Gaga Gothic

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Abstract
In this article I examine Lady Gaga's fusion of Gothic and pop. Focusing on her provocative performances and 'dark' lyrics – from the infamous 'meat dress' to her debut album *The Fame Monster* (2009) – I explore Lady Gaga's use of Gothic tropes and her creative concerns for "what keeps us up at night and what keeps us afraid" (Gaga quoted in Dinh 2009). Within this context, I argue that Lady Gaga deploys and commodifies the Gothic – perhaps most strikingly in The Monster Ball Tour when she was 'bitten' vampire-like, causing blood to dramatically spurt from her neck, before 'dying' in a pool of blood – in order to craft the performative subject position and musical persona that is Lady Gaga. I contend that Lady Gaga can be located within a 'Postfeminist Gothic' tradition as she is the personification of a 'sexual subject' who harnesses the trappings of Gothic horror to express her postfeminist subjectivity. Existing within a domain of risk, she seemingly subverts expectation while at the same time conforming to it. In this way, Lady Gaga's Gothic pop/self provides expressions of the tensions of subject formation in a postfeminist era. For Lady Gaga, Gothic (per)forms a self that individuates as well as others.

Keywords: *Lady Gaga, postfeminist Gothic, horror/romance, performativity, commodification*

On 13 September 2010 Lady Gaga grabbed the headlines at the MTV Video Music Awards, not only for her eight 'Moon Man' statuettes for *Bad Romance* and *Telephone*[1], but also for the controversial Franc Fernandez designed dress, hat and boots she wore, made entirely from cuts of raw meat[2]. Always eager to challenge her audience by

[1] The 'Moon Man' statuettes are so called because they depict an astronaut on the moon with an MTV flag.

[2] A fan of meat couture, Gaga had appeared previously on the September 2010 cover of the Japanese edition of *Vogue* wearing a meat bikini.

celebrating the 'freak' and the 'monster', Lady Gaga, aka Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta, utilises a Gothic aesthetic to style her dramatic lyrical performances. Whether bending gender or genre, Gothic is at the heart of her artistic expression, transforming "the conventions of pop stardom into a fully realized Gothic musical that aims for the commercial sweet spot at the intersection of horror and romance" (Zinoman 2010). This fusion of these historically dichotomous or polarised elements of the Gothic, horror and romance, embodied for example in the male Gothic writing of Matthew Gregory Lewis in *The Monk* (1796) and the female Gothic of Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) respectively, capture the Haus of Gaga's artistic vision that sees postmodern Gothic 'mashup', pastiche and parody mobilised in Gaga's songs[3]. The merging of Gothic horror and romance, particularly in Gaga's Monster Ball Tour, underlines how for Gaga Gothic becomes the articulation of what fans recognise as a seemingly authentic or 'real' expression of the self – by invoking a form of Goth/Gothic subcultural affiliation – and at the same time a commodity for consumption – mainstreaming her subcultural associations through pop and dance tracks that have a broader appeal[4]. According to Victor Corona, Gaga

> attempt[s] to explicitly link herself to categories of individual Otherness. By celebrating the 'monster', the 'freak', or the 'misfit' in multiple expressions – not 'fitting in' at school or being gay – she is able to build a sense of subcultural membership among fans while the catch-all liveliness of her music works to sustain mass appeal. (Corona 2011: 2)

Monstrous Otherness is reconceived by Gaga not as something that is isolated, detached, threatening and/or misunderstood, but

[3] Modelled on Andy Warhol's *The Factory*, the Haus of Gaga is Lady Gaga's creative team who are responsible for the development of her distinct style.

[4] In an interview for *Rolling Stone* magazine (Scaggs 2009: 34), Gaga asserts that "The largest misconception is that Lady Gaga is a persona or character. I'm not – even my mother calls me Gaga". Her fans are quick to seize upon the direct correlation between Gaga's persona and her 'real' self, along with her control of her self-styling. As one fan puts it, "I would *hate* for that to be an image […] It seems so genuine. I hope to God it's true. Yes, she has stylists, but the perception is she's done it herself. *My* impression is she's done it herself" (quoted in Callahan 2010: 4).

rather a common, shared experience that binds and solidifies her fans under the banner of Gaga's so-called 'little monsters'. Here the monster (and Gaga's much-promoted misfit or outsider status) is a catalyst for Gaga's success: her exploitation of the Other in her carnivalesque Gothic performances attracts a loyal fan base that connects with her expressions of *différance.* Simultaneously it is the product of that success: fans are (represented as) 'monsters'. In this way, the monster serves "to indict past relationships and fame, and to celebrate the products of that fame, her fans. Monsters become a metaphor for the maddening swirl of images, anxieties and fads in hypermodern life" (Corona 2011: 8). This postmodern reimagining of the monster harbours a complex dual directionality in Gaga's oeuvre, which, as this article goes on to discuss in more detail, resonates with a Postfeminist Gothic critical perspective that embodies a series of critical conflicts of signification, spectral sites where meaning is called into question.

