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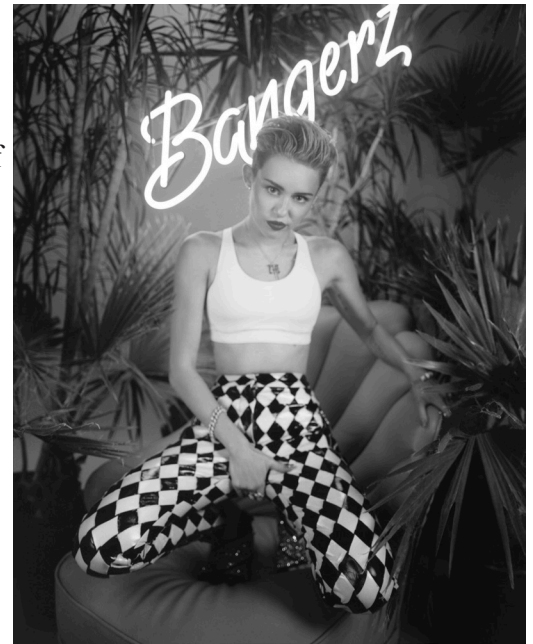
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“The Biggest Feminist in the World”: On Miley Cyrus, Feminism, and Intersectionality¹

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On 14 November 2013 Miley Cyrus proclaimed her feminism to an unsuspecting world. “I feel like I’m one of the biggest feminists in the world because I tell women not to be scared of anything,” she said. “Girls are beautiful. Guys get to show their titties on the beach, why can’t we?”² For a media-friendly soundbite, this quotation actually reveals a lot about a phenomenon that, for simplicity’s sake, I’m going to refer to as Miley feminism. Miley feminism is about fearlessness: about being unafraid to make choices, to be yourself, to self-express. It’s about appropriating a masculine-coded kind of individual freedom: the freedom to not care, to show your titties on the beach, to party without consequences, to live the “can’t stop won’t stop” dream that Cyrus sang about in “We Can’t Stop,” the arresting pop anthem that was inescapable during the summer of 2013. This feminism is transgressive, up to a point: Miley imagines a kind of femininity that flagrantly rejects the rules of respectability and propriety that define normative notions of girlhood. Miley’s not the only one singing the song of this type of feminism: we could be talking about Ke\$ha feminism—Ke\$ha’s laissez-faire persona led Ann Powers to compare her to the screwball comedien-nes of yore—or draw a connection to Icona Pop and their brazen choruses proclaiming “I don’t care.”³ Cyrus’s performances, though, seem to have pushed buttons in ways that those of her peers haven’t. When she twerked on stage at the MTV Video Music Awards (VMA) in a teddy-bear onesie, taunting the audience with her omnipresent stuck-out tongue, it was Miley feminism made manifest, with all of its potential and limitations there for us to see. Here was a young woman rejecting the rules that tell us that girls need to be quiet and good. But here, too, as her critics have pointed out, was a member of pop royalty who could afford to reject those rules; whose whiteness and wealth let her do so with relatively few consequences; and who, like generations of white rock and pop singers before her, was drawing on musical traditions from communities of color to facilitate her transgressions.



*Miley Cyrus
Courtesy of RCA Records
Photo by Tyrone Lebon*

The Miley feminism moment followed on the heels of a moment of intense (and intensely necessary) debate in online feminist circles. On 12 August 2013, Mikki Kendall, a writer and activist who tweets under the user-name Karnythia, started using the twitter hashtag #solidarityisforwhitewomen.⁴ The hashtag was appended to tweets that called out feminist activists who perpetuated racism and classism under the auspices of feminism; who didn’t see anti-racist work as a fundamental aspect of working for gender equality; and who disregarded or appropriated the contributions of women of color to feminist thought.⁵ While #solidarityisforwhitewomen was reacting to one very specific instance of racism rearing its head in online feminist circles, it broadened and spread to reflect the frustration of activists, mostly women of color, whose work and ideas remain marginal in a

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conversation dominated by mainstream, online feminist publications like *Feministing* and *Jezebel*.⁶

#solidarityisforwhitewomen built on the work of generations of womanist and anti-racist feminists, from the Combahee River Collective, who called for a feminism recognizing “interlocking oppressions” in the 1970s, to scholars like Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term “intersectionality.”⁷ These scholars and activists called for intersectional understandings of gender and sexuality—that is, understanding how gender articulates with other categories, including race, class, and ability, to shape identities and experiences. #solidarityisforwhitewomen shows how much work mainstream feminism still needs to do in this regard.

