The Mystique of the Celebrity Rainbow
The Postmodern Re-Mystification of the American Female Pop Star

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Do not all charms fly
   At the mere touch of cold philosophy?
There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:
   We know her woof, her texture; she is given
   In the dull catalogue of common things.
   Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,
   Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
   Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine
   Unweave a rainbow, as it erewhile made

The tender-person'd Lamia melt into a shad. (“Lamia” 214)
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Preface

Andy Warhol once remarked, “In the future everyone will be world famous for fifteen minutes” (qtd. in Goodman 510). Yet, being famous for fifteen minutes does not constitute being a star, but then what does? A longevity of fame, the romanticizing of discovery, the idolization of a figure seemingly larger than life? Or, all of this under the umbrella of an elusive mystique? These are some of the questions Americans have pondered ever since the stage lights first started shining. The last few years in American culture have been characterized by an economic depression, social malaise, and perhaps most notably an overall desire to dream—a dream that involves the ability to shine once more. As a result, we observe the emergence of a syndrome of alluring female pop stars who attempt to reinstate a magical image of the star by using postmodern characteristics as a strategy for mystification. These constructed postmodern stars offer us a cannibalized pastness of romanticized myths. They efface any notion of a veridical self to protect an elaborate system of signification and console audiences with an endless array of sparkling costumes. However, the reception of this syndrome reveals an ambivalence that both celebrates and laments the newly-constructed star. We desire to revel in myth but simultaneously wish to dismantle it to unearth a structure that valorizes the mythical feelings stars elicit. Finally, this duality functions as a paradigm for the current sensibility that permeates American society.

Stars earn their title because they signify something seemingly unattainable which is concurrently part of everyday life. It is in the romanticization of this enticing remove and the concealment of the obvious that the audience perceives mystique—an intriguing allure that has fetishized fame and irrevocably intersected stars with the public’s everyday life. As we will see, the star’s presence in the public sphere is comprehensively staged and includes the obstruction of an assumed veridical self; a self the audience attempts to unearth through dismantling. This dismantling manifests itself physically through attempts at observing stars
without make-up. Furthermore, dismantling attempts to uncover inherent contradictions the star wishes to conceal through the construction of a public self. Particularly due to her amplification of beauty, the female star is valorized most by the star system—an overarching system of values, meanings, and representations through the conceptualization of seemingly extraordinary figures. The star system it is not a phenomenon of modernity that has accelerated over time, nor is it simply the idolizing of figures. It is a pivotal system of intriguing representations that is used to shape our own subjectivity through the enforcement and displacement of certain values. Several theorists opine that the star system rests merely upon fabrication, “enormous investment, industrial techniques of rationalization and standardization” (Morin 135). However, consumerist theories fail to explain why some stars are allowed into the limelight and others are relegated to the wings. As chapter one will demonstrate, the integration of a subjectivist component into assumed theories of stardom not only legitimizes the audience’s interest but valorizes the star’s mythical qualities we so desperately desire and seek.

Additionally, this millennium marks the emergence of a (digital) public sphere of meaning, one grounded in spectacle that fosters so-called imagined communities and encourages immediacy over substance. Rather than watching media, the current internet generation desires to be part of it; “media [has become] corporeal” (Smit 12). Agency is not clearly defined and has given rise to a sense of entitlement over the star. This entitlement manifests itself through dismantling of the star and violent consumption—all in an attempt to unearth the mystique the pop star exudes. We revel in the beauty of the rainbow but our attempts to understand it partly undo its mystique. Consequently, the star is left with a dismantled persona who asks us to believe that there are qualities neither dismantlement nor reason can account for. This is most evident in the violent dismantling and exile of quintessential pop-princess Britney Spears between 2007 and 2008. Spears’ exile created a
vacuum in a social landscape overcast by endless paparazzi images of stars. The star system was not only in need of an idol worthy of aspiration who could define a generation, but one who could concurrently restore a mythical image of the female pop star in an era of vigorous deconstruction.

It is here we meet a new woman whose origins are elusive, whose appearance confuses many, and who has created a new category for others like her. Spears’ public dismantling, the valorization of “blank fame,” and the increased desire to possess the star have led to an overall demystification of the star and cast the star system into crisis. Rather than risking it combusting into a meaningless plethora, chapter two examines a syndrome from 2008 onwards which re-mystifies the female pop star through overly-extravagant constructed personas. The women who define this syndrome cunningly use postmodern parody—ascribing to Linda Hutcheon’s modality of postmodernity—as a strategy to de-naturalize, fuse, and deconstruct assumed binaries and representations to intrigue spectators. This postmodern female pop star is not discriminatory as to what she cannibalizes from past incarnations of stardom; instead, she assimilates whatever is necessary to captivate the audience. Nothing is out of bounds and everything with the potential to beguile is on the table. This syndrome does not challenge the assumed characteristics of postmodernism, but utilizes these as tactics to parody existing notions of stardom, gender, race, and authenticity. Since postmodernism is characterized by a weakened ability to historicize, the constructed female pop star comes to us without identifiable origins and utilizes myth to frame herself within a larger narrative of stardom—after all, myths are “imaginary solutions to contradictions” and these constructs operate through contradiction (Guilbert 8). We are to believe she is the result of the American Dream; an exceptional struggling artist lifted from obscurity to showcase her talents. This is achieved through adopting an abstract “pastness,” cannibalized from earlier stars and tales of stardom to construct an origin story (Jameson 19).
No costume is too lavish and no wig is too artificial as these women present exactly what we desire; a female pop star who reinstates a conception of stardom whereby each appearance is met with the physical extravagance expected of a star. By examining some of the most notable front-runners associated with this syndrome, namely Lady Gaga, Nicki Minaj, and Lana Del Rey we see they incorporate modernist myths of stardom as imitable postmodern codes to foster an alluring contradictory figure. Any notion of a veridical self is obscured with a thick layer of glitter and rhinestones. Lady Gaga presents a pop star who rewards each gaze with an ever-changing simulacrum of sensational appearances. Similarly, Nicki Minaj has fused many binaries into one construct that encompasses multiple personalities. Finally, through a barrage of nostalgic Americana-inspired imagery, Lana Del Rey attempts to hint at an authenticity she cannot offer. Additionally, since this syndrome manifests itself through both surreal appearances and fabricated personas, it has become a trend that has inspired other female stars to follow in the high-heeled footsteps of their constructed peers. Nonetheless, while we were initially mesmerized by her glamour, we have since grown ambivalent of the sincerity this new star attempts to convey.

Since 2008, the United States has found itself in an era of dashed (American) dreams characterized by an economic downturn and a wave of (gay) teen suicides. In a time of confusing messages of intolerance, several American teenagers chose a permanent solution to a temporary problem. Consequently, the postmodern female pop star interpolated herself into the role of an intimate confidant for despondent listeners. As chapter three demonstrates, this confidante tried to console a postmodern loneliness with self-love anthems which urged us to believe we can be and do anything we desire. Therefore, while this syndrome surfaced to re-instate a mythical image of the star, it also tried to sweep audiences away from social unrest by instilling positive aspirations and restore faith in upward mobility. More than anyone, the ever-present star embodies the continued possibility to transform oneself. However, rather
than introducing idols to believe in, we were presented with a postmodern female trickster. A
shape-shifter marked by duality who confronts us with inherent contradictions in society
through parody. Yet, if parody is the trickster’s mirror, these constructs have started casting
reflections so extreme they may be refused and passed over for something seemingly more
authentic. In an era of deconstruction, our efforts at dismantling fail since what is uncovered
proves irreconcilable with the construct who asks us to trust her. Consequently, her alluring
tales of hope are met with caution and ambivalence since the constructed star cannot give
meaning to what she attempts to signify.

