

Blah, Blah, Blah: Ke\$ha Feminism?

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Is Ke\$ha more Gaga than Gaga? What can we learn about the status of contemporary feminisms from the performance of Ke\$ha across media productions that have been downloaded through YouTube and BitTorrent sites? To see Ke\$ha as not political, in contrast to the politics of other artists, is to participate in the delegitimization of certain subject positions, denying their agency, and potentially not seeing the radical visions of political possibility they offer. To begin this article, I approach listening to Ke\$ha from the standpoint of using a digital device through which I can delete the most offensive songs on her album, “Grow a Pear” and “Dinosaur,” which are blatantly trans-phobic and ageist. The analysis presented here is not necessarily about Ke\$ha, but rather about a possible reading of a selection of her songs. Consider it one way of listening to her album, the conceptual gesture of a playlist.

In addition, this article makes no claim that the performance of Ke\$ha is a true representation of the actual person Kesha Sebert. In considering the performance of Ke\$ha, as distributed across songs, videos, and interviews, it is important to consider that Ke\$ha is largely a product of the collaboration between Kesha Sebert and the producer Lukasz Gottwald, also known as Dr. Luke. Gottwald has produced and co-written 18 number one hit songs in the last five years for artists including Ke\$ha, Katy Perry, Pink, Kelly Clarkson, and Britney Spears (“Dr. Luke: The Man Behind Pop’s Biggest Hits”). In interviews, he is not shy about promoting his role in the writing process, comparing himself to earlier producers by saying “prior to Bruce Springsteen, I don’t think Elvis wrote a lot of his songs. . . . I don’t think during Motown, a lot of those artists wrote a lot of those songs” (“Dr. Luke: The Man Behind Pop’s Biggest Hits”). He describes giving songs to artists, going so far as to say “When I gave it to Taio, I told him, ‘Listen. This song is not yours. You have to earn it’” (Sternbergh). Journalist Adam Sternbergh’s profile on Dr. Luke describes his process as defying the notion of authorship and extending into a networked form of collaboration saying, “It’s not entirely correct to say he writes his songs,

at least not in the romanticized sense . . . Rather, he assembles songs. He curates them. He hears a song before it exists, then he figures out who can best help him bring that song into existence.” Similarly, Lady Gaga’s album “The Fame” does not include any songs that list Lady Gaga as the only writer.¹ Given this conception of pop song writing as a collaborative process, it is perhaps impossible to know how much any element of the performance of Ke\$ha represents her actual ideas and actions. Still, her albums include songs that do not list Gottwald in the writing credits, such as “Blah, Blah, Blah,” “Party at a Rich Dude’s House,” and “Cannibal.”² In addition, Ke\$ha has asserted her identity as a writer in an interview about the song “Till The World Ends,” which she wrote for Britney Spears with Lukasz Gottwald, Max Martin, and Alexander Kronlund, saying “I’ve never been more proud of anything in my career . . . It really solidifies me as a songwriter in the pop music world, which is what I consider myself first and foremost” (Marcus). As such, I will not take any position as to whether or not Ke\$ha, as a performance, represents the artist’s life, but will engage in a reading of the media elements that makeup Ke\$ha as a performance.³ Ultimately, the notion that the performance of Ke\$ha arises out of a network of competing desires and norms in the form of the artist, producer, and co-authors, will serve as a useful basis for understanding the form of agency demonstrated by Ke\$ha, an agency that is never absolute, not necessarily original, and always in negotiation with networks of norms of various scales.

My sentiments in this article are meant to resonate with Judith Halberstam’s proposal for low theory that engages with eccentric texts and popular culture (2, 16). By making Ke\$ha my object of study, I will use methods proposed by Halberstam including “privileg[ing] the naïve or nonsensical (stupidity)” and “aiming low in order to hit a broader target” (12, 16). By considering the possible political readings of Ke\$ha, I am engaging in the task of taking femmes seriously and seeing where that leads. Similarly, a related study might be made that takes Amy Winehouse’s music seriously, and thus see her death from alcohol poisoning not simply as ironic, a joking connection made by many, but as deeply rebellious in the spirit of poets of intoxication, such as Charles Baudelaire and Henry Miller.

