera and Lil' Kim make multiple references to gender equality, exemplified in their desire to be as sexually promiscuous as men without receiving social punishment. Aguilera sings, "If you look back at history / it's a common double standard of society / the guy gets all the glory the more he can score / while the girl can do the same and yet you call her a whore." Lil' Kim opens her solo with a perplexing quandary: "Here's something I just can't understand / If the guy have three girls then he's the man / He can either give us some head, sex her off / if the girl do the same, then she's a whore." To listeners with cheating partners, Lil' Kim suggests an "eye for an eye" solution: "do it right back to him and let that be that / you need to let him know that his game is whack." They are attempting to gain equivalence with men on a personal level by matching behavior and action.

The styles of dance that each group employs is indicative of their gendered perspectives. The men are generally athletic, and their solo dance moments are frequently ostentatious displays of skill. They exhibit advanced breakdancing moves that involve balance and significant upper body strength. In contrast, the women dance in a way that is sexual, but not seductive. They are also aggressive, but more contained, in their movements. The camera allots more focus on the women's faces than on the men's, highlighting their resistant attitudes and facial expressions. These

distinct styles of dance reflect the men's assertion of traditional male privilege and the women's determination to stand their ground and to offer fair responses and challenges.

Self-confidence and variety in color and shape are exemplified in the members of Aguilera's female posse. The type of dance movements they showcase, coupled with facial expression and attitude, illustrate McRobbie's (1984) description of dance as an activity of control, pleasure, and sensuality for girls. The confrontation ends as the women rejoice in the street, reflecting an "appropriation of the street as a reworking of the ideological stance of male privilege" (Lewis, 1993). Lewis (1993) notes that "females are socialized to avoid streets for fear of harassment and rape, to expect to become objects of the male gaze if they make themselves too visible by loitering or even walking slowly" (Lewis, 1993: p. 137). Thus, Aguilera's triumphant exit via an inner-city street punctuates a deliberate subversion of expectation and behavior associated with gender.

From the moment Aguilera steps foot onto the street, she uses her clothing and body movements to display her sexual confidence. Her sexual appeal is magnified by the sweeping camera movement that pans over her body, especially at the moment when the man grasps her behind. Lil' Kim and Aguilera both remove clothing at points during the song to expose their bodies. Sexuality is used strategically in "Can't Hold Us Down"; Aguilera and the other women exercise agency in the presentation of their individual sexual appeals. In claiming their own sexuality as a tool, the women suggest that they can diminish the subordination of the male gaze by controlling its direction. Women's bodies attain full potential when they are completely designed, displayed, and

removed by the determination of every individual woman. Power, then, is tied to the creation and manipulation of the object of sexual attraction.

"Can't Hold Us Down" draws another connection between sex and power, aside from sexual attraction. Both in the lyrics and video, the men and women draw comparisons between *sexual* dominance and *gender* dominance. Twice, a man grabs his penis as an affront to the women in a visceral reference to sexual virility. The women respond by making gestures to imply that he is insufficiently endowed. As verbalized in Aguilera's lyrics: "So you're just a little boy / All you'll do is annoy / You must talk so big / To make up for smaller things." In implying that the man she addresses is deficient in size and thereby unsatisfying as a sexual partner, she instantly strips him of masculine pride while revealing the insecurity of his aggressive demeanor. While the early verses refer to men's moral integrity, the last verse of the song shifts to primarily sexual insults. The video illustrates the women's manipulation of gender roles; Aguilera's phallic positioning and use of the garden hose ultimately breaks the tension between both groups, causing the men to run away. In this final action, she enforces her commitment to match men's actions stride for stride. In effect, "Can't Hold Us Down" suggests that by "becoming" men—engaging in the same activities and adopting a dominant perspective on sex—women can eliminate social hierarchy and any remnant of male privilege.