Finally, the reception of this syndrome has resulted in a “construction fatigue” that
signals something pervasive about American society. The desire for modernist notions of
autonomy and authenticity combined with a desire for the irony of postmodernism reveals the
emergence of a new sensibility. This sensibility navigates between both conditions but is
unable to encompass either fully; a post-postmodernism some have deemed
“metamodernism.” As our current condition, metamodernism “is constituted by the
tension…of a modern desire for sens and a postmodern doubt about the sense of it all” (Van
Akker and Vermeulen 6). As a result, these constructed stars, who initially refused to be
categorized, have become a category in their own right that can be enjoyed and passed over
for something new. Who or what that is, is something not even the trickster can tell us.
Chapter One
“Star Light, Star Bright”
The Workings of the Star System and Dismantling the Female Pop Star

How can it be that the female pop star is able to move an audience to tears simply by stepping into the spotlight? What inherently differentiates her from us; and more importantly, how can we uncover this magical quality? These are some of the questions on our lips as we voyeuristically peruse paparazzi photos of stars. Some theorists opine the star system functions solely to “shepherd the populace into imitative consumption” through the creation of spectacle (Rojek 34). We undoubtedly enjoy the bright lights that accompany the spectacle. However, even in a postmodern era of alleged depthlessness, we cannot help but feel there is more to the star than a one-dimensional signification of our deepest desires. It is the irrationality of stardom myths that asks audiences to accept that certain things are unable to be unearthed or structured. Yet, this has not deterred many from dismantling the brightest of stars. Pondering glances have been substituted for intrusive lenses and social media has created a digital public sphere, grounded in spectacle, where we vicariously monitor as well as instantly scrutinize. Rather than observe and admire, we wish to participate. By transforming the media into extensions of the self, agency has become increasingly dynamic (McLuhan 19-21). Particularly pop stars—aided by the immediacy and personalized nature of music and the music video—are absorbed as nodal points into the public’s life. Conversely, services like Twitter have become a vehicle for the star to attempt to regain a sense of control in an era where consumerism has led the audience to feel entitled to possess them. Yet, as stars appear to navigate more closely towards audience—through this illusionary digital proximity—they are vulnerable to undermining their own mythical qualities. This is most evident in the violent consumption of quintessential pop-princess Britney Spears between 2007 and 2008 when the public’s “passive” violence prompted her dismantling and subsequent exile. Therefore, Britney Spears occupies a transitional space for the current
female pop star; it is her highly-publicized and accelerated breakdown that left the vacuum which prompted a trend to re-mystify the female pop star.

If we are to uncover the mythical qualities of the star, the most common theoretical approaches to the star system warrant the integrating of a subjectivist component that re-instates agency. The most dominant approach to the star system has been structuralism as it scientifically deconstructs it as an institution in which the culture industry exerts complete control and stars are merely replicable pawns. Subjectivist notions of mystique are discounted and the star system’s existence is founded on social control. Audiences are subdued into what Herbert Marcuse termed “repressive desublimation,” whereby stars are conceptualized to subdue the masses into passive consumption and unconsciously adopt values which conflict with their true needs (59). Additionally, stars are thought to belong to a “powerless elite”; a group “whose institutional power is very limited or non-existent, but whose doings and way of life arouse a considerable and sometimes even a maximum degree of interest” (Alberoni 108). Nonetheless, structuralist approaches tend to overstate “the uniformity of structural forces” (Rojek 43). Presently, stars wield great influential persuasion (rather than overt “power”) that goes beyond their status in the entertainment industry. One need only look to Lady Gaga’s rally speeches in favor of repealing the US’ “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy or Madonna’s efforts regarding “Free Pussy Riot” to observe that the relationship between star and audience goes beyond mere consumption or dominant values (Zezima). Moreover, post-structuralist approaches reduce the star system to a field of production and visual representations that rely merely on consumption; thereby removing any notion of individuality. Since underlying structures that guarantee meaning are rejected, meaning becomes an ongoing active process. For the post-structuralist, “star images are inflected and modified by the mass-media and the productive assimilation of the audience” (Rojek 44). Both approaches, while not to be dismissed, are too simplified and fail to explain why some
are valorized as stars and others are not. Furthermore, they occlude the socially integrating function the star possesses in contemporary society.

While not diminishing the importance of mass consumer culture in the star system—ultimately, recognition of the star partly depends on consumption—something additional is needed to legitimize the audience’s fascination with the star and his or her valorization in the overarching star system. The problem with (post)-structuralist notions of stars as symbolic “attempts to contain the masses” in a policing capacity, is that they occlude any sense of agency from both star and audience (Marshall, Celebrity and Power 243). They fail to “examine the content of star images” and assume that in a postmodern age there is merely one dimension of surface variations (Dyer, Stars 14). Beguiling complexity is ignored as an empty spectacle of capitalism and stars are replicable images in a capitalist game of titillation. The complex quality that is often dismissed is a subjectivist component, namely that of Max Weber’s charismatic authority. It cannot easily be replicated and even the most fabricated of stars demand it. For example, if we adhere to notions of passive consumerism, television shows such as American Idol and X-Factor would not fail in their ability to churn out stars with longevity. If we are willing to spend money, we are given the illusion of choice to vote for a proposed star from a selection of candidates. Nonetheless, on these shows enduring success is an exception not a rule. They may elicit intrigue because of the seeming novelty of unapologetic construction and feigned myths of discovery. However, the success-rate proves that neither talent nor industry support guarantee success—let alone stardom. What they do exemplify is that “we covet the limelight”; and, in recent years, do not simply want to admire but seek to participate in that limelight (Goodman 510).

Weber’s charismatic authority provides a crucial component lacking from the aforementioned approaches. He writes, “The term ‘charisma’ will be applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and
treated as endowed with supernatural, or at least specifically exceptional powers or quality” (61). This charisma is essential to the creation of the mythical star as it validates his or her fame. The appeal of the star is difficult to define. Therefore, we ascribe myth to their valorization in popular culture to “elucidate mystery, to solve the unsolvable…[and] to guide action or to legitimate” (Cuppit 29). Most important is how the star is regarded “by his ‘followers’ or ‘disciples’” (Weber 61). In a society of mass visuals those subjected to the star’s charisma are extensive, followers do not merely include fans; one does not need to idolize an individual to accept him or her as a star. If “followers” on Twitter are an indication, women like Lady Gaga, Britney Spears, and Nicki Minaj have between fifteen and thirty million pairs of eyes on them. Thus, the recognition of charismatic authority depends solely upon the audience who functions as “‘proof’ of its genuineness” (Ibid., 69). Therefore, it is not difficult to see why not every individual proposed by the culture industry has the so-called “x factor.” As an image, the star encompasses many mythical qualities, apart from charismatic authority, that are abstract audience desires—accidental discovery, rags-to-riches, exemplary beauty, wealth, and widespread adoration. Yet, it may be the irrational and elusive nature of this inherent charisma that leads some to dismiss it. Weber explains that “charismatic authority is specifically irrational in the sense of being foreign to all rules” (Ibid., 63). Mystique, like charismatic authority, generates a feeling of assumed uniqueness; it implies something extraordinary about something we, subconsciously, suspect to be ordinary—the star as a human being. Audiences attempt to valorize this mystique by searching for an underlying structure that governs it. However, we are unaware that stars are mythical because we desire them to be; our fascination is “proof” of their mystique. Consequently, it is the star’s legitimization in myth and fantasy—legitimized by the audience itself—that explains why we attribute to them qualities that appear out of our reach. Furthermore, it is the spectacle
of their appearance and performance that validates their star power and no appearance is expected to be more spectacular than that of the female star.

It is the history of forced manipulation and staging that not only valorizes the female star in the star system but demands she present something that is always alluring. While all have become inextricably linked, manipulation of the body can be observed separately from commodity and celebrity culture. Ever since ancient times, “the female nude was linked to the divine…and represented beauty in its purest form” (Davis 557). Consequently, the female star is expected to signify an unparalleled beauty and is most suited to be to be a paradigm for the star system. However, “the star system does not limit itself to scouting for natural beauties” (Morin 12). Therefore, she achieves this through amplification techniques such as make-up, wigs, plastic-surgery, and extravagant costumes; all of which “are ideally suited to promoting the glamorous life” of the star (Ibid., 564). Therefore, she may be perceived as more extensively staged than her male counterpart—leading to excessive fascination to see the female star dismantled. However, if this staging becomes too extreme it may lead to ridicule. Cher has often been dubbed a drag queen (by herself, no less) and has become the inspiration for female-impersonators as she is the perfect model for mimicking femininity through extravagance. While her persona does not originate from construction, Cher’s extravagance subverts authenticity similarly to her male-impersonators; “the combination of her drag, their drag, and their mutual embracing of each other creates a diversified and confusing picture of femininity…that denies any attempt to mark an authentic natural original” (Marsan 55). As such, it is this heightened degree of staging imposed upon the female star that intensifies intrigue by contributing to an exotic public face which seems to obscure something unintelligible. As chapter two will demonstrate, some female stars refuse gazes outside of this exotic public face in order to remain truly mythical.
Since physical appearance is deeply rooted in our valorization of the female star, sexist and ageist remarks are often targeted towards women in the public eye. Furthermore, it is in the endurance of this (hetero)sexual scrutiny that gay men live vicariously through the diva. While we may see the emergence of a female (or homoerotic) gaze which partially redirects male and female audiences, “both sexes value physical attractiveness more highly in woman than in men” (Davis 560). Female stars such as Madonna, Cher, Diana Ross, Dolly Parton, Janet Jackson, and so on, refuse to perform differently from the way they did twenty years ago; still exuding sexuality through performance and attire. If we follow Michel Foucault, the body may act as an agent of power at the micro-level. This ascribes agency (justified or not) to those women who seem to control not simply men, but the audience with their body through an image that is the antithesis of female domesticity. This might be a reason why gay men tend to idolize female pop stars. Some may subconsciously sense a kindred and subordinate spirit, as well as an intimate confidante, in the woman who profess a great deal of agency—the diva. Daniel Harris likens homosexual diva worship to football: “It is a bone-crushing spectator sport in which one watches the triumph of feminine wiles over masculine walls of a voluptuous and presumably helpless damsel in distress single-handedly moving down a lineup of hulking quarterbacks who fall dead at her feet” (13). Nonetheless, the female star is constantly urged to present a beauty that continues to radiate from when we first fell for her—possibly due to younger female pop stars who seem more enticing. If she cannot offer this and only presents a fearless quarterback, some may urge her to retire or descend into exile. The aforementioned stars’ longevity in the entertainment industry proves they are able to resist condemning ageist gazes. Consequently, they are perceived as idols of empowerment and worthy of emulation—hence, the many male female star impersonators.