Concentrating on her provocative performances and 'dark' lyrics, this article explores Gaga's use of Gothic paraphernalia and her creative concerns for "what keeps us up at night and what keeps us afraid" (Gaga quoted in Dinh 2009). I argue that Gaga manipulates, adapts and commodifies the Gothic – perhaps most strikingly in The Monster Ball Tour when she was 'bitten' vampire-like, causing blood to dramatically spurt from her neck, before 'dying' in a pool of blood – in order to craft the performative subject position and musical persona that is Lady Gaga. Moreover, I contend that Gaga can be located within a Postfeminist Gothic tradition as she is the personification of a 'sexual subject' who fuses Gothic horror and romance in order to express her contentious and potentially ambiguous postfeminist subjectivity. Existing within a domain of risk, she seemingly subverts expectation while at the same time conforming to it. In this way, Gaga's Gothic pop/self provides articulations of the tensions of subject formation in a postfeminist era, as the lines between protagonist and victim, self and Other thin and dissolve. For Gaga, Gothic (per)forms a self that individuates as well as Others.

1. Gothic resurrection

"I felt a spontaneity and nerve in myself that I think had been in a coffin for a very long time. At that moment I rose up from the dead"

(Gaga quoted in Phoenix 2010: 39). The transformation of Stefani Germanotta into Lady Gaga appears to be taken straight from the pages of Gothic fiction, as Gaga describes rising vampire-like from the coffin of her perceived personal and social internment in order to reveal her latent self. Gothic for Gaga works contrary to Anne Williams's assertion that it "marks a threat to the bodily integrity of the 'I' – its very existence in the Symbolic" (Williams 1995: 75). Instead of challenging and fracturing the self and dislocating its position within the Lacanian Symbolic order, Gothic animates, individuates and empowers by working as a mode of expression *par excellence* for Germanotta's living dead 'resurrection' as Gaga.

As such commentators as Maureen Callahan have observed, there seems to be a potential conflict between Germanotta's former life on the Upper West Side of New York and the conception of Lady Gaga as an individual and artist who speaks to 'freaks'[5]. It can be reasoned that Gaga's Otherness and outsider status run contrary to Germanotta's privileged upbringing and her attendance at the exclusive Convent of the Sacred Heart on East 91st Street, an institution that has educated a number of America's political and cultural elite, including Caroline Kennedy and Gloria Vanderbilt. Although Gaga maintains that she always felt like 'a freak' as a teenager and did not easily inhabit the world she found herself in, Callahan notes that

> photos from this time show a fresh-faced girl, perpetually smiling, surrounded by other, perpetually smiling young girls. They all look like they're part of the same well-adjusted, uptown tribe: long groomed hair, age-appropriate makeup, jeans and T-shirts and sweaters for day, strapless gowns and pearl chokers at high school dances. (Callahan 2010: 15)

Germanotta's conformity and ordinariness, her very lack of marginality, fail to expose the narrative of the isolated Other that Gaga promotes. Here, the "well-adjusted" teenager shows no signs of the flamboyant displays and Gothic excesses of Gaga. However, the absence of idiosyncrasy does not in itself undermine Gaga's account of her artistic rebirth and empowerment through what she

[5] See for example Callahan 2010.

characterises as the external expression of an internal idea of the self[6]. On the contrary, by shedding Germanotta like an unwanted skin, Gaga's rise from the (living) dead harnesses the Gothic potential of her inner monster, confirming as she says in an interview for *Rolling Stone* magazine, "that innately we're all born with the monsters already inside us" (Hiatt 2009).