My approach also takes inspiration from the writing of Gayatri Spivak and Saba Mahmood. Although they write about women in India and Egypt to reconsider feminist notions of agency, my approach considers Ke\$ha not as a way of eschewing or ignoring her privilege as a white woman living in the United States, but as a way of considering figures such as

femmes and pop stars who have been presented as lacking agency or self-awareness in feminist theory. As Halberstam writes,

Spivak . . . imagines a feminism born of a dynamic intellectual struggle with the fact that some women may desire their own destruction for really good political reasons, even if those politics and those reasons lie beyond the purview of the version of feminism for which we have settled It is this version of feminism that I seek to inhabit, a feminism that fails to save others or to replicate itself, a feminism that finds purpose in its own failure. (128)

In this spirit of exploring without reclaiming, this article considers Ke\$ha, a self-declared sleazy girl who “want[s] to get naked” and fails to meet the standards of many feminists, as a possible model for new forms of agency within networks of existing norms.

Through the example of Ke\$ha, I consider ways in which queer femme affect can disturb capitalist ethics and rationality, which I have termed “femme disturbance,” a combination of femme science and electronic disturbance.⁴ The capitalist ethics disturbed by femme affect include competition, individualism, and hierarchy; all of which are ethics that provide the logic for structural violences of social exclusion, such as patriarchy, white supremacy, ableism, and US/Euro centrism. Disturbance here should be understood as different from resistance, less as a teleological, external form of opposition, and more as an internal, impure act of destabilization. I am interested in a broad conceptualization of queer femme as that which exceeds the normative limits of femininity, of the femme slut who refuses to bend to demands for chastity from normative institutions, but also commands the sexual agency to decide when to not be sexually available. The queer femme I am proposing here is the femme misfit that does not fit well with social demands from educational or corporate workplaces to dress less provocatively, and thus must find alternative ways of living, such as Ke\$ha’s “Crazy Beautiful Life.” Agency here is related to temporality, in that the femme agency presented by Ke\$ha both refuses to be nonsexual and refuses to be sexualized on demand, but instead expresses itself as desire within Ke\$ha’s own timeline. In contrast to the rights-oriented lists of identities in Lady Gaga’s biologically determinist anthem “Born This Way,” which demands recognition because of an inherent and unchanging identity, Ke\$ha’s song “We R Who We R” suggests a post-rational politics in which producing agency occurs within the moment.

In “Born This Way,” Lady Gaga lists off a string of identities, which one may be born with, “no matter gay, straight or bi/Lesbian or transgendered life . . . No matter black, white or beige, Chola or orient made . . . I’m beautiful in my way ’cause God makes no mistakes.” With these lines, Gaga performs a rational attempt at coalition building across lines of acceptable forms of homosexuality that fit into the LGBT acronym and a few different skin colors, ultimately making the move of justifying all of these sexualities and ethnicities with recourse to God. Her brief list of widely accepted sexual categories linked to terms used for racial stereotypes is troubling to many in popular culture and academia alike (Garcia). In contrast to Lady Gaga’s overt attempts to market herself as LGBT-friendly, Ke\$ha’s attempt to market a similar antisuicide anthem, “We R Who We R” could be read as either more queer for its omission of specific identity categories with which a listener must fit to find solidarity, or as more heteronormative and racially homogenizing for this very same reason. Ke\$ha also makes reference to religion in her anthem, but somehow the lines “no, you don’t want to mess with us/got Jesus on my necklace” seem merely ridiculous in context of Ke\$ha’s ethical urgings in other songs, although they can also be read as reinforcing the US nationalism of the American flags she wears.

Ke\$ha’s music can be heard through a listening framework described as conversational by Saba Mahmood, that does not seek to impose a judgment of being resistant or not. Mahmood states “agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms” (15). Although Mahmood makes this claim based on the actual lives of women participants in the Mosque Movement in Egypt, I use her intervention to consider the mediated performances of Ke\$ha and the ways that people may respond to these representations. I see Mahmood’s work as an intervention into feminist thought as well as the frameworks within which such thought operates. Mahmood’s assertion that agency exists within norms is particularly interesting to me because much of my motivation for this article comes from my own experiences inhabiting norms in different ways as a transgender woman, as a mixed race queer femme and as a self-declared slut.

In watching Ke\$ha’s music videos, such as “We R Who We R”, one can see many ways in which she is working within, and reinforcing, norms of capitalist consumption, such as frequent product placements for dating websites, tequila, and Baby-G watches. A simple attempt to claim that Ke\$ha’s video is resistant might be based on the apparent fleeing of the crowd from police. Also in the “Tik Tok” video, one sees Ke\$ha being handcuffed

and arrested, again in an oppositional stance to police, and the song says “We go until they kick us out, out/ or the police shut us down, down/ . . . the PoPo shut us.” Another attempt might cite Ke\$ha’s exit from the family breakfast, in which her appearance seems to make the mother drop her pancakes, as a moment in resistance to heteronormativity. However, I will try to create a more nuanced discussion of Ke\$ha’s music by *not* addressing whether or not she attempts to disrupt norms, but asking instead how she inhabits them.