The star system itself can largely been seen as a system with an overarching dynamic hierarchy; one in which certain stars shine brighter than others. Most critical studies on
stardom and celebrity culture have focused primarily on movie stars as the “true” stars of the entertainment industry since the audience’s commitment to the actor is based on the complete obstruction of both a veridical and public self in order to portray a one-dimensional fabricated representation. Conversely, the pop star operates from a different proximity. While still remaining at an intriguing distance, pop stars address the audience seemingly as themselves through music and performance; thereby fostering a tie of personal commitment. The pop star is always its own product—his or her material is perceived to be a reflection of the self. Pop music “works specifically in the affective realm” by incorporating themes of romance, seduction, and heartbreak—through extravagant performances (Marshall, “The Meanings” 214). Additionally, it is no surprise the female star has been so thoroughly associated with popular music—albeit through a permeated subconscious sexism. However, this distinction between the movie and pop star has blurred over the past several decades—“Hollywood” has become a denominator that encompasses the entire entertainment industry and many questionable “stars.” As a result, the MTV generation and the so-called internet boom of the 1990s have not only changed who is deemed a star, but also our perception of proximity to the star.

The omnipresence and immediacy of pop music and the music video—combined with a fame fetish—have since interpolated pop stars into our daily lives and valorized them as legitimate stars. Currently, pop stars have been awarded many similar qualities to movie stars but at an accelerated pace. Each new track, album, or video is treated as a cinematic release with countdowns to its “premiere.” Our appetites are wet for something that is consumed within minutes. With the creation of the MTV network in the early 1980s and the internet boom during the 1990s, pop music and especially the music video have become inescapable and easily consumable products—more-so than film. While a new cinematic release not only requires audiences to travel to a cinema and pay admission, it also necessitates the audience to
sit through about ninety minutes before it can be consumed wholly. In contrast, the consumption of pop music is almost immediate. In the age of YouTube, we are able to watch and hear the star’s latest releases whenever we please. Additionally, rather than mere choreography captures, music videos have become emblems for the star and vehicles for audience identification. Like the actor, each new song or video may present a completely new persona. Therefore, the music video actively frames and constructs a narrative surrounding the pop star—in easily consumable and readily available doses. Madonna’s moniker as “Material Girl” is a result of this. Still, she has created many personas that conflict with this status, yet all are assimilated into “Madonna.” Additionally, music offers more direct affiliation than film; interpretation may be broader due to its relatable nature (songs of love). Therefore, music and those who sing it have become serialized nodal points in our own lives. Nonetheless, while proximity to the pop star may appear closer due to its overt presence in everyday life, he or she remains at an intriguing distance. Like the movie star, we are still left with a figure that is elusive, yet continuously present, and difficult to deconstruct due to its changing nature.

Increased availability of the visual not only legitimizes the pop star but has also amplified a counter-effect wherein the public fetishizes fame for the sake of fame. Adulation of stardom has become a phenomenon in itself, not derived from talent but from sheer notoriety based on so-called “reality.” Our media saturated society has guaranteed that those who stand out are made to do so in the limelight. Especially in secular societies or those without a monarchy, “celebrity culture provides an important integrating function” (Rojek 14). In the absence of pre-destined figures of renown, or an overall waning of belief in the divine, the star may functions as an idol of aspiration. Conversely, convergence surrounding these idols transforms them into “new symbols of recognition and belonging” or immortal “idols of cult worship” such as Marilyn Monroe or Tupac (Ibid.). However, particularly in the
United States, this has generated an eagerness to ascribe “blank fame” to those celebrated merely for being famous (Goodman 510). For example, Kim Kardashian’s recent wedding has been dubbed “American royalty” (Carreon). These “celebutantes” make their debut into fame without any apparent quality to valorize their celebrity (Zimmer). Paris Hilton and Kim Kardashian are examples of what Daniel Boorstin harshly deems “pseudo-events” void of substance and a “category of human emptiness”; they are known “for [their] well-knownness” (79, 84). Reality programming’s primary objective—from which many celebutantes hail—is to sensationalize the mundane and attempt fabricate a spectacle surrounding everyday life. Similar to Marcuse’s one-dimensional man, “the culture of late capitalist society is characterized by just thin, pseudo, fabricated elements” (Dyer, Stars 13). While these celebutantes appear to be one-dimensional facsimiles, or even parodies, of stars, their continued presence in popular culture does emphasize a symptom of our time. The spectacle of fame is so grand that we are willing to recognize individuals without any justifiable star-quality as pseudo-stars. Their public presence highlights “something hollow that is a manifestation of our own hollowness,” to be precise, a craving for (vicarious) participation in a system that is ever present but not directly accessible—the star system (Gabler 2).

While tabloids and overzealous paparazzi have always existed, the media has transformed into an extension of the self—as termed by Marshall McLuhan—which has given rise to a new type of digital public sphere. Furthermore, it is the acceleration of this condition that is responsible for violently consuming and exiling Britney Spears. The star is mythical by its concealment of seemingly obvious aspects of life. However, currently those aspects have been transposed into the limelight; thereby making the star image less magical and, consequently, more easily critiqued. In an attempt to deconstruct mystique, paparazzi lenses act as the public’s prying eyes into the lives of the star. One of the primary differences in the interaction between media, celebrity culture, and the audience is that while the baby boomer
generation watched media, “generation X or Y, or the millennials…desire to be part of it” (Smit 12). This marks the emergence of a new (digital) public sphere in which both star and fan participate; one grounded in spectacle that does not allow for delays and encourages immediacy over substance. Social media has become a looking glass through which we instantly and vicariously observe and scrutinize. A recent example are the so-called “celebrity close-ups” whereby websites are dedicated to extremely close-up photographs of stars so viewers can meticulously inspect each and every pore and the level of make-up (“Celebrity Close-up”). This process of “democratainment” has resulted in everyone immortalizing judgments in the digital realm (Turner 494). In an era of alleged postmodern depthlessness, the public’s scrutinizing eye has distorted the traditional sign/signifier relationship. While the star is still thought to be a sign for extravagance, increased visual imagery of stars taking out their trash negates this. As such, this raised a desire for a mythical star who remains intriguing upon dismantling.

No other celebrity event in recent years matches the public spectacle that was Britney Spears’ breakdown. There have been other instances that garnered a lot of media attention, such as the numerous celebrity deaths; yet, those were one-time events prolonged by media coverage. What sets Spears’ breakdown apart is the accelerated pace and ease with which her image altered and the role the audience, rather than Spears, played in doing so. She went from quintessential American pop star, to hypersexual vixen, to one of the most ridiculed women in America. John Fiske calls this process “semiotic democracy,” in which viewers are actively invited to (re)define cultural symbols by assigning meaning different from the creator’s intent (95). Spears’ breakdown showcased the magnitude of social media and both online and offline tabloids joining together to dismantle her. Not a day went by that she was not watched incessantly without apology or remorse. We observed her doing the most mundane and outrageous things—such as shaving her head, beating a car with an umbrella, accidentally
exposing her nether regions, and crying in public\(^1\). For the spectator, “[t]o be involved, even if by digital manufacturing, in the dark and dirty lives of others…makes our lives feel more clean” (Smit 97). Furthermore, Spears’ dismantling demonstrated the extent of consumption whereby one of the biggest pop stars was wholly consumed. The division between public and private seemed to have dissipated as Britney showed us everything. Her overt dismantling provided the audience access to a new Britney Spears they had not experienced before—yet, yearned for after years of titillation—who could also be consumed. As Smit notes, “Britney was ours when she was up, much more so when she was down” (Ibid.). Rather than spitting her out, she went through our digestive cycle; initially consumed with great delight, digested, and finally secreted since her use value had dissipated—we thought we knew and had seen everything (119).