Germanotta, the product of a Catholic convent education, writes her own Gothic script as her conformity to a well-structured education along with her nurtured virtue and faith define her victim status within a Gothic context. As if describing Emily St. Aubert from Radcliffe's *Udolpho*, the school website notes that "Sacred Heart women positively influence the world by thinking critically, acting with courage and compassion, and manifesting an informed and lively faith" (Convent of Sacred Hearth n.d.). Yet unlike Emily, Germanotta's transformation into Lady Gaga frees her from the restrictive limits placed upon the Female Gothic heroine by overcoming the victim-signified surface of female body in Radcliffe's work through a radical modification of the heroine as monster. Her white Italian American body functions in a similar way to that of another archetypal action-adventure Gothic heroine – Buffy Summers, from the successful television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003). In Buffy's case, her cheerleader persona signifies as victim but hides her true calling as the 'chosen one'. *Buffy* creator, Joss Whedon, ever aware of the Gothic context of his creation, describes the idea behind Buffy as a desire to "create someone who was a hero where she had always been a victim. The element of surprise, that element of genre busting is very much at the heart of […] the series" (Whedon quoted in Thompson 2004: 4). Likewise, Gaga exploits the tension between the victim status of her former self, Germanotta, and the seemingly empowered self embodied by Lady Gaga. This transition and underling expression of agency are not without problem and Gaga's relationship with

[6] Gaga describes her metamorphosis in the following terms: "[t]he way that I perform, people think it's exhibitionist because it's so theatrical. But I tell you, there is something in me that I can't help, and that is the girl who got made fun of all those years. And when I went to college, I got rid of her and I started to be *something that I thought I was supposed to be*" (Gaga quoted in Callahan 2010: 18-9; emphasis added).

feminism is particularly knotty. In fact, as Curtis Fogel and Andrea Quinlan (2011: 187) argue "[w]hile arguments have been made that Lady Gaga could be seen as a gendered warrior allied with ongoing feminist struggles, it could also be argued that she represents the continued objectification and dehumanization of women". Without naming it, Fogel and Quinlan open up an on-going debate within feminist criticism about the definition and function of the concept of postfeminism, with its highly contested manifestations of agency. At the same time, these feminist deliberations are witnessed within Gothic criticism through the shifting dynamic between Female and Postfeminist Gothic representations of the heroine, which I consider in more detail in the next section of this article.

Within this context, Diane Long Hoeveler expands upon these critical tensions between the Female Gothic and women's victim status, arguing that feminist criticism has fostered a sense of passivity by representing women as victims. According to Hoeveler (1998: 3) "discussions of the female gothic, like analyses of 'feminism', have, unfortunately, uncritically participated in the very fantasies that the genres have created for their unwary readers". For Hoeveler, there is a direct connection between the Female Gothic and the antifeminist perspective of 'victim feminism', as both rely on an ideology of "female power through pretended and staged weakness" (Hoeveler 1998: 7). Gaga's story indirectly responds to the critical implications of Hoeveler's argument by coming out from behind this mask of passivity in what could be characterised as a Postfeminist Gothic turn.

2. Posting feminism, posting Gothic, posting Gaga

Postfeminist Gothic emerged as a critical category in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, reflecting transformed gender relations and variations in feminist criticism. The concept of postfeminism is highly contested, with proposed definitions ranging from popular evocations of 'Girl Power', cultural analyses of backlash, academic discussions of postmodern/poststructuralist feminism and political examinations of neoliberal individualism[7].

[7] For Genz and Brabon, postfeminism "sits alongside other 'post-' discourses – including postmodernism and postcolonialism – and here, it refers to a shift in the understanding and construction of identity and gender categories" (2009: 1).

It is this definitional plasticity that makes the conceptual alliance of postfeminism and Gothic particularly productive, with both terms exhibiting a proclivity for haunting: a gap in the signification process that allows for multiple (and contradictory) meanings. Both concepts are bound up with ghosts of the past that constantly shadow the present and threaten to re-materialise. Just as Gothic is uneasy about its relationship with history, postfeminism is troubled by its problematic ties to the past and previous incarnations of feminism. As David Punter (1996: 198) notes, "the code of Gothic is [...] not a simple one in which past is encoded in present or vice versa, but dialectical, past and present intertwined, and distorting [...] each other with the sheer effort of coming to grips". Along these lines, postfeminism undoubtedly harbours a Gothic urge, split as it is between backlash inclinations and progressive ideas, depictions of victimhood and agency.