The title of Ke\$ha’s song “We R Who We R” exhibits a mode of inhabiting norms by creating new norms within existing networks of power. Mahmood asks a question very relevant to the study of Ke\$ha and other pop stars: “How do we conceive of individual freedom in a context where the distinction between the subject’s own desires and socially prescribed performances cannot be easily presumed, and where submission to certain forms of (external) authority is a condition for achieving the subject’s potentiality?” (31). The claim that one is either resisting norms or inhabiting them is a binary formulation, but understanding multiple modes of inhabiting norms, as Mahmood suggests, begins to move beyond this binary. Another way of moving beyond a resistance/habitation binary is to consider that norms exist at different scales simultaneously: local, neighborhood, city, and national. There are norms that pertain to certain groups of people, and norms constantly compete, rise, fall, form and dissolve, creating an architecture that is multilayered and constantly changing. One might consider norms as a Deleuzian multiplicity, which Manuel Delanda describes as “a nested set of vector fields” (30). What is important here is the nested nature of multiplicities, but also, as Deleuze and Guattari state, multiplicities, or rhizomes, as “acentered systems, finite networks of automata in which communication runs from any neighbor to any other” (17). In this sense, we can see Ke\$ha and other artists as both inhabiting and creating norms, as nodes in networks, which use lines of communication to form new assemblages. In addition, as norms perpetuated by media networks are constantly emerging, fading away, and reorganizing, one must understand the norms created by Ke\$ha as in need of constant performance, by her and others, to exist.

For example, Ke\$ha’s song “We R Who We R” recursively instantiates its own public, the We. The size of the We potentially described by this song is massive, considering that as of January 2012 the song had sold over 3.6 million copies in the United States alone (Grein 2012). The song uses English at the same time that it uses Internet/texting slang, and in doing so identifies a nested set of We’s—English speakers and English speakers

who use texting or chatting technologies. By virtue of being a major record label artist with the top selling single of 2010, Ke\$ha further establishes the use of Internet slang she borrowed from communities often associated with this slang, such as texting youth and users of MySpace.⁵ In addition to nested address via language, the We is shaped by the audience who may appreciate the affective qualities of her music such as her singing style, or lack thereof, which has been described as “white-girl rap” (Caramanica).

In this context of a performance of collectivity, Ke\$ha’s choice of white girl rap for her singing aesthetic can be understood as an attempt to demonstrate her ordinariness. The way that Auto-Tune is highlighted in her songs can also be understood as foregrounding her lack of singing talent, perhaps another gesture of presenting herself as an everyday person with whom listeners can relate. Which listeners might relate to such a gesture, though? In contrast to black rappers, Ke\$ha’s appropriation of rap as a mode of singing that requires little or no talent demonstrates a misunderstanding of rap through Ke\$ha’s own white privileged subject position. Ke\$ha’s white girl rap displays none of the vocal performativity of an artist such as Saul Williams, and none of the skillful vocal flow of a rapper such as Bahamadia or Q-Tip of A Tribe Called Quest. The drive to learn and master skills in rap can be seen as a survival tactic for escaping the racialized economic subjugation that is oftentimes a consequence of living in the United States. In Fatima El-Tayeb’s book *European Others*, rap as a mode of struggling against structural inequality is understood as a translocal experience among youth of color worldwide. El-Tayeb cites a European rapper who says “when we were teenagers, to see black American artists erupt in our world, like NWA, Run DMC, with their attitudes, with a certain pride, def[ied] white racist America” (29). Although Ke\$ha’s performance cannot share the same effect as other rappers with regard to experiences of ethnicity or classed disenfranchisement in the US, perhaps her appropriation of rap can be understood as an attempt to create femme solidarity by using a singing style that could apparently be performed by anyone. The global reach of her music, though, does underscore the questionable use of her choice of wearing the American flag on her clothing. Although it is at times worn as a torn up t-shirt, which has been described as desecration of the flag (Flags Gone Wild) performances, such as her appearance on Saturday Night Live wearing an American flag cape seem to lend support to the idea that she is supporting nationalism (Wete).