"Work It" : Originality Exceeds the Opposition

"Work It" suggests that although gender differences can help constitute a ground level of experience, they can be creatively refashioned into composite expressions that exceed binary frameworks. Thus, an examination of the topic becomes less important

with a holistic re-evaluation of the song as a multimedia work of art. One of the most salient characteristics of “Work It” is its creative manipulation of sound and image. The song itself is not simply an original product, but an example of the escape from society into private artistic innovation. Art, then, is portrayed as a place of refuge.

Missy “Misdemeanor” Elliott, like Lil’ Kim, is an artist producing from within the boundaries of black hip-hop and rap culture. Rap is based on principles ultimately derived from African music and verbal traditions (Starr & Waterman, 2003). “Work It” exhibits features that are characteristics of African American music, including, “an emphasis on rhythmic momentum and creativity; a preference for complex tone colors and dense textures; a keen appreciation for improvisational skill (in words and music); and an incorporative, innovative approach to musical technologies” (Starr & Waterman, 2003; p. 408). Hip-hop culture, which emerged in the 1970s in New York City, included distinctive styles of visual art (graffiti), dance, music, dress, and speech (Starr & Waterman, 2003). Each of these elements are present in the videos of “Can’t Hold Us Down” and “Work It,” which portray hip-hop culture in a stylized fashion.

“Work It” opens with instantly identifiable rap music techniques, such as the use of multiple underlying melodies and sampled beats that highlight the rhythmic pattern and movement via “breaks and points of musical rupture” (Rose, 1994: p. 67). At some points, she incorporates lines of unrecognizable words, which draw attention to the rhythm and rhyme of the song. Many of these parts resemble the linguistic tools of onomatopoeia--words imitating sounds--and scatting, a type of vocal improvisation honed by jazz musicians of the 1930s (Starr & Waterman, 2003).

Elliott offers a unique musical perspective as a female rapper and producer. Black women rappers have assumed the social responsibility of interpreting and articulating the fears, pleasures, and promises of young black women whose voices have been relegated to the margins of public discourse (Rose, 1994). The women musicians who have emerged from rap music have attempted to balance "rap music's track record of sexism and misogyny" (Pough, 2003; p. 239). Just as Queen Latifah and Erykah Badu have begun to connect third wave hip-hop feminism and black feminism through their music, Missy Elliott's "Work It" exhibits characteristics that similarly push the boundaries and issues addressed in rap music (Pough, 2003).

The video to "Work It" is composed of many scenes and brief visual story lines, each with accompanying wardrobe changes, characters, and digital enhancements. The song lacks a continuous plot, but is instead composed of independent scenes. "Work It" opens with a man at a pay phone, calling a radio DJ. Elliott's manicured hand reaches for a record covered by bees, as the shot segues into a surreal image of her behind a DJ turntable and microphone. Her face is impeccably made up, yet half of her head is covered by swarming bees. She literally slides into the next scene, a dark desert playground, in an extended horizontal position. She is centered between male dancers amidst desert plants and playground equipment. The third scene introduced is in a dark downstairs lobby. Part of the floor is covered in a polished black and white checkered linoleum, on which several breakdancers are practicing. Elliott, wearing a light blue jumpsuit, is shown suspended with her feet in the air, in a diagonal position. The visual imagery shifts to correspond with the images that are described in the lyrics.

For example, at the verbal cue of "water," a hand comes from the left of the screen, offering her a glass.

The fourth scene is introduced when Elliott sings, "If you a fly gal, get your nails done / Get a pedicure, get your hair did" (Elliott & Mosley, 2002, track 4). Elliott stands in the foreground of a beauty salon, clad in an orange and black Adidas track suit. Hairdressers sporting Afros are behind her, attending to a row of seated women with long, straightened hair. In the fifth scene, Elliott is on a nice dinner date. Her hair is short and styled, and her date is wearing a suit. As she sings, "Don't I look like a Halle Berry poster / See the Belvedere playin' tricks on ya," the blurry image of Halle Berry appears in her date's glass tumbler. The scene shifts after he faints out of his chair, illustrating that she is "hot as Las Vegas weather." In the sixth scene, she is in a parking garage, with body diagonally tilted toward a man in a convertible to illustrate the message, "I'm not a prostitute, but I could give you what you want." In another part of the parking garage, she appears in the center of female dancers. The camera focuses on her dancers' highly sexualized movements as she sings, "Keep your eyes on my bum-bum-bum-bum-bum."