Postfeminist Gothic texts capture these incongruous and seemingly irreconcilable forces, wary of the fact that "the resignifications of femininity cannot rid themselves of the threat of phallocentricity, the spectre of heterosexism, as they still function within the same cultural imagery" (Genz 2009: 73), a system of signs that continues to fashion women as inferior and powerless. Postfeminist Gothic works leave the reader with a series of critical contradictions that reflect the contested nature of both postfeminism and Gothic – providing backlash and progressive developments. Aware of the fact that we are no longer in the second wave of feminism, Postfeminist Gothic as a category responds to the shifting landscape of feminism's form in the late twentieth and twenty-first century. In this way, Postfeminist Gothic opens up new subject positions for both the hero and heroine of the Female Gothic, and its readers for that matter, moving beyond binary distinctions between victim and perpetrator while remaining haunted by the very system it aims to transgress.

Gaga and her music connect with the dual directionality of Postfeminist Gothic, exploiting both elements of the concept. Instead of branding postfeminism as contributing to the continued subordination of women or wholeheartedly embracing postfeminist emancipation, what interests me here is the tension and unease within the processes of representation and signification which raise the ghostly trace of Otherness. This phantasmagorical quality

of representation and signification evokes a Foucauldian notion of *assujetissement* (or 'subjectivation') which captures the double bind of subjectivity. As Genz (2009: 31) has argued, "[t]his double process may help us to comprehend and explore the paradoxes of a postfeminist femininity that can work in empowering and subordinating ways". These complexities of subjectivity denied by the Female Gothic and the potential of postfeminism to account for "a double movement of empowerment and subordination" (Genz 2009: 31) provide a rich critical terrain for reading Gaga and her work through a Postfeminist Gothic lens.

Gaga's subject position captures the critically problematic terrain of postfeminism. Gaga is quick to assert her status as a strong single woman, in what could be characterised as a classic example of the mantra of 'Girl Power' feeding into the rhetoric of individual empowerment: "I don't need a man. I might sometimes want a man, but I don't need one. I earn my money, I create art, I know where I am going" (Gaga quoted in Phoenix 2010: 213). As a singleton, itself a subject category representative of the postfeminist 1990s, Gaga invokes her financial independence and creative power to define herself as a sovereign woman who does not require a man to delineate the parameters of her existence. Her mantra of power is that of the politics of the individual and it ties into the commodity form the subject takes within late capitalism. In this respect, Gaga's postfeminism seems to work against that historic marker of the Second Wave: sisterhood. In its place, Gaga's hedonistic individualism perceives a common bond focused on a form of self-actualisation linked to fame: "You have the ability to self-proclaim your own fame. You have the ability to experience and feel a certain amount of self worth that comes from a very vain place, by your choices [...] you can literally choose to have fame" (Gaga quoted in Phoenix 2010: 52). This rhetoric of choice that has been aligned closely with postfeminism is presented in Gaga's mind as a path to willed success and empowerment. The veneer of Gaga's motivational and inspirational words is dangerously thin as it hangs upon the assumption that choice in itself will deliver the desired change through an act that will give the self value in a world that celebrates the fleeting nature of celebrity and fame. As Gaga knows only too well, fame is a monster, and its fickle contours serve to highlight the complications of

promoting a postfeminist form of self-expression that relies upon little more than belief in the self and making a choice. In this respect, Gaga undermines this narrative of self-empowerment in a typical postfeminist turn that invokes the playfulness of the sign, hinting that she will get married while promoting the song *Marry the Night* from her album *Born This Way*. Indeed, Gaga is more than the image that she seems to be a slave to. She is constantly working on, performing, crafting and 'doing' Gaga to such an extent that the fissure between the persona and the person closes up – "she *is* the persona she inhabits on stage" and she subjugates the simulacrum of the self (Corona 2011: 10). As a self-confessed workaholic, her work is Gaga.

Gaga's 'work' is inherently tied to the performance and consumption of a particularly sexualised type of feminine agency, what Shalit (1998: 27) describes as "do-me-feminism", coupled with a Gothic aesthetic that draws on the trope of the 'freak' to add, simultaneously and somewhat paradoxically, both subcultural edge and commercial appeal. Gaga's lavish stage productions highlight her construction of the identity of overtly sexualised freak that, while clearly manufactured and clothed in designer gear, is nonetheless portrayed and experienced by her fans as 'authentic'. Here, sexual agency is seen to be interlinked with and dependent on Gaga's use of a Gothic freak show that, she argues, differentiates her from mainstream prudish American culture (which of course she herself is rooted in, entertains and profits from). In Gaga's words, "We Americans are quite hard on women for strong sexuality. But it's really who I am and what I feel comfortable with" (Gaga quoted in Phoenix 2010: 88).