The fetishization of fame and effortless consumption of entertainment have produced a heightened sense of entitlement over the star. Spears embodies how “[c]apitalism has created a new sort of permission, one in which we feel entitled to ‘it’ because we have paid for it” (Smit 86). Pop stars are “commodities in the sense that consumers desire to possess them” (Rojek 15). Like Eminem raps in “We Made You” or Spears sings in “Piece of Me,” the audience may feel it has dominion over the star because they are the ones who “made” them. The public has invested in an image and, therefore, believes to have the authority to reprimand if the image departs too severely from its most celebrated incarnation or stars refuse this assumed obligation to satisfy the audience—this is the risk the female star who constantly (re)constructs herself faces. For Spears, this may have been because she was no longer an alluring ‘tween’; she got married twice, had two children, and could no longer be bothered to “look her best” in public. Furthermore, since the pop star has unapologetically injected itself into the public’s private life, the audience may feel vindicated in attempting the

\(^1\) The pinnacle occurred on January 3\(^{rd}\) 2008 when Spears was hospitalized after allegedly locking herself in her bathroom with her children (“Timeline”). News sites around the world set up helicopter live feeds and to the minute updates as Spears was taken to the hospital (Smit 115).
same. This type of passive violence manifests itself through incessant surveillance and immediate speculation. Nevertheless, “alongside the everydayness of control is the cumulative effect [of] a damaging invasion into the lives of those we purchase” (Ibid.). This is what cast Britney Spears from her throne into exile. While audiences gleefully pointed the figure at Spears for undermining her own mystique, her behavior as a loose cannon for most of 2007 and 2008 is not a symptom of her demise but rather a result of our control over her. Her violent dismantlement demonstrated the lengths to which some went in order to uncover something elusive. We have paid (for) her; therefore, we are entitled to consume her whatever way we choose. She could not hide any longer.

These new forms of media—such as Twitter and Facebook—also function as (mediated) extensions for stars to reassert agency by rebutting things written about them, defending other stars, or participating in so-called feuds. Consequently, the deconstruction of the star has become a joint process in a battle for agency. Before the emergence of the digital sphere, “[a] non-reciprocal relationship of intimacy [depended] upon the scrutiny of the celebrity…by the audience and not the other way around” (Stevenson 201). Furthermore, what was previously rare and a privilege, seemingly unmediated communication with a star, now appears possible. Yet, the audience may also be presented with false connections. Certain stars such as Rihanna and Cher arguably do their own tweeting, due to the unfiltered nature of the messages and, at times, questionable grammar and punctuation. However, Britney Spears has allegedly claimed she does not own a cell-phone and tweeted during times she could be observed on stage (“25 Things”). Therefore, we are left with a voice that cannot be verified but which we still wish to hear. This seemingly unmediated mouthpiece may also leave the star vulnerable to undermining his or her own mythical qualities by sharing things

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2 The stardom “[m]yth frames three stations …people, in the mass, expect to witness: discovery and rise, tragic fall, comeback and redemption.” Britney Spears has gone through all stages. Consequently, this is the reason why she has reappeared as a source of intrigue (Goodman 511). Therefore, while we may have violently dismantled her, we have simultaneously authenticated her even more as a star who exudes mystique.
that till then had been concealed. Online arguments and “feuds” between stars, or between stars and audience members, may result in “out of character” responses that tighten the gap between the mythical realm of the star and the audience. For instance, the unfiltered nature of Cher’s frequent tweets regarding politics and popular culture have led to her being “attacked” by Donald Trump and Nicki Minaj (Rothing, Mann). While entertaining, Cher’s remarks have made her a source of ridicule rather than intrigue (Balthazar). Therefore, advancements in the (domestic) nature of technology reconstruct the manner in which the star is regarded. For instance, Alexander Walker describes the “the ‘loss of illusion’” when the first talkies came out as it forced audiences “to do away with some of the mystique of their favorite actors and actresses as they heard them speak rather than be silent stars and, in doing so, were confronted with the realness of their idols” (223). This is not to be mistaken with a new mundaneness for celebrity; rather, it is an ongoing process that has resulted in the lifting of a veil of mystique at an accelerated pace.

Thus, we can no longer claim the audience is a passive consumer or the star is without agency and exceptionality. The emergence of social media has heightened our fetishized desire for fame in all its forms. We live in a decade where dismantling and empty fame have come to outweigh the mythical star who operates through careful concealment. When Britney Spears retreated, she not only took with her the icon of a generation but had shown how easily one of the biggest stars in the world could be dismantled. Finally, audiences were left with a desire of a mythical star who would reward each gaze with an alluring appearance.

Chapter Two
“Follow This, You Bitches”
Postmodern Parody as a Mystification Strategy

On April 19th 2012 Lady Gaga tweeted a photo of a merchandise cup from Britney Spears’ last tour. Two days later she posts a photo of a tin of “meat bandages”—inspired by her 2010 VMA meat dress—to be sold on her latest tour. The dichotomy between these two items perfectly encapsulates a current syndrome that attempts to re-mystify the female pop star. It is no coincidence Britney Spears’ exile coincides with a return to the surreal and extravagant. Spears’ dismantling, the prevalence of “blank fame,” and an increased desire to possess the star warranted the spotlight to shift back onto the star as opposed to their everyday doings off stage. It is here we meet a new postmodern female pop star; a star who has extended this stage so far that each gaze is met with a mythical appearance. This star can be possessed wholly since she is constructed purposely for us and simultaneously restores a mythical conception of stardom. 2008 marked the birth of Lady Gaga; an elusive figure whose origin appeared to be the limelight. Since then, we observe many female pop stars who ascribe to this syndrome of mystification by effacing any notion of a veridical self in favor of constructed personas who extravagantly cannibalize what came before them. The syndrome’s most extreme and diverse frontrunners—Lady Gaga, Nicki Minaj, and Lana Del Rey—operate as avatars of, what Linda Hutcheon deems, postmodern parody in an era of postmodernity. Consequently, rather than mere pastiche, the tactics of postmodern parody combined with recursivity have become a strategy perfectly suited for creating an alluring pop star who parodies established notions of stardom, race, authenticity, gender and femininity, as well as the relationship between the star and its fans. These women “[reinforce] as much as [undermine]...the conventions and presuppositions [they] appear to challenge” (Hutcheon 1-2). While the most extreme examples originate from construction, the nature of this syndrome has made it a trend that can be followed. Consequently, this has stimulated existing pop stars such as Beyoncé, Katy
Perry, Christina Aguilera, and many others to adopt constructed alter egos and present surreal appearances to heighten their mystique.

Rather than rejecting this new trend as a symptom of waning historicity and depoliticized pastiche, the women affected by this syndrome demonstrate a self-reflexivity that is able to actively critique the very era of postmodernity of which they are products. One of the most prevailing assumptions about postmodernity is that it “offers a value-free, decorative, de-historicized quotation of past forms” (Ibid., 94). According to Frederic Jameson, postmodernism has lulled audiences into a forever-present and consumerist dystopia where we do not question what is offered but are satisfied with empty stylizations—termed “pastiche.” This implies the postmodern star is merely an endless recycling of styles that are falsely presented as novel, yet unable to exert any critique or parody. Stars are speaking to us in a “dead language” which we will listen to because it is the only one we understand (Jameson 17). Conversely, Linda Hutcheon ascribes to a modality of postmodernism that distinguishes between postmodernity as a “condition” we find ourselves in, and “postmodernism” as a phenomenon which manifests itself across “many fields of cultural endeavor” (1). This re-mystification syndrome should be examined as a cultural endeavor which, through parody, exerts critique on postmodernity while simultaneously presenting a female pop star who exudes mystique by concealment. Parody is the antithesis of pastiche and “may indeed be complicitous with the values it inscribes as well as subverts, but the subversion is still there” (Ibid., 106). Therefore, while Lady Gaga, Nicki Minaj, and Lana Del Rey may be commodities, they are no less able to parody conditioned notions of stardom. Consequently, we may find ourselves in Jameson’s late capitalism; yet, that same system is not impervious to critique from within.

While some may argue that these constructed stars are no different from pop stars before them, it is their engulfment as so-called “celeactors” that differentiates them. Through
the necessary act of staging the star plays a game of cultural hide and seek. The seemingly most “authentic star is a construction” due to careful staging by the star system; however, the degree of the self that is obscured varies (Guilbert 10). The star shares similarities with the audience, yet operates in a realm that we only get to observe in rare glimpse—glimpses which have increased dramatically over the past decades. Social psychologist George Hebert Mead argued “the split between the I (the ‘veridical’ self) and the Me (the self as seen by others) is the human condition” (Rojek 11). Overt acts of staging draw us to uncover this veridical self. The public face a star constructs, possibly to mask inherent contradictions in its image, belongs to the audience. However, the postmodern “celeactor” does not possess a veridical self; she exists for and through the audience. Celeactors are constructs, often satirical in nature, who “operate as models for emulation, embody desire and galvanize issues in popular culture, dramatize prejudice…and contribute to identity formation” (Ibid., 26). They are well-suited to embody all the audience desires in a star and are portrayed by individuals fully engulfed by their mythical creations. Women like Lady Gaga, Nicki Minaj, and Lana Del Rey do not possess an original “because the original is consciously performing herself” (Maran 55). While Dyer claims “stars do not exist outside of [media] texts,” these postmodern stars ensure that each glance is met with an alluring appearance; even the most mundane actions are done fully in character (Stars 1). Postmodern parody’s “distinctive character lies in [a]…wholesale ‘nudging’ commitment to doubleness” (Hutcheon 1). Since this postmodern star does distinguish between a veridical and public self, her parody relies on “self-contradictory [and] self-undermining [statements]” of the mythic construct (Ibid.).