I am not interested in policing Miley Cyrus’s right to call herself a feminist. Reading her declaration of feminism in the context of #solidarityisforwhitewomen does, however, reveal the limitations of Miley feminism. As it has been articulated and enacted in performance, Miley feminism is about individual empowerment, not about recognizing or combating institutional power structures; it’s liberal to the point of being nearly libertarian. Miley feminism is about being unafraid to do and say what you want, but when I think about this through an intersectional frame, I’m reminded of note of caution that Wendy Brown raises in “Freedom’s Silences”: that when we speak, we always risk silencing another.⁸

As a feminist musicologist interested in questions of the voice—both literal and metaphorical—the question of whose voices get heard and whose voices get silenced (and the how and the why of it) is key to how I’ve been trying to think through Miley Cyrus’s performances and responses to them.⁹ Listening to the justifiable frustration and anger that’s been voiced over racial inequality in online feminism has fundamentally shaped my thinking about how race, appropriation, and power work to create silences both in musical performances and in the way we talk about them. I’ve found it productive to start by thinking about the activist practice of *signal-boosting*, and to extend it to considerations both of musical performances and conversations about musical performances by thinking in terms of *amplification*.

Signal-boosting is fundamental to the kind of online activism exemplified by #solidarityisforwhitewomen. Signal-boosting can be as simple as drawing attention to someone else’s ideas: so, if you’re a blogger with a big following, it’s could be the act of pointing your readers to someone else’s writing. It amounts to using your platform to amplify other people’s writing, ideas, and voices; and it’s an activist gesture that attempts to create a feminist conversation that isn’t just white and middle-class, but includes people of color, different social classes, etc. You can think of it as metaphorically passing the mic so that other people get a chance to be heard, using one’s voice and position to amplify other people’s voices. With this practice in mind, I have been approaching Cyrus’s performances by asking whose voices they are amplifying.

By asking about amplification, I’m trying to move away from a type of critique that would frame performances like Cyrus’s solely in terms of appropriation. Certainly, cultural appropriation is part of what is happening here: when Miley Cyrus twerks, for instance, she’s drawing on a performance tradition that recently manifested in the mainstream via the New Orleans bounce scene, and the sound of *Bangerz*, her most recent album, draws heavily on sounds associated with hip hop. As many of her critics have pointed out, what we have here is another iteration of a young, white musician drawing on performance traditions from communities of color to self-authenticate, potentially disenfranchising those communities in the process.

My concern with turning to the familiar love-and-theft, appropriation model is twofold: first, it reifies racial categories like black and white, and doesn’t do enough to explore how music contributes to constructing those categories and how musical traditions are more complex than such categorization would have us think. Recent scholarship on music and race, including work by scholars such as Daphne Brooks, Nina Eidsheim, Karl Hagstrom-Miller, and Guthrie P. Ramsey, has pushed us beyond an appropriation framework by demonstrating how

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musical practices have complex positions in histories of racialization and help produce knowledge about race. The hip hop Miley flirts with and twerks to, for instance, didn't emerge from a racially segregated vacuum; it's the product of multiple cultural intersections. My second concern is that thinking only in terms of appropriation leaves out key voices, and reproduces the very patterns of inequality that we would critique. Miley Cyrus's performances—though she fronts them—are, ultimately, *not* solo performances. I want to understand her relationship with the other players who make them possible, to understand the extent to which those relationships are collaborative or hierarchical. Focusing only on Cyrus's acts of appropriation makes it harder to see these kinds of relationships, and makes it harder to critique the way, on a larger level, networks of power operate in the music industry. The formulation that “Miley appropriates black music” reinforces a hegemonic dichotomy of black and white, and neglects a much more complex historical and social reality.