The We in “We R Who We R” allows people to identify with a new norm: glitter, identified with a femme agency that reaches the point

of excess. This excess is demonstrated in Ke\$ha's frequent use of huge glitter guns and cannons that she rides (which are remarkably phallic in their shape, size and ejaculations), as well as the video for "Take It Off" which shows dancers exploding into glitter ("Ke\$ha's Confetti Cannon"). The We that is instantiated through Ke\$ha's address is continually reinforced by the collectivity on which the song focuses:

If you're one of us, then roll with us . . .
 I've got that glitter on my eyes
 Stockings ripped all up the side
 Looking sick and sexyfied . . .
 Tonight we're going har har-har ha-ha-hard
 Just like the world is our our-our our-our-ours
 We're tearin' it apart part-part pa-pa-part
 You know we're superstars
 We R Who We R!

This collectivity is also repeated in songs such as "Sleazy," in which she states "I don't wanna go places where all my ladies can't get in." In "Raise Your Glass If U R A Firework Who Was Born This Way," Lauren Elmore points to the collectivity expressed in Ke\$ha's music videos in which she dances in crowds, not above them, saying "'Dumb' as it is, Ke\$ha's indiscriminate will to party can subsume any listener in an escape to the embodied, seemingly endless present of sweating together on the dance floor." Although the drive toward collectivity and solidarity may be the content of Ke\$ha's work, her participation in the financial structures of the music industry, such as her contract with a major record label, which has made her incredibly wealthy, render these gestures (at best) a slight modulation from the norm, or a masking of her participation in norms of hierarchical economic systems, not an opposition to them. Ke\$ha's "dancing like we're dumb" can point to how "*stupidity* could refer not simply to a lack of knowledge but to the limits of certain forms of knowing and certain ways of inhabiting structures of knowing," which is further explored in songs that reject the rationality of language (Halberstam 12).

In songs such as "Blah, Blah, Blah" Ke\$ha may be realizing the feminist project of authors such as Luce Irigaray and Monique Wittig of going beyond the heteronormative, phallogocentric restrictions of language to find a space of feminine desire and sexual agency. Although she may be seen as simply reproducing the structure of racialized, gendered

power that increasingly sexualizes younger women through commodities, Ke\$ha defines her own recognizable norm of excessively glittered femme expression by associating it with a complete disregard for male speech and language. As Irigaray and Burke write, in “When Our Lips Speak Together,” “if we speak to each other as men have spoken for centuries, as they taught us to speak, we will fail each other. Again . . . Get out of their language” (69). When one hears Ke\$ha’s song “Blah, Blah, Blah,” one can read a rejection of the importance of language linked to a feminine desire for sexual pleasure in the immediate moment:

Ohhhhh Blahblahblahblahblahblahblah
Coming out your mouth
With your blah blah blah
Zip your lips like a padlock (yeah)
And meet me in the back
With the jack and the jukebox
Don’t really care
Where you live at
Just turn around boy
And let me hit that
Don’t be a little bitch
With your chit chat
Just show me
Where your dick’s at

This link is significant in that it uses a refusal to understand the language spoken by the person with the dick as a means of more quickly achieving satisfaction. Not only does this reverse common stereotypes, it establishes a norm of femme sexual agency that ignores phallic power. In “Animal” and in “Till The World Ends,” written by Ke\$ha for Britney Spears’ latest album, Ke\$ha presents an apocalyptic hedonism that eschews political utility in favor of momentary pleasure, a temporality centered on having sex in the back of a club, based on an acceptance of the imminent end of the present world, with its normative conventions of sexuality. At the same time, though one might see this as a clear and willful misunderstanding of language, it is hard to subsume it within a feminist agenda when no such allegiance is made in any of the songs. Ke\$ha’s urging the audience to “be yourself, unapologetically, fucking always” may be a call for its members to each take up the production of norms, beyond individualism, into a mode

of being unapologetic that can be seen to be at odds with participation in social movements such as feminism. Also, as Elmore discusses, there is a significant danger in declaring the work of pop music artists to be feminist in a context in which there is so much market competition among performers to produce the latest gay anthem for the LGBT consumer public. Again, rather than comprehend the performance of Ke\$ha as a feminist gesture of resisting or opposing patriarchy and heteronormativity, it is perhaps best understood as a mode of inhabiting those structures in a way that may lead to more individual pleasure.

A constructive strategy can also be seen in Ke\$ha's "ironic" use of the dollar sign in her name. In an interview with *Billboard* magazine, Ke\$ha says of the dollar sign tattoo on her hand, "I got it because I was being ironic . . . I didn't make any money off the Flo Rida song—no one knew it was me. Whatever. I'm money—I don't need money," and in an interview with the *Guardian* Ke\$ha claims, "The dollar sign, to be honest, was me taking the piss out of being broke" (Gordon; Day). With this statement she again creates her own value and rejects the meaning of established symbols and value systems by replacing them with her own performance. Every instance of her name reinforces the ironic resignification of the dollar sign by associating it with her own sleazy performance, which she refers to as "garbage chic" (Piazza).