When “Lady Gaga” came to us in 2008, it appeared as though she had fallen out of the sky. Nobody knew who or what she was, or what her intentions were; but we knew we wanted to see more. Since her first record “Just Dance,” Gaga has incorporated a postmodern “pastness” into her constructed persona to correspond with our expectations of stardom. This
is best showcased through a short documentary she did for her *Monster Ball Tour* in 2011. The documentary appears to be hybrid of Madonna’s iconic black and white documentary *Truth or Dare* and a 1998 special (“Madonna Rising”) where Madonna revisits her old pre-fame neighborhood in New York City with Rupert Everett. Madonna—with her freshly acquired faux-British accent—meticulously reminisces and is recognized by locals who knew her back then. Yet, Gaga is not recognized by anyone from “her” past as she wanders the streets of Manhattan. Dressed in an oversized jacket with “Born This Way” embroidered on it, Gaga attempts to take us on a stroll through memory lane (see fig. 1 and 2). However, whose memory is unclear. As she wipes away a tear with her claw-like acrylic nails from underneath her Chanel sunglasses—when seeing a billboard of herself—we cannot help but feel that the whole thing emanates an odd staging and artifice akin to Gaga herself (2:05). It reveals nothing, yet it is all she offers us. There is no mention of Stefani Germanotta who attended a prestigious prep school alongside Paris Hilton (Herbert 14). There is only the pop star “Lady Gaga” and her cannibalized pastness. Through this self-reflexivity Gaga unapologetically demonstrates that the postmodern artist does not care about “the opposition between commercial and ‘authentic’ production” (Guilbert 23). In fact, to promote her upcoming album *ArtPop*, Gaga posted a photograph on Facebook with the text: “I am an artpopist. I assign art to things that are popular. I place new meaning on that which already exists.” Therefore, we see that she “does not really invent [but] arranges recuperated signifiers” (Hutcheon 22). The distinction between high and low culture is irrelevant to this new female pop star; the fusion of cannibalized elements is a self-ironizing parody which unapologetically “signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference” (Ibid., 93).

Lady Gaga also reintroduced the cinematic nature of the music video by creating overly-long videos that incorporate stardom codes to valorize myth. On the one hand, music
videos are assumed expressions of the pop star’s persona whereas, alternatively, pop stars can be seen playing “types” in videos—akin to the actor. If we examine the multitude of music videos a pop star produces, we are presented with a “multiplicity of meanings [interpreted as the star’s own agenda] and affects they embody and the attempt so to structure them that some meanings and affects are foregrounded and others are masked or displaced” (Dyer, Stars 3). For Gaga, this means creating videos that legitimize her as a pop star and occlude anything that may negate it, as is most apparent in her video for “Marry the Night.” Like the Monster Ball documentary, the video is a parody on rising to fame—cannibalizing heavily from the film Fame. The video demonstrates how the star myth operates as a “postmodernist code”—signifying some original and authentic experience—that is imitated and has become a strategy (Jameson 17). The bombardment of rapidly changing visuals seems like a stream-of-consciousness whereby each shot is a page from the fictional diary of “Lady Gaga.” However, it is Gaga’s opening monologue that unapologetically admits that the fusion between pastness and myth is what defines her construction:

When I look back on my life, it is not that I do not want to see things exactly as they happened; it is just that I prefer to remember them in an artistic way. And truthfully, the lie of it all is much more honest because I invented it…my past is an unfinished painting, and as the artist of that painting, I must fill in all the ugly holes and make it beautiful again. It is not that I have been dishonest, it is just that I loathe reality. (00:00-00:45)

If her fascination with the mythical and elusive unicorn was not indication enough, Gaga admits to the constant amending of her past to create a representation of a star who plays into all assumed of myths of stardom. If America is indeed a Baudrillardian hyperreality characterized by simulation; then, as the fabricated simulation of a pop star, Gaga has become
more real than the Real by amplifying everything inherent in stardom. In an interview with Oprah Winfrey, we learn Gaga’s mother even calls her daughter “Gaga” (53:00-53:17).

Furthermore, Gaga parodies and deconstructs gender and authenticity through the fabrication of her male alter ego “Jo Calderone”; urging the audience to assimilate another construct into an existing one. At the 2011 VMA’s “Lady Gaga” appeared as her own construct “Jo Calderone”—a male character who kept referring to Gaga as his girlfriend (see fig. 3). She later explained, “In a culture that attempts to quantify beauty with a visual paradigm...how can we fuck with the malleable minds of onlookers and shift the world’s perspective on what is beautiful?...And the answer? Drag” (“Gaga Memorandum”). Gaga tells Oprah Winfrey that prior to her performance as Calderone she lived as a man for two weeks: “I taped down my breasts. I went through a severe psychological change...If I have to do a performance art piece, confess who I truly am, that is my way” (59:00-1:00:15). Female to male drag is not novel: Mr. Calderone is very reminiscent of Cher’s male drag character from her video for “Walking in Memphis” as well as Sharleen Spiteri’s (from the band Texas) portrayal as Elvis Presley in “Inner Smile.” However, this recursivity does not negate Gaga’s aforementioned goal of parody. She has been ambiguous about gender and sexuality since the day we met her. Her extravagant nature led many to believe she was a transsexual or male-impersonator and she did not actively deny this. Furthermore, in her videos for “Bad Romance” and “Born This Way” her body is digitally altered to both emphasize femininity as well as de-naturalize it—a smaller waist, accentuated hips, and enlarged eyes in “Bad Romance” and taped down breasts and protruding horns in “Born This Way.” Through this technique of “postmodern de-naturalizing” Gaga forces us to question assumed qualities of the female star and her body “as socially and historically constructed through representation” (Ibid., 49, 143).
However, none associated with this syndrome have taken the engulfment of self to the extent of Nicki Minaj. As her surname suggests, she encompasses a ménage of schizophrenic characters who manifest themselves through her music and appearances. Nevertheless, we have never been introduced to Onika Tanya Maraj. Minaj differs from Gaga because her constructed persona, while also hailing from unintelligibility, was fabricated before her debut into mainstream popular culture. Before she became a household name, Minaj released “Go Hard” in which she told us to call her “Nicki Minaj or Lewinsky”—a name her manager suggested (“The New Now” 0:25-35). Subsequently, Minaj seeped into mainstream music as a featured artist but without any solo material until late 2010. Like Gaga, Minaj’s origins are contradictory and obscured. Initially, it was reported she hailed from Queens, NY and was a struggling rapper with a troubled childhood that resulted in her many alter egos (L. Goodman). She admits “fantasy was always [her] reality” and from a young age she found comfort by channeling different personas (Ibid.). Conversely, it was suggested she hailed from Trinidad Tobago—arguably a convenient origin to convey the exotic (Telesford). Minaj did not make efforts to clear-up this initial confusion. In her recent song “Beautiful Sinner” she even raps with an affected voice: “South Africa is where I come from…You see me come out of England at dawn. You say the pattern come from Kingston. Trinidad, Trinidad, my island.” As a result, we are presented with multiple origins as diverse as her personalities. These contradictory fragments that make up “Nicki Minaj” are akin to Jean-François Lyotard’s “petits récits”; in the postmodern absence of meta-narratives, or a totalizing origin story, we are left with “smaller and multiple narratives which seek no universalizing stabilization or legitimization” (Hutcheon 24). There is no outside to “Nicki Minaj” only a bombardment of personas and histories that may contradict each other. As Minaj explains it in her song “Beez In The Trap,” she is always “being” in the place “where you get your
money”—thus, always the consumable constructed Nicki Minaj (“Graham Norton” 23:50-24:35).

