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Music, Sexuality, and Gender
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Beyoncé Knowles and Britney Spears appear as significant female icons in American popular culture. As musicians, Knowles and Spears have obtained a massive, female-driven fan base—individuals who have aged with the performers, and have therefore faced experiences similar to those about which the artists sing. Knowles and Spears cater to an audience only a few years their minor, and in this manner, the women are able to produce relatable music.

By 2001, many of Spears' fans knew firsthand, the early adolescent confusion portrayed in "I'm Not a Girl, Not Yet a Woman." Teenage crises are often centered around life taking an unexpected turn, around wanting to feel like an adult, but remaining trapped under the control and protection of adult authority. Both of these messages are highlighted in Spears' lyrics. In a similar way, a difficult falling out with friends or with a significant other often encourages newfound principles heavily focused on needing no one but oneself, as Knowles sings in "Me, Myself, and I." Although Knowles and Spears enter the music industry yielding music within which young women can place themselves and their experiences, pressures of fame and living in the public sphere eventually begin to morph the messages portrayed through the music of both artists. Suddenly, Knowles and Spears seemed to be less concerned with constructing themselves as icons for typical young women, and instead, transformed themselves into sexual symbols for the media, for the paparazzi, and ultimately, for the patriarchy.

I create this project with the intention of producing a piece that follows Beyoncé Knowles and Britney Spears on their journey through fame, capturing along the way, the ways in which the lyrics the women sing and the messages they convey, shift in both content and intention. My most

pressing desire is to critique the words “feminism” and “feminist, and to discuss the mechanisms used by Spears and Knowles to become situated in a realm constantly critical of and restructuring the use of those two words. In a chapter called “Imaginary Conversations” from a journal piece entitled *A Feminist Ethnomusicology: Writings on Music and Gender*, Suzanne Cusick states that,

Today, when many young people do not know (or care much) about feminism, or see it as some historical relic, it is sometimes difficult to believe that this wonderfully energetic movement still exists. Perhaps it no longer does, at least under the name *feminism*. That word, like *diversity*, and so many others, has picked up its baggage and moved on, no longer signifying its original meaning, now reduced to code. I am not suggesting here that we reclaim it—perhaps its usefulness as a label is over; its usefulness as a political tool for resisting and overthrowing unequal gender relations, however, is not.

(Cusick 2014)

My project aims to address both the deconstruction and reappropriation of the word “feminism,” and to investigate the manner in which Beyoncé Knowles and Britney Spears seemingly fail to portray this kind of true feminism, despite songs such as “I’m Not a Girl, Not Yet a Woman” and “Me, Myself, and I.” I begin by sampling the domestic and eroticized images I will eventually analyze, and speak about them as “Lolita-like” individuals—a term that Shari L. Savage, a professor at The Ohio State University introduces as one coined by Vladimir Naboko in his novel *Lolita*. The novel is heavily focused on the idea of a woman being simultaneously innocent and sexual (Savage 2011). Savage explains that,

For the girl being visually consumed, the effects [of producing Lolita-like images] are complex and will last long after she has reached puberty. Popular culture’s Lolita is a girl ready-made for pursuit, a girl who will be sexually desired while at the same time condemned for her sexuality. Attract and be desired but remain pure and untouched is a conundrum that needs much more serious consideration in contemporary cultural discourse.

(Savage 2011)

Britney Spears’ “I’m Not a Girl, Not Yet a Woman” was released on her 2001 album, *Britney*, and directly portrays this distinction. She sings about innocence, but does so in a belly shirt, and with

close-up shots of her lips, her chest, her bare stomach. Knowles interrupts Spears with “Me, Myself and I,” a 2001 hit released on *Dangerously in Love*, in which she reminisces on a past relationship, and realizes that she cannot always count on men to treat her well; that instead, she must learn to love, appreciate, and rely on herself. The voiceover explains how Knowles came to be perceived as iconic in the first place, touching upon the male-dominated music industry she manages to penetrate, as well as her fame, and comfort with her sexuality (msmagazing.com). Her defending of a “girl-power anthem” is addressed as well, though that is exactly the anthem I am attempting to critique (msmagazine.com).

The point at which the video features a clip of Knowles’ ***Flawless music video with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s speech, and then cuts to the TED Talk with the same speech, may perhaps be the highlight of the suggestion I am trying to make. When Adichie speaks during ***Flawless, there is an immediate cut to Knowles’ vagina. The imagery is almost feminist, almost making a statement, and would have perhaps succeeded had Knowles done more than use the female body to empower women. I was instantly reminded of “Pretty Hurts,” during which Knowles sings about a societal need to diminish the desire to be absolutely perfect, but appears flawless, unblemished in the video. Knowles tells a female-based audience that perfection is not the ultimate goal, yet is unable to display her own imperfections to the world. The ***Flawless clip seems to suggest that feminists can only be female, and that those females are required to use their bodies in order to obtain the equality they deserve. It is the same point Cusick touches upon in *A Feminist Ethnomusicology: Writings on Music and Gender*, in which she infers that the words “feminist” and “feminism” must exist solely as political tools if they are to remain useful in any sense. My goal in repeating the message through the Ted talk in the next scene, is for the viewer to be forced to fully come to terms with what it means to be a feminist. There are no “distracting”

body parts, no questioning of intention, just Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, her words, and a message attempting to drill equality into its listener. And listening is absolutely essentially.

The viewer is then presented with a very sexualized dance performance from Britney Spears in “Slave 4 U”, during which she sings about being a slave for a man—about dancing with him for an extended period of time, about allowing him to forget her name and age because they are unimportant. Knowles follows, wondering how the man in “Why Don’t You Love Me?” could not love her, despite the fact that she is beautiful, smart, wealthy, and can dance really well. The song is grounded in the notion that Knowles has a lot of qualities she considers important in a female partner, but is still unable to find love. In this sense, the song conveys a crumbling of feminist ideals: Again, Knowles embodies some grand sense of female perfection through the lens of the patriarchy, and therefore believes that love should be easy.

My piece explores a section of the musical journey experienced by Beyoncé Knowles and Britney Spears respectively, and uses the artists as a means of framing and restructuring the feminist principles prevalent in contemporary culture. It hinges upon conflicting definitions of the word “feminism” and “feminist” and further attempts to address the notions of performativity and what it means to “have it all.” As explained by Tyler Bickford,

“Having it all” discourses often identify a conflict between “feminism” and “femininity” (Brunsdon 1991) that applies specifically to women in contemporary capitalism, in which an apparent incompatibility between public, professional roles as wage-earners and heads of households and private, domestic roles as wife and mother places impossible, contradictory demands on women.

(Bickford 2015)

Knowles and Spears are essentially caught in the middle of having it all. They want to demonstrate themselves as fem-positive role models for young women, while, at the same time, maintaining a sort of sexualized representation of femininity. And that is exactly the issue with perceiving either artist as feminist. They simply cannot have it all.

References—

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