The choice of the name Ke\$ha may be seen as a clever exploitation of citationality. As described by Judith Butler, performativity is always citational, coming into being momentarily by referencing previous instances of meaning that are understood as gendered. Butler states, "performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms . . . this iterability implies that 'performance' is not a singular 'act' or event, but a ritualized production," and it is through this need for repetition that the possibility for agency, for different combinations of norms, becomes possible (60). The kind of agency I have described here, demonstrated by Ke\$ha, involves not so much the creation of norms out of nothing, but a selection of existing norms of femininity, musical styles, and sexualized embodied gestures, remixed or modulated into the particular combination that is the performance called Ke\$ha. Like a playlist of songs, one can understand her sexual agency through a context in which sexual gestures are always already coded by media representations, by the histories of bodies and economic markets, and by choices between various norms of gender and sexuality and their performance in particular combinations. In this context, the idea that one can perform an original

gesture is undermined, and critiques of artists like Lady Gaga for recycling the looks, gestures, and sounds of previous performers such as Madonna are less valuable as critique, and more valuable for illustrating the elements that make up a particular performance.

Halberstam's "Gaga Manifesto" offers a reading of Lady Gaga that offers "a form of feminism that advocates going gaga, being gaga, running amok, physically and intellectually" (O'Leary and Blas 28), which can be compared with Ke\$ha's urging to "go insane, go insane, throw some glitter, make it rain," and similar lyrics that urge listeners to engage in activities that may seem irrational, such as having casual sex while intoxicated by alcohol, and eschewing heteronormative rationalizations of love. The excessive sexuality presented in Ke\$ha's songs may facilitate a reading of her performances as examples of queer femme embodiment. In songs such as "Cannibal," Ke\$ha moves far beyond the passive receptacle of male desire, becoming a monstrous femme fatale, singing "I want your liver on a platter/ Use your finger to stir my tea/ and for dessert I'll suck your teeth/ Be too sweet and you'll be a goner/ I'll pull a Jeffrey Dahmer." The queerness of this song, which has no official video, is reinforced by the fan video "Kesha—Cannibal (Official Gay Music Video)," in which an apparently gay male singer lip syncs to the song while a group of dancers caress each other and engage in feasting on the body of a shirtless man with well defined abs. Julie Levin Russo, writing about femmeslash, online media produced by fans of *The L Word* and *Battlestar Galactica*, asks "how queer forms of desire sustain the economy of immaterial labor while also exceeding its bounds," claiming that "we could conceptualize the labor of subjectification and desire, in form, as queer labor" (233, 246). Her analysis of online fan productions reveals the complex networks in which "late capitalism's labor relations are far more enmeshed with gender and sexuality than Marxism has typically acknowledged," opening up a rich terrain of possible forms of disturbance to capitalism within daily acts of the construction of identities such as femme (246).

Another lyric of Ke\$ha's that supports a possible queer reading is from her debut song "Tik Tok," which starts with "wake up in the morning feeling like P. Diddy." An interview with *Billboard*, which led to my initial thinking for this paper, states that the song is "a constant reminder of the morning after, when she opened her eyes to find herself 'surrounded by these foxy babes,' thinking: 'This is what P. Diddy must feel like'" (Gordon). Although songs such as "Stephen" and "The Harold Song" express her heterosexual longing, in numerous songs Ke\$ha avoids expressing love for

men and instead only focuses her affection on music. For example, in “Blah, Blah, Blah” she says “I’m in love/ with this song” and in “Animal” she focuses her love on a more abstract notion of being saying “I am in love,/ with what we are,/ not what we should be.” Her love for non-human objects climaxes with “Sleazy,” in which she states “the beat so fat/ gonna make me cum,” and then whispers a qualification “(over to your place),” performing the prescribed limit on her sexuality only reluctantly.