Her multiple personalities, oddly eclectic music, and changing appearance have transformed “Nicki Minaj” into a bricolage of antitheses that present something both novel and reminiscent by parodying established notions of race. While Minaj encompasses many personas, the most notable is her gay twin brother “Roman Zolanski” who “says things [she] cannot say…he is mean, vicious” (“Lopez Tonight” 2:00-2:15). In “Moment 4 Life” we see Minaj as “king Nicki” who is given words of wisdom by her British fairy godmother “Martha” while both discuss “Roman.” However, it is her self-proclaimed peroxide blonde “Barbie” persona she favors most. In photo shoots for Out magazine and her Pink Friday album, Minaj is seen with elongated legs and blonde and pink wigs (see fig. 4 and 5). Barbie is the epitome of constructed femininity as well as whiteness—arguably the antithesis of the rap community. In a curious case of art imitating life imitating art, Mattel even released its own Minaj inspired doll (see fig. 6). Especially “(peroxide) blondeness, is the ultimate sign of whiteness…[it] is racially unambiguous” and “keeps the white woman distinct from the black, brown or yellow, and at the same time it assures the viewer that the woman is the genuine article” (Dyer, Heavenly Bodies 40). However, is Minaj the genuine article or does she force us to cast her in a post-racial in-between category by fusing binaries? When Oh No They Didn’t posted a partial image of her “Starships” single cover, several commentators assumed it was Paris Hilton due to the platinum blonde hair and light skin (see fig. 7, “Guess Who?”). Similarly, the cover for Roman Reloaded shows Minaj’s body splattered with various paint colors, a blonde wig, and overdrawn eyes. Her skin is not black nor white, but radiates a pink glare (see fig. 8 and 9). Rather than demonstrating a desire for whiteness, this de-familiarization strategy presents something familiar in an unfamiliar way. For instance, when she appeared in Vogue, Minaj channeled Marilyn Monroe in a red dress, pink curls, and blue
skin (see fig. 10). Similarly to Gaga’s manipulation of the female body, Minaj emphasizes the constructed nature of racial representations and the inherent masculinity in hip-hop. As a postmodern phenomenon, she “[de-naturalizes] some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as ‘natural’…are in fact ‘cultural’” (Hutcheon 2).

Therefore, this syndrome does not racially discriminate and encourages the deconstruction and fusion of assumed concepts to construct something mythically alluring. Nicki Minaj’s playful schizophrenic persona allows her to fuse assumed binaries in her videos and since she alters herself so rapidly we do not dare look away. This dichotomy between the visual and musical is best observed in her video for “Super Bass.” Throughout the video Minaj’s constant smile is eerily artificial and constant—like a Barbie doll. The video parodies “bubblegum pop” by overflowing with bright pink; however, this is contrasted against Minaj’s explicit raps. Moreover, her raps are set to catchy dance pop music rather than what one would traditionally expect in hip-hop. Her constant re-appropriation of words like “strawberry shortcake” and “tumble-dry” to mean different things, has even garnered its own “Nicktionary” mobile application. Through her deconstruction and re-appropriation of language, music, and representations of race, Minaj “…presents what is really constructed meaning as something inherent in that which is being represented” (Ibid., 49). Similarly, her video for “Stupid Hoe” shows Minaj in an endless array of different looks cannibalizing Alice in Wonderland and Barbie; resembling Lady Gaga in “Bad Romance,” Minaj’s eyes are at times digitally enlarged and coincide with bright flashing images as she tell us affectedly we are “stupid hoes” (see fig. 11). A common theme throughout all of her videos is that the schizophrenic nature of her construction manifests itself on her face. Long lethargic gazes away from camera (while continuing to rap) are suddenly exchanged for irate outbursts or
eerie smiles. Akin to her personas, Minaj constructs a schizophrenic visual of Tourette Syndrome; a simulacrum of constructs manifested by one ever-changing female star.

Both Minaj and Gaga parody the relationship between star and fan by intensifying an imagined community and assuming a matriarchal gaze. Traditionally, the pop star and its fan share a special non-reciprocal bond whereby “[t]he mythic star [may become] the object of a cult, a religion” (Guilbert 11). Furthermore, the “remoteness of the object from the spectator means that audience relationships carry high propensity of fantasy and desire” (Rojek 25-6). Rather than reducing fans to abstraction, both Gaga and Minaj parody and intensify this bond by denomenating them with a specific name and create a niche within their existing fanbases. Gaga has her “Little Monsters” and Nicki Minaj has her “Barbz.” Every win at an award show is credited as a joint effort by the respective community and the star herself. Especially in the digital age, we foster imagined communities—as termed by Benedict Anderson—surrounding stars who function as nodal points in our lives. Digital media is a vehicle for expression and identification; we validate a system in which we give meaning to doing anything possible online—often the scrutinizing of stars. Consequently, while the audience may keep a watchful eye, we observe Gaga and Minaj attempting the same. Nicki Minaj is head “Barbie” and Lady Gaga has adopted the moniker “Mother Monster”; both vigilantly oversee and address their disciples. Additionally, Lady Gaga has created her own social-networking site littlemonsters.com; a community not unlike Facebook where she casts a digital matriarchal gaze over her monsters. Furthermore, the promotional poster for her Born This Way Ball shows a medieval castle over which we see Gaga’s digitally deformed head bursting through the clouds (see fig. 12). As a result, Lady Gaga, as well as Nicki Minaj, parody their status as stars by actively embracing the deified role the star may occupy for its most fixated followers in society.
Also part of this syndrome is “Lana Del Rey,” who provides a barrage of nostalgic 1950s and 60s imagery to allude to a lost sense of Americana; a nostalgia that supposedly predates the artificial constructs of contemporary popular culture. She differs from Gaga and Minaj in her rather sultry and demure character. Del Rey has put herself in a precarious position by affiliating with a musical genre grounded in artistic authenticity—“indie music.” Yet, Del Rey is the antithesis of everything she proposes to embody. Her use of excessive nationalism demonstrates how “[p]ostmodern texts consistently use and abuse actual historical documents” (Hutcheon 87). Furthermore, it has transformed her constructed persona into a parody of authenticity whether she chose to or not. Born Elizabeth Grant, “Lana Del Rey” came under scrutiny when it was revealed Grant was the daughter of a wealthy businessman, allegedly had plastic surgery, and her persona was entirely fabricated (Hopper). While Del Rey briefly lived the bohemian trailer park lifestyle she alluded to, she only did so after signing a record deal and receiving a $10,000.00 advance (Sowray). Rather than validating artistic authenticity, this highlights the carefully outlined construction and incubation period from which Grant emerged as Del Rey. Del Rey freely admits the name was inspired by the “glamour of the seaside” and she—or her handlers—wanted something to “shape the music towards” (“Meet Lana Del Rey”). Yet, she does not elaborate on Elizabeth Grant. Instead, she tells us, “I had a vision of making my life a work of art” (“Lana Del Rey Revealed” 00:57-01:05). She continues with what may be the motto for this syndrome: “Find someone who has a life that you want and figure out how they got it. Read books, pick your role models wisely, find out what they did, and do it” (Ibid., 2:42-2:52). Consequently, while Del Rey may appear very dissimilar to Gaga or Minaj, all are different sides of the same false coin. Gaga and Minaj seem overly polished and blind us with their sparkle; yet, Del Rey has made her coin look older in order to make it appear more genuine than it really is.
Del Rey’s most overt display of parody is her video for “National Anthem” in which she warns she is “blurring the lines between real and the fake.” In the song she desperately pleads to be “[our] national anthem” and asks if we do not know “who [we are] dealing with?” If her public reception is any indication, the audience is not sure. In the video, Del Rey re-incarnates herself as both Marilyn Monroe and former first lady Jacqueline Kennedy—arguably epitomes of American femininity—complete with a dress inspired by the iconic Chanel suit (see fig. 13 and 14). The video is filled with Americana-inspired imagery shown through a Zapruder-style filter. Additionally, Del Rey acts as a first lady to an African American president with two daughters; the irony is not lost that she is presenting us with a nostalgic parody of contemporary America. The postmodern female pop star realizes “everything has been said before, there is no point in creating if [her] work constitutes nothing more than another (necessarily boring) example of this or that classified type of artistic creation” (Guilbert 21). Yet, since parody is “doubly coded” by both legitimizing and subverting that which it parodies, Del Rey’s contradictory persona hypnotizes audiences for now (Hutcheon 101). Nevertheless, viewers also appear critical of the supposed authenticity she is attempting to convey through excessive nationalism because her constructed nature negates it. Del Rey may be aware of this since in the video there is a brief shot of her hand which has “trust no one” tattooed on it (5:43). Consequently, this is precisely the result of the video. As chapter three will demonstrate, she cannot be our first lady since she cannot be trusted; yet, this has not deterred the audience from consuming her.