Miley Cyrus
Courtesy of RCA Records
Photo by Tyrone Lebon

Asking whose voices are amplified and whose voices are silenced lets me critique the very flagrant displays of privilege in Cyrus's recent performances while also listening for the voices of other people who have helped create those performances. When Miley Cyrus appeared on the VMAs, we weren't just hearing and seeing Miley. We were seeing the manifestation of the work of producers (including Mike Will, who produced “We Can't Stop”), of directors and choreographers, of songwriters, dancers, and musicians, and even of the audience and Miley's fans, whose responses to her are as much a part of the performance as her singing. This network gets lost when we make Miley the center of the story, and sometimes neglecting these other players might lead us to reproducing the same inequalities that we would like to critique.

This issue is particularly acute in considering Cyrus's VMA background dancers. The most notorious moment in the performance comes when Cyrus approaches one of the dancers, a statuesque black woman, and grabs her backside. Bloggers responding to the performance have dwelt on this moment and the way it objectifies the dancer, and black women's bodies more generally. Several writers point to the way this moment evokes Saartjie Baartman, a Khoikhoi woman from South Africa who was sold into slavery in the nineteenth century and put on display in Europe as the

“Hottentot Venus.” As far as I have been able to discern, however, none of these writers have taken the step of finding out who the dancers on stage with Cyrus are. Without considering the nature of their participation in the VMA performance, it's impossible to really understand how agency, power, and, indeed, appropriation, were operating on that stage.

The dancer that Miley Cyrus grabbed is Ashley Adair, who performs using the stage name Amazon Ashley.¹⁰ Adair is a fixture in burlesque scenes in Hollywood, and, by all appearances, Cyrus's good friend. The two appear regularly in one another's twitter feeds, and Adair is, at time of writing, on tour with Cyrus. Adair also takes great pride in claiming to be the person who taught Cyrus to twerk.¹¹

To reduce Ashley Adair to a symbol undermines her agency, and discounts the fact that she surely has her own motivations for performing with Miley—it has certainly raised her profile, and it's likely that she has benefited in other material ways as well. Considering Adair's agency does not place her above reproach nor exempt the performance from critique—there is still plenty to be said about the problematic elements of that performance, in terms of race, gender,

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and sexuality. It does, however, add a layer of complexity to readings of the VMA performance, while leaving her out risks reproducing the very patterns of marginalization that we would critique. To put this in terms of amplification, then: Adair’s “voice”—her presence, subjectivity, and agency—play a crucial role in Cyrus’ VMA performance. The performance, however, amplifies Cyrus over Adair, while our conversations about Cyrus have perhaps had the unintended effect of creating another instance of silencing.

To bring this back to feminism and intersectionality, I want to consider how the idea of amplification could serve as a model for activism through performance. There’s a moment out of a musical performance from 1965 that shows this kind of amplification in practice. That year, British singer Dusty Springfield hosted a television special called *The Sounds of Motown* that featured some of Motown’s most well-known acts. Motown didn’t have an established following in Britain at the time. Springfield had been a fan of African-American music from a young age, and while she wanted to be able to sing like her favorite black American artists, she was just as invested in using her platform as a celebrity to advocate for them.¹²

In *Sounds of Motown* she performs a duet with Martha Reeves and the Vandellas. Midway through the number a key moment of amplification occurs: Springfield moves to the side, so that she’s on the edge of the frame, with the Vandellas (Rosalind Ashford and Betty Kelly) in the middle. This simple but crucial act of stepping aside puts the *backup* singers—women whose voices were usually just used to support other people, and not ever the showcase—momentarily become the focus. They get amplified.

Like Cyrus’s work, this performance has messy origins: it’s the product of people from a range of social positions and levels of privilege coming together, and, as Motown employees, the amount of agency the Vandellas had in shaping the performance is difficult to ascertain. But asking “whose voice gets amplified here, how, and why” lets me think about all of the people who are part of this performance, lets me think about how much agency they have, and how they use their positions to amplify, or perhaps silence other voices.