The possibility for agency as proposed by liberal western feminism has been questioned by authors such as Gayatri Spivak, who asks “can the subaltern speak?” and these questions can be similarly asked of the agency offered by the lyrics of Ke\$ha. Looking at the position from which the claim to liberation through sexual release beyond rationality is issued, one can ask if Ke\$ha’s apparent freedom only reinforces whiteness as the privileged place of freedom. Similarly, one could ask if Ke\$ha’s highly sexualized expressions reinforce male conceptions of entitlement to the female body, by embodying in capitalist commodification of female sexuality, as described in Gayle Rubin’s seminal second wave feminist essay “The Traffic in Women.” Mahmood describes “the internal struggle [women in the Mosque Movement] had to engage in within themselves in a world that constantly beckoned them to behave in unpiious ways” (156). A similar struggle for agency can be read in the lyrics of Ke\$ha, in the challenge of women to be able to express their sexuality within a heteronormative structure, which demands that they be chaste until they are expected to be sexual on demand. Although it is perhaps dangerous to compare the religious power struggles of Muslim women in Egypt with western pop music fans negotiating their sexual desires, the similarity is that in both scenarios there are multiple, layered, competing norms and power structures operating simultaneously that must be negotiated, challenged, reinforced, and dynamically recreated by non-hierarchical networks of actors. Given the contemporary transnational context, one can imagine that popular music artists such as Ke\$ha may have so large a reach as to be one of the factors making women in Egypt feel pressured to act unpiiously, while simultaneously enabling women in the US to access sexual desires beyond heteronormative demands for stable couplings. There is a Facebook group devoted to fans of Ke\$ha in Egypt, with only 23 followers, and fans have made requests on Kesha’s website, keshaparty.com, for her to perform in Egypt, which have gone unanswered. The complexity of performances of sexual agency in relation to transnational networks of multiple racial and ethnic groups is demonstrated by recent discussions about race in the SlutWalk movement. The movement, which

aims to stop victim blaming of sexual assault survivors based on their clothing choices, began in Toronto before subsequently going viral through many independently organized local actions (Maxwell).

The question of whether or not SlutWalk privileges white women's experience has been widely discussed since its inception. A SlutWalk in New York City further fueled these debates due to two protesters sharing a sign that read "Woman is the Nigger of the World" (Maxwell). The discussions that ensued illustrate the racialized character of sexual agency in a networked context by emphasizing that for women of color, being seen as a slut (or not) does not depend on one's actions, but is often based on the color of one's skin and other racial markers. Black Women's Blueprint published "An Open Letter from Black Women to the SlutWalk," which was endorsed by over 100 women of color and women's health and anti-violence organizations such as the Women's Health and Justice Initiative in New Orleans, the Audre Lorde Project, and the subRosa artist collective. The letter stated that women of color have worked for years to end the use of derogative terms such as slut, partly in response to histories of slavery and forced sexualization that white women do not share, and that they have no desire to reclaim the word slut. At the same time, other women of color activists have taken part in organizing SlutWalks, and have pointed out that the many women of color speakers at SlutWalk NYC were ignored by the media, which instead focused on one white woman's sign with racist language (Valbrun). The picture of sexual agency that emerges here involves a network of networks: personal history, social responses to forms of embodiment, news media, and social networks that distribute such media and language itself. Considering the hardware and software that distribute media online, and the way that language creates meaning, one can see this agency operating in a network of human and non-human actors, as Bruno Latour has described. In a section of *Reassembling the Social*, titled "Objects Too Have Agency", Latour writes, "objects are suddenly highlighted not only as being full-blown actors, but also as what explains the contrasted landscape we started with, the overarching powers of society, the huge asymmetries, the crushing exercise of power" (72). Writers, including the Crunk Feminist Collective, have stated that "'sluttiness' and 'slut-shaming' around sexuality are in fact, central to white women's experiences of sexuality." If so, this helps to define the bounds in which Ke\$ha's appeal may be understood, as largely addressing a struggle over sexual agency that mainly white women face. In Ke\$ha's case, she does not actually use the word slut to describe herself.

Yet femme of color authors such as Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha also identify themselves as “slutty” and claim a politics of sexual agency for women of color as a strategy of survival (“Femme Shark Manifesto”). In *Colonize This!* she writes:

Browngirlworld is home and heartbreak, the place where my heart meets my cunt and they cum and rip open at the same moment I really went to revolution and feminism cuz [sic] I wanted a family that would love me, decolonize me, heal me. The feminism I walked into as a bi-queer brown breed girl was all about the women I wanted to fuck, love and make home with. More than any meeting, I wanted to make places where my girls, my queer dark sistren, could survive. Hernandez and Rohman (4)

Piepzna-Samarasinha describes a model for femme sexual agency in which political action and sexual desire are not separate, but are mutually reinforcing, saying “is my fem body fake? What does gender performance mean when you need a rock? I build this body, this gender, layer of silk over steel skeleton” (Dahl 98). Similarly, Miss Stewart of the Atlanta Femme Mafia links together her own queer of color politics with femme expression saying:

black women have been objects of sexual curiosity and this history pervades our present in every which way, particularly for black femmes But whether I have on my basketball gear or a short mini-skirt with some fierce heels, I control the way people perceive me. My femmeness is captivating. Once “others” see what black femmes are capable of, this will help facilitate acceptance in the South and slowly deter racist, homophobic and heterosexist comments. (Dahl 105)

Stewart describes the act of subverting the racialized sexual gaze, changing a moment of objectification into a moment of empowerment by exploiting the attention given to her as a result of gendered bodily expression. Femme sexual agency, as performed and encouraged by Ke\$ha, can operate in a queer of color context as well as a white heterosexual context. Piepzna-Samarasinha and Stewart are just two examples that demonstrate that a mode of sexual agency that includes aggressive sexual desire does not preclude the inclusion of women of color, or the ability to decide when and where that sexual desire will be performed.