Since this syndrome manifests itself both physically and cognitively, it is not strictly exclusive to those female stars who originate from construction. Instead, it has become a trend that has inspired many others to also adopt alter egos, overly-long cinematic music videos, surreal fashion, and an overall return to the performativity of musical theater. This is done to return the audience to a state of reverence and curiosity for the female star who exudes
mystique through obvious concealment; yet, resists dismantling due to her constructed nature. While some have named it the “the Gaga effect,” and Lady Gaga is certainly the main instigator of this syndrome, it is not novel (Moré; Nika; “Pop girls”). In fact, it rests upon the cannibalization and subsequent amplification of what has come before. For instance, in 1992 Madonna introduced “Dita,” a hypersexual dominatrix who shamelessly explored female sexuality on her Erotica album. The use of alter egos is an alternative both to the veridical and public face of the star; it is an opportunity for the star to experiment out of character. However, this does not imply the audience will welcome these personas. Even Britney Spears created “Mona Lisa” in her video for “Do Somethin’” and a 2005 demo wherein she suggests the rebellious Mona Lisa has been there all along and is finally taking control—as we have seen in chapter one, this did not end well for either one. Yet, not until Lady Gaga do we observe such an overt and wide scale adoption of personas which partly or fully engulf the star combined with surreal appearances.

While this syndrome includes a return to surreal appearances, a common theme has become the overt hiding of hair with outrageous wigs that resist any notion of authenticity. When during her Farewell Tour in 2002 Cher told all “new girls coming up” to “follow this, you bitches,” she may have meant down into her wig cellar and wardrobe (0:11:50-12:00). While make-up is also a tool for concealment, it is often used to intensify what is already there. Thus, someone’s eyes are made to “pop.” Within this syndrome, however, the wig shamelessly obscures something perceived to be natural with something clearly artificial. While the wig can be used invisibly, it has become a tool to showcase the contradiction and inherent construction of the overly glamorous female pop star. This overall return to extravagance also signifies something more pervasive about contemporary celebrity culture. If the shallowness of postmodern consumer culture is indeed the reason for the valorization of blank fame, the dismantling of Britney Spears, and overall demystification of the star, these
newly-constructed pop stars have inspired others to reinstate a conception of the pop star whereby appearance is always excessively constructed. As such, the most extreme fashions of Cher, Grace Jones, Madonna, and even David Bowie have become a continued inspiration for the contemporary female pop star. Women like Rihanna and Fergie—both are stage names—may have not have embraced alter egos, nor did they originate from complete construction. Yet, in a Gaga-era, both have adopted attire on and off stage that is significantly more exotic than before 2008 (see fig. 15-19).

Moreover, other female pop stars, who did not originate from construction, have chosen to fully embrace both the return to extravagance as well as fabricated personas. Katy Perry—not her given name—is an example of someone who demonstrates the success of construction and amplification. Perry debuted as a straightforward brunette pop singer in early 2008 whose most daring quality appeared to be kissing girls and liking it. Yet, since her second album she has transformed herself into a “Candy Princess” who is rarely seen without her florescent wigs and whose polka dot dresses have been replaced by lavish costumes inspired by fruits and candy (see fig. 20-25). Also, Perry has constructed a persona—with her own Facebook and Twitter—named “Kathy Beth Terry”; a social misfit who in interviews urges audiences to embrace individuality and ends up the life of the party in Perry’s over eight minute video for “Last Friday Night” (see fig. 26). Like Lady Gaga telling us we are “Born This Way,” the tagline for Perry’s latest concert-film *Part of Me* reads: “Be yourself and you can be anything.” This emphasis on both innate distinctiveness and fluid performativity is rather ironic when coming from fabricated personas. Late 2008 also saw the birth of “Sasha Fierce,” a persona created by Beyoncé Knowles, whose “fierceness” exuded from her non-organic metallic costumes and her fiery demeanor. Prior to the release of her album *I Am... Sasha Fierce*, Beyoncé’s handlers created the website whoissashafierce.com for the audience to speculate “who” Sasha Fierce actually was. During appearances as Fierce, Knowles wore a
metallic glove to resemble an artificial appendage—thereby highlighting the constructed nature of the persona (see fig. 27-30). Beyoncé has since noted she “killed her” and is now “able to merge the two”; in response, MTV.com created a memorial video for “Sasha Fierce” (Crosley). Fierce’s demise, however, has not deterred Beyoncé from continuing to embrace elaborate costumes. In 2010, Christina Aguilera also attempted to follow suit by introducing “Madam X” in her video for “Not Myself Tonight” from her album {Bi~OII~iC}. However, the persona and music video drew greatly from Fritz Lang’s 1927 film Metropolis—a highly influential film for many female pop stars, including Lady Gaga. As a result, Aguilera was heavily criticized for “copying” Lady Gaga (Stryker).

While Aguilera, Perry, and Knowles exemplify the affiliative nature of this remystification syndrome, there are also other pop singers who are not as widely celebrated but still navigate closely to construction. In 2009 we were introduced to “Ke$ha”; an overnight sensation due to her superficial carefree disco persona. As a stylized rebel, Ke$ha is often seen with glitter all over her body and her signature excessive make-up. For instance, her video for “We R Who We R”—a proposed self-love anthem to combat bullying—shows her in a leotard of shattered glass and rhinestones for eyebrows (see fig. 31). Like Lady Gaga, Ke$ha has a fascination with unicorns. Her video “Blow” shows her shooting rainbow guns in a room filled with unicorns dressed in suits. However, like many other women in this trend, Ke$ha has completely obscured any sense of a veridical self with a thick layer of glitter and rhinestones. Footage of Ke$ha pre-$ shows a plainly clothed brunette girl, rather than a slender “glitterized” disco princess (Greenblatt). The irreconcilability of the construct and the individual that preceded it leaves audiences with a puzzling, yet intriguing persona. Finally, there is Natalia Kills—born Natalia Keery—who is signed to the same record label as Lady Gaga. Kills, whose accent is a hybrid of American and British, has fabricated a persona that embodies “feminine brutality” (“Need to Meet” 2:00-05). Not unlike Gaga, she utilizes many
“dark pop” themes of poison and murder that parody consumer culture. Her video for “Wonderland” shows Kills as red riding hood being forced into a manor where she is fed a raw heart and cupcakes with pills on them while those around her wear white-rabbit masks—signifying submission to temptation. The video interposes actual riot footage and flashes of dystopian messages such as “it’s all lies,” “there is no happy ending,” and “we are all alone.” Similarly, her video for “Free” parodies the emotional attachment towards money and shows Kills with a glove tightly around her throat, as well as with her hair on fire while fanning it with money (see fig. 33). Kills’ videos may be the most overt parodies of Jameson’s late capitalist society yet. Thankfully, the postmodern female pop star is willing to open our eyes while simultaneously forcing us to eat her poisoned cupcakes.

Kitsch? Perhaps. Nonetheless, the women who define this syndrome demonstrate that consumer culture, stardom, assumed notions of race, gender, musical authenticity, as well as postmodernity itself can be parodied by even the most fabricated pop stars. Simultaneously, this syndrome presents audiences with an exaggerated version of the pop star at all times: a star who conceals by always presenting an extravagant persona. Consequently, she does not appear to allow for dismantling. If “[m]yth is forged by mankind to elucidate mystery,” then parody and postmodern construction have become strategies to recreate that mystery (Guilbert 8). However, while this re-mystification syndrome has succeeded in heightening the star’s mythical qualities, it has also made us hesitant to trust them.
Chapter Three  
“Ambivalent Dreams”  
The Constructed Star’s Navigation Between Authenticity and Allure

In 2009 Lady Gaga wore an outfit made out of Kermit the frog as social commentary because she “[hates] fur, and [does not] wear fur” (Andrews). She subsequently proceeded to wear a “meatdress” and various real fur coats. When some voiced their dismay and PETA labeled her a “turncoat,” Gaga retaliated: “You see a carcass, I see a museum pièce de résistance” (Mackey; “Furgate”). The criticism female stars associated with this syndrome have since received alongside their chart success signifies something pervasive about our current sensibility. If Cher, Madonna, Britney Spears, and so on, are truly pop culture royalty, then these newly constructed pop stars are the jesters—or postmodern tricksters—at the court. They succeed in parodying those before them from within the confines of the castle and are highly entertaining but cannot be trusted. The Jungian trickster “cannot be tied down: [she] is a shape shifter, appearing at one moment in one form, only to transmute and make [her] next entrance in quite another” (Izod 91). This versatility is instrumental in bringing about social-change and beguiling the audience. However, the extremity of their parody and construction also generates ambivalence when these women try to assert sincerity—through anti-bullying campaigns, or efforts to restore faith in the American Dream in a time of social unrest. As a result, this syndrome has transformed into a category in itself; one that can be critiqued and passed over for something else—something seemingly more authentic. Rather than accusing the audience of hypocrisy for wanting both a mythical star but also dismantling her—thereby undoing that very mystique—we should see this as a symptom of our current sensibility. One which has generated a post-postmodernism or “metamodernism” which navigates between modern autonomy and postmodern irony like a pendulum. This has presently led to construction fatigue since these newly-constructed female pop stars have taken their tricks to
such extremities that we desire some form of authenticity to compensate for all the enticing lies we have been told.