Thinking in terms of amplification is productive for multiple reasons: first, it assumes that marginalized people are already speaking. They are active, they have agency, they aren’t sitting around waiting for someone with more power to give them permission. It also acknowledges, however, that because of social inequality, their voices often get drowned out. It places responsibility on people with established platforms to stop doing things that drown out those other voices and to actively create platforms that boost marginalized voices. I also like this model because it can apply both to the question of what is happening (or not happening) in a performance, and to how we talk about performances.

I want to end, then, with a challenge to Miley Cyrus. As I said above, I don’t want to police her right to claim a feminist identity. I do, however, want to call on her to think about how she uses her position, and what her feminism could mean. I’m challenging Cyrus to not just be the kind of feminist who is all about individual choices, self-empowerment, and not being scared to amplify her own voice (which is important and has its place), but to also be the kind of feminist who thinks intersectionally, and uses her platform to amplify other people’s voices too.

Notes

¹ This piece is derived from comments that I delivered as part of panel called “Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop: Critical Perspectives on Miley Cyrus,” that was hosted by UCLA’s Hip Hop Congress and DiverseCity Dialogues series on 19 November 2013. Thank you to the student organizers and activists who put the event together, and to my colleagues and co-panelists, Wade Dean, Mike D’Errico, Tamar Levitz, Libby Lewis, Tiffany Naiman, and Caroline Streeter, whose thoughtful perspectives on Miley greatly informed me as I developed this piece.

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²Cavan Sieczkowski, “Miley Cyrus Thinks She’s ‘One Of The Biggest Feminists In The World,’” *Huffington Post*, 14 November 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/11/14/miley-cyrus-feminist_n_4274194.html.

³Ann Powers, “Album Review: Ke\$ha Is a Wisecracking ‘Animal,’” *Pop and Hiss: The LA Times Music Blog*, 4 January 2010, http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/music_blog/2010/01/album-review-keha-is-a-wisecracking-animal.html.

⁴Mikki Kendall, “#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen When WOC Are Treated as Teaching Tools & Resources, Not Actual People by Big Name Feminism,” Twitter post, 12 Aug 2013 16:36:00 GMT, <https://twitter.com/Karnythia/statuses/366961489476718592>.

⁵While Kendall was the first to use the hashtag, it was quickly adopted by many other Twitter users. Some of the more prolific contributors to the hashtag include Flavia Dzodan (@redlightvoices), Amadi Aec Lovelace (@amaditalks), Trudy (@thetrudz), and Sydette (@blackamazon). This list is by no means exhaustive.

⁶Kendall and Dzodan provide background on #solidarityisforwhitewomen in an interview with Jia Tolentino of *The Hairpin*: “A Chat with Mikki Kendall and Flavia Dzodan About #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen,” *The Hairpin*, 13 August 2013, <http://thehairpin.com/2013/08/solidarity-is-for-hairpin/>.

⁷See Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review*, 1991, 1241–1299; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed., (New York: Routledge, 2000); Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement,” in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (Rutgers University Press, 1983), 264-274.

⁸Wendy Brown, “Freedom’s Silences,” in *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) 83-97.

⁹Elizabeth K. Keenan’s examination of race, gender, and sexuality in the reception of Liz Phair’s *Exile in Guyville* grapples with similar questions. Keenan writes, “The question for Third Wave feminism is not if the movement encompasses all of those voices, which it does, but who has the privilege to say what, and whose voice is most prominent.” “If *Exile in Guyville* Made You a Feminist, What Kind of Feminist Are You?: Heterosexuality, Race, and Class in the Third Wave,” *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture*, Volume 14 (2010): 45-71.

¹⁰Thank you to Tamara Levitz for making contact with Ashley Adair, and further illuminating her role in Miley Cyrus’s performances.

¹¹CJ Sitzer, “I Taught Miley How to Twerk,’ Says Amazon Ashley,” *In-Touch Weekly*, 19 September 2013, <http://www.intouchweekly.com/posts/exclusive-i-taught-miley-how-to-twerk-says-amazon-ashley-26881>.

¹²For more on Springfield and Reeves, see Annie Randall, *Dusty!: Queen of the Postmods* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).