Mahmood sees a way out of theories such as Spivak's and Butler's claims that the subaltern cannot have access to discourse when she says that "the mosque women's practices of modesty and femininity do not signify the abjectness of the feminine within Islamic discourse, but articulate a positive and immanent discourse of being in the world. This discourse requires that we carefully examine the *work that bodily practices perform* in creating a subject" (160). Considering this, one can read Ke\$ha's performances of sexual embodiment and urgings to "go insane" not merely as the privileged claims of a "white-girl rap" singer, but instead as bodily practices that reinforce her solidarity with collectivities often presented as outside of the bounds of the rational. Critical ethnic studies scholar Chandan Reddy writes that "the state could exert its monopoly on force because they produced racial and sexual differences to designate the horizon of irrationalities against and through which state violence became identical to legitimate force," and goes on to say that "race is the 'Other' of the nation-state, the limit of sovereignty, and hence also outside the boundaries of the rational" (39, 235). Perhaps we can perceive Ke\$ha's repeated irrationalities, from jumping off a building, to making out with a unicorn, to unzipping her skin and blowing away into a cloud of glitter, as a rejection of the rationality that would deny her the ability to say both yes and no to sexual acts. In songs such as "Sleazy," she denies sexual advances saying "sorry daddy, but I'm not that easy!" Thus, her embrace of an excess of embodied pleasure is not in contradiction to her ability to deny sexual advances, but is a rejection of the system of male entitlement that rationalizes sexual violence as an unfortunate, but acceptable, norm. These acts can be seen as in solidarity with other groups deemed irrational, and as a means of resisting oppression through irrationality as well. Ke\$ha's irrational acts resonate with Halberstam's call for "self-shattering, loss of mastery and meaning, unregulated speech and desire" as strategies of queer failure which can resist the "forward-looking, reproductive, and heteronormative politics of hope that animate all too many political projects" (106). In Ke\$ha's lyrics, this solidarity also emerges within a class-based critique.

Ke\$ha's lyrics call for femme solidarity based on shared desire in the face of poverty that may be considered a multiracial class-based strategy of resistance to white male supremacy. Using Halberstam's *Queer Art of Failure*, one can understand Ke\$ha's embrace of the position of the sleazy, cheap slut as a failure to accept the moral duties of heterosexuality. This failure enables a form of femme disturbance, a rejection of the rational drive for affective labor. Although affective labor demands that one direct one's

affect toward others in return for a wage, such as in nursing or teaching, the hedonistic vision of femme pleasure presented by Ke\$ha exceeds such attempts to rationally apportion and direct one's emotions. To indulge for a moment in queer phenomenology, the pleasure of femme embodiment, in my experience, is an individual pleasure that I can experience without recognition from others, and is experienced in direct opposition to the demands of affective labor—that I orient my affect outwardly toward others. Still, the pleasure I derive from wearing patent leather heels, or a short ripped jean skirt, or walking a certain way, cannot be completely separated from the network of semiotic meaning I perceive in those gestures, and the ways that others perceive them. Yet I still experience the pleasure of femme forms of bodily expression as deeply personal and internal in a way that routes around, and exists underneath/independently from, the demands for social interaction according to the rules of capitalist employment. It can coexist with them, but it provides a layer of pleasure that is external to the logic of work, and does not depend on capital to be experienced. Thus, it can threaten the hegemonic logic that pleasure must mean subjugation to the demands of the market for immaterial labor.

The drive for pleasure depicted in Ke\$ha's songs goes beyond survival strategies for living under precarious conditions, and calls for finding pleasure by violating the laws of capital in entertainment industry venues. In contrast to Gaga's alignment with the wealth of the high fashion world, Ke\$ha's listeners are urged to sneak in the back doors of clubs, "don't buy bottles . . . bring'em" and "take the drinks off the tables when you get up and leave'em." In the video for "We R Who We R," Ke\$ha performs the aesthetic of "garbage chic" by using common and cheap forms of embellishment like glitter, broken glass, and metal spikes to exaggerated effect, looking like she bedazzled her face. In addition, many articles comment on her excessive use of eye shadow and mascara to have a permanently "dirty" look (Piazza). Perhaps femme fashion on a budget and ways of finding free entertainment can be thought of as enactments of Foucault's "subjugated knowledges," which Halberstam describes as "knowledge from below" (11).