Gaga's graphic use of sex and sexuality in her lyrics and music videos also functions in the contested postfeminist site between sexual liberation and retrosexism. As Fogel and Quinlan argue within this context,

> some may regard Lady Gaga as a liberator of women with her sexually provocative styles of dress, dance moves, and gestures. She is a contemporary sex symbol who pushes the boundaries of acceptable female sexual expression. Her public displays of sexuality should, however, conjure up longstanding debates between feminist scholars surrounding pornography as being inherently oppressive or liberating. (Fogel and Quinlan 2011: 187)

Gaga as 'do-me-feminist' treads the fine line between sexual subject and sexual object, with the ever present risk of becoming the victim of her own sex and thus an embodiment of archetypal Gothic womanhood. The problematic nature of Gaga's use of sexuality divides critics as the risk of objectification has potentially hazardous implications for Gaga and her followers. Fogel and Quinlan are pessimistic about Gaga's ability to use sex as a means to power, maintaining that she "becomes a sex object that is routinely victimized as she is bought and sold and violently abused. Her only agency is her ability to use her victimization and treatment as a sex object to bring men close to then commit the ultimate revenge: murder" (Fogel and Quinlan 2011: 187). While there is always the possibility that the sexual subject will slip into the position of sexual object, in Gaga's case agency is determined by the individual self-expression of choice in the pursuit of fame and monstrosity as commodity.

This intricate association between Gaga's sexual subject/object status is picked up in her Gothic flavoured lyrics that often exploit these inherent contradictions at the nub of postfeminism's critical intersection with the Gothic. In the lyrical playfulness of *Bad Romance* for example, Gaga mobilises Gothic machinery in order to represent her sexual choices/preferences in a relationship that is fashioned as potentially harmful, but arguably without straightforwardly pejorative connotations. In this song, desire is represented as something dark and complex as sex is made Gothic:

> I want your horror, I want your design
> 'Cause you're a criminal as long as you're mine
> I want your love,
> Love, love, love, I want your love
> I want your psycho, your vertigo stick
> Want you in my rear window, baby, you're sick. (Gaga 2009)

Gaga represents the relationship in *Bad Romance* as something motivated by her own sexual desires for horror and psycho romance, not simply a trap forged by her lover's tyrannical and monstrous desires. "Love" in *Bad Romance* is closely aligned with sex as the phallic potential of her partner's "vertigo stick" is directed towards the anal imagery of Gaga's "rear window", evoking the response, "you're sick". Yet Gaga's Gothic descriptions of the destructive

potential of this "bad romance", and by extension the conception of her lover's desires as sick or monstrous, create a picture that exposes that the overpowering quality of being in a bad romance is something that Gaga desires in part. Here Gaga plays with her victim status by locating herself in a postfeminist subject position that potentially bridges the thin divide between sexual subject and object, teasing her partner and the listener with her desire for the monstrous. Gaga seemingly occupies a position of power and control as expressed through her repeated "wants" within the song. However, the relationship itself incarcerates Gaga within a Gothic matrix of phallic aggression, as she acknowledges that she is "caught in a bad romance".

In this way, the Gothic aesthetic that pervades Gaga's music and performances reveals a complex process of Othering and individuating experienced by the postfeminist subject. The darker and often latent aspects of romance are accentuated by Gaga through her use of sex/sexuality as she confounds her victim status as outsider, freak and Other, demonstrating a progressive postfeminist potential to her Gothic reimaginings. Gothic here acts a point of connection/identification that is aligned with agency and individual self-expression, but at the same time Gaga (and the postfeminist subject more broadly) is haunted by the spectre of backlash and its position as nothing more than the object/product of patriarchal and capitalist consumption. Corona's analysis points to the superficiality of hypermodern pop culture and "the persistent longing for the spectacle of stardom as a ready escape from the tedium of everyday life" (Corona 2011: 17) – which cannot be denied – but what is really at stake in Gaga's work is the possibility of reimaging Gothic freaks and monsters as agents in a postfeminist world that celebrates Otherness, not at the margins of society, but as the predominant articulation of the subject's commodity status in late capitalism. For Gaga, the exchange between freakishness, both as a marker of consumer/designer creativity and self-chosen subject/Other, and sexuality, in a similarly dual expression of subject/object status, highlights the tensions within the contemporary (postfeminist) Gothic playing field where the production and consumption of subcultural/sexual authenticity and empowerment sit in an uneasy alliance with infiltration and appropriation by market rationality and phallocentric logic. Here, the marginal becomes central and the centre is made to

appear marginal through Gaga's makeover and branding of Gothic as a route to notability, fame and capital in the twenty-first century.

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