After the break, the video shifts between a montage of brief illustrative scenes coordinated with the lyrics: a row of ethnically diverse young men, herself as a dunce in a corner, a "drummer boy" dressed in American military gear, a depiction of a slave and his master, and Elliott on a table with a Prince impersonator. The latter portion of the video is dance-intensive, as she returns to the breakdancers on the checkered linoleum. The desert playground is also revisited, this time with children as back-up dancers instead of men. The final scenes feature the original man at the pay phone, followed by

Elliott alone, turning her back after a dismissive hand gesture. The performance is structured not only on gendered lines, but also in terms of real/surreal.

As shown, "Work It" introduces multiple personas with every shifting scene. This video is distinguishable from the others addressed in this project, due in particular to its visible lack of a continuous plotline. In addition to the displays of visual manipulation, "Work It" interjects various sounds, such as the sound of an elephant or high whistles. Elliott also uses words creatively, inserting invented words or onomatopaeia: "This the kinda beat that go bha ta ta / Ra ta ta ta ta ta ta ta ta / Sex me so good I say blah blah blah." Several times, she plays a spoken line backwards so that it sounds unrecognizable, such as when she directs her audience to "Listen up close while I take it backwards," prior to the digital backwards feed of the line. Elliott's stylistic choices enforce the song's absence of traditional binaries. Rather than addressing forces of opposition within the video, the composition of the video itself reflects an emphasis on multiplicity and individuality. Thus, the song's presentation and treatment of issues differs from the other videos.

Elliott manipulates her image in the "Work It" music video in creative and visually engaging ways. Through digital technology, she shows herself in realistically impossible physical positions and situations: in a diagonal handstand, sliding vertically for an extended period, or covered by bees. At one point, her jaw extends to catch and swallow a miniature Lamborghini. Scenes within the video are continuously changing, whether they are focused on Elliott herself in color or black and white tones, showing brief role-playing to illustrate the music, or showing full-body shots of Elliott with dancers.

Throughout, Elliott is depicted as dominant compared to men. "Work It" contains many references to sex, whether preparatory maintenance ("Phone before you come / I need to shave my chocha"), physical exertion ("Work it, I need a glass of water"), or scheduling ("Gimme all your numbers so I could phone ya / Your girl actin' stank then call me over"). Other references indicate pride in sexual skill or the ability to command attraction: "You won't find a bitch that's even better / I make you hot as Las Vegas weather." She describes herself as divorced from the emotional component of sex, to the point that the pleasure of the act supercedes commitment to fidelity. Her overt sexuality is expressed as a tool of power, which is illustrated in her physical posturing and response to male characters in the video. The man at the dinner table faints from his chair. The man in the convertible appears unsure and indecisive as she leans toward him, singing, "I'm not a prostitute but I can give you what you want." The Prince impersonator mimics the action of licking her, but her attention remains focused on the camera.

"Work It" is an expression of Elliott's individuality as a creative artist. The video illustrates a retreat into individuality, through which she shares a continually changing sense of self. Elliott's experimentation with appearance, style, and fashion reflects the creative agency used by girls to assert individuality (Lewis, 1993). The parallel projection of both her sexual skill and her creative agency indicate a mutual re-enforcement of both sites of power. The video to "Work It" is by far the most stylized and unconventional of the four analyzed. Although the video depicts no continuous narration, Elliott is depicted as the song's DJ, and the video closes with her literal exit from the scene. Between her entrance and exit from the video, she adopts multiple