In more than one song, Ke\$ha specifically rejects any ties between capital and affection. For instance, in "Sleazy" she states, "I don't need you or your brand new Benz/ Or your boozy friends/ And I don't need love, looking like diamonds." This sentiment stands in stark contrast to so many other pop songs. In "VIP" Ke\$ha again rejects the hierarchies created by capital when she sings "this, sucks, yeah, it's fucked up/ You're making me

sick, ugh/ I hate to say it but/ There ain't no scene in the V.I.P for me/ So you can take your class, shake your ass, and drown in that martini." Again, in "Party at a Rich Dude's House" Ke\$ha takes the greatest pleasure in wrecking the party and home of a "rich dude" together with her friends by putting her "cigar in the caviar/ . . . pissing in the Dom Perignon . . . come on let's do it . . . we're going to fight till we do it right/ . . . I threw up in the closet/ and I don't care." Given Ke\$ha's status as an international pop star, these gestures against the social logics and ethics of capitalism may be contradictory, but understood as a message modulated within the norms of the music industry so as to reach a wider audience, they may represent a modest improvement over glorifications of wealth. Ke\$ha's anti-capitalist possibility is best understood in the networked context of the Internet where the spelling and grammar choices she uses are common, and the drive to obtain products such as film and videos for free is also common.

Perhaps this logic can be extended to downloading free music from online torrent and video sharing websites, which create publics of listeners who are not generating revenue for Ke\$ha's record label, yet still gain the affective benefits of her music. In the video for "We R Who We R," the graphics commonly associated with MP3 music player visualizers are used to open the video and again at the crescendo of the song. The imagery hints at stealing alcohol and the kind of access that Ke\$ha argues for in "Sleazy" and "Blow," translated to stealing music online. The strategies that she proposes, like taking drinks off of tables and holding the back door of the club open are a kind of "counter-knowledge" akin to "Pirate Cultures" of the past and present, such as the knowledge necessary to download music from a site like *ThePirateBay.org*, create a playlist, and upload that set of songs to one's mobile device for extended listening and study (Halberstam 18–19).

Ke\$ha's repeated failure to act within the normative expectations of sexuality can allow one to see her as a character who "quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being." She enacts a text that "does not make us better people or liberate us from the culture industry, but might offer strange and anticapitalist logics of being and acting and knowing" (Halberstam 88, 20). Through her performance of "trash chic," Ke\$ha may foster the growth of alternative strategies of living while inhabiting the role of an international pop star. Still, I have attempted in this article to resist ascribing feminism to Ke\$ha, but instead have tried to "leave open the possibility that our political and analytical certainties might be transformed in the process of exploring" Ke\$ha's work

(Mahmood 39). Instead of asking “can the slut speak?” and looking for a new model of feminism, I would instead ask “can the slut fuck?”⁶ and urge the reader to consider embodied modes of learning that exceed the ability of rational language to name and categorize, and invite us to participate in our own embodied experimentation. Instead of offering Ke\$ha as another white heterosexual cisgender⁷ icon for feminism, my attempt has been to use her performance to understand femme agency in everyday contexts as a modulation of nested networks of norms, as a choice between impure options that can still contain possibilities of ethical embodiment.

Notes

1. Album notes for *The Fame* by Lady Gaga, Interscope Records.
2. Album notes for “Animal” and “Cannibal” by Ke\$ha, RCA Records.
3. A more thorough consideration of the line between the life and art of any performing artist is beyond the scope of this paper.
4. The femme disturbance concept was first presented at the “Catalyzing Knowledge in Dangerous Times” conference at UC Berkeley, inspired by Lisa Duggan and Kathleen McHugh’s femme science and the Electronic Disturbance Theater (Cárdenas).
5. “One such post is a satirical Top 10 list of “How to Be Cool on MySpace,” which includes material like “Your MySpace name MUST contain symbols and incorrect spelling” (Boyd).
6. Inspired by femme authors such as Joan Nestle and her essay “My Mother Liked to Fuck” in *The Eight Technologies of Otherness* by Sue Golding.
7. Cisgender is a word from transgender theorists such as Julia Serrano, where cis- is the prefix with the opposite meaning as trans-, so cisgender people present the gender they were assigned at birth.

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