The female trickster in Jungian theory is a recurring figure across many fields such as religion, dreams, and currently popular culture; it is marked by a duality that “consists of all possible opposites” (Izod 91). The trickster is able to simultaneously represent “both the animal and the divine; it is a figure that manages to be both inferior and superior to humanity” (Ibid.). Therefore, trickster mythology is applicable to the dichotomy between the desired mythical star and the dismantled star as a human being. Traditionally, the trickster is referred to as male since men could “violate society’s norms, [act] the awkward prankster,” and behave erratically without necessarily being ostracized (Ibid., 104). However, the trickster is also perfectly suited to be embodied by the female star who professes great agency as this “confirms that she is not to be taken as pliable” and bends only to her own whim (Ibid., 99). Like the trickster, the postmodern constructed female pop star is marked by duality, contradiction, and unpredictability in attempt to bring about social change. That is, social change that does not affect her success negatively. For instance, Gaga may advocate free-speech but her all her albums were initially only released in “clean” format to censor swearing. The desired “explicit” version was not made available until months after the initial version had been purchased by fans. Yet, the postmodern female trickster is not to be confused with a late capitalist siren who lures audiences into despair. Instead, both the trickster and constructed pop star indiscriminately alternate between diverse shapes and roles before discarding them and moving on to another incarnation. Therefore, while socially relevant, the trickster is not to be trusted because she possess no authenticity (which is not pertinent to her parody). As we have seen in chapter two, this mystification syndrome manifests itself not merely through the fabrication of personas but also a simulacrum-like array of appearances whereby each incarnation effaces or contradicts the previous. Like the
trickster, each image is charged “with an energy which gives [it] what appears to be an independent existence of [its] own” (Ibid., 98). Our female tricksters are not trapped in a particular type but have the ability to shed it when they please. Women like Gaga, Minaj, and even Katy Perry and Beyonce demonstrate the ease with which they shift between transformations.

The trickster is often regarded as a negative figure since she cannot be trusted and arouses discomfort since to her “tricks” demonstrate inherent problems in society. John Izod observes the trickster “…is a god of thieves and cheats, but at the same time he is also, in his role of messenger, a god of revelation” (Ibid., 91). While we should not be so lofty as to ascribe the constructed star god-like status, many of the women who define this syndrome could be regarded as “messengers” through their attempt at critique on contemporary culture through parody. Like Lady Gaga who uses postmodern de-naturalizing to manipulate the female body, or schizophrenic Nicki Minaj who negates racial and musical stereotyping, the postmodern female trickster presents “an awkward, uncomfortable personality as well as a persuasive, amusing prankster and sexual polymorph” (Ibid., 99). The fundamental tactic the trickster, as a true jester, has at its disposal is humor—thus, parody (Pickles). The postmodern female star does not exist for the self but rather for and through the audience. Thus, this syndrome initially surfaced in response to a growing desire for a romanticized mythic star in an era of dismantling. However, these women then proceeded to reflect on other problematic issues in America society through parody. As we shall see, it is here where conflict may arise since the star’s attempts at parody have become so extreme—thereby “going too far”—that intersecting parody with possible sincerity leads to a cautious and hesitant audience. Consequently, she presents tales of upward mobility and self-love to instill the audience with positive aspirations and concurrently play into myths of stardom. Yet, we are unable to verify
her claims because we cannot verify her—the postmodern construct is irreconcilable with what dismantling reveals.

If stars indeed “embody social values that are to some degree in crisis,” this syndrome did not only emerge to protect a glamorous image of those in the spotlight (qtd. in Dyer, Stars 25). Instead, it attempted to protect an elaborate system of signification in a time of economic and social unrest when it would reasonably have been welcomed as escapist and restorative. Since 2008, the United States has found itself in era of pessimism that substituted dreams with the harsh realities of declining upward mobility (the economic recession), exclusion, and loneliness (the wave of teen suicides). The prevalence of a fetishization of fame combined with the struggles of everyday life have made “access to stardom” something for many to daydream about on the subway (Guilbert 149). Show business is one of the most prevalent fantasies since it “crystallizes the frustrations of the average American much better than the corporate world” (Ibid.). Given that stars are always present, stardom assures audiences the mythical American Dream exists and toil is rewarded. As a female pop star, Madonna has often been associated with this definition since her global success is a verifiable tale of upward mobility—regardless of her subsequent re-inventions. Simultaneously, she presents a self-governing “independent feminist [who] is her own fairy godmother, and in no way depends upon some Prince Charming to succeed” (Ibid., 152). Madonna demonstrates that “the idea of self-creation [is] a core myth of American identity” (Campbell and Kean 24). Consequently, she can be “[believed] in…as you believe in an idol (in the original sense)” who proves that determination equals power for all, including women (Guilbert 89). Similarly, women like Lady Gaga and Nicki Minaj urge us to believe that the possibility to transform oneself and rise upward is still very much alive; “[b]etter than anyone, the mythic pop star or movie star makes Americans dream” (Ibid., 149). However, while the constructed female pop star is mythic, she does not truly embody the American Dream. Rather, she
incorporates it into her construction in an attempt to valorize herself within the myth of stardom.

Consequently, rather than presenting idols to believe in, this syndrome introduced alluring tricksters who instill questionable tales of hope. What differentiates Madonna from the newly-constructed star is that her vertiginous rise to fame is not part of an elaborate portrayal of parody—thereby ascribing her a degree of authenticity these constructs lack. Richard Dyer notes that “the value embodied by a star is…harder to reject as ‘impossible’ or ‘false’ because the star’s existence guarantees the existence of [that] value” (Stars 20). This applies to stars like Madonna and Cher who do not originate from complete fabrication but still exude mystique. Yet, can the same truly be said for the star who not only originates from construction but who operates through contradictory dualities—whereby dreams that seem unrealizable at present are parodied? Through the use of the American Dream as a postmodern code that can be imitated to heighten mystique, “[t]he trickster keeps an older state of consciousness in our minds” (Izod 99-100). Consequently, women like Lana Del Rey and Lady Gaga initially secure chart success by intriguing the audience with a contradictory pastness—such as Gaga’s cannibalized parody of Fame and Del Rey’s bohemian trailer park lifestyle. Yet, since the only one to authenticate this pastness is an elusive contradictory figure, they fail in providing the audience with genuine hope. Their attempt to reinforce threatened values simultaneously displaces them due to the star’s constructed nature. Consequently, while these new stars may appear to be self-made women, they are foremost self-made stars who may not give meaning to what they attempt to signify. In times of despair, two of the most dominant modes of affinity the audience feels for the star are identification and projection (Tudor 80). However, we have since looked past the bright light of the projector and discovered that the screen is not as silver as we hoped.
Consequently, we observe a present desire for alluring idols who concurrently possess a degree of authenticity that makes them worthy of aspiration. However, the women associated with this mystification syndrome have since taken their attempts at parody to such extremity that any attempt at authenticity (through sincerity) may be perceived as an element of parody. Firstly, both the reception and backlash the mythical star has received demonstrates that the audience is not a homogenous whole. Chart success and global renown for the mythical star highlight that many accept her postmodern de-naturalizing as alluring. Conversely, others have taken her parody at face-value, or have since grown tired of her endless contradictions, thereby reacting ambivalently. For instance, when Lady Gaga recently tweeted “#PopSingersDontEat” she sparked widespread outrage and was accused of promoting eating disorders. Yet, many failed to note it was “pop singers” who do not eat; with such widespread dreams of stardom this technicality appeared irrelevant. While the tweet was arguably satirical in nature and parodied common assumptions of the star’s body, it demonstrates the problematic nature of idolizing someone who operates through continuous contradiction. Indeed, Lady Gaga has often noted she enjoys time in the kitchen and even had her own “Cooking with Gaga” segment on *Alan Carr: Chatty Man*. Therefore, while backlashes are common, especially when preceded by a rapid rise to popularity, the fall may be just as steep. For someone who portrays herself as a role model for individuality and self-love—but is completely constructed herself—such a small, yet extreme, form of parody may be perceived as “going too far.” Gaga told Barbara Walters: “I try to be a teacher to my fans…I want to liberate them” (2:30-2:50). While such attempts at sincerity initially appeared inspiring—although vague enough to be appropriated in a multitude of ways—they have become mangled with the uncomfortable theatrics of the trickster.

Captivatingly awkward costumes are welcomed; however, satirical portrayals of problematic societal matters—upward mobility, eating disorders, religion, and bullying—are
met with hesitance and possible scrutiny. The postmodern star who ventures onto the terrain of these “no joking matters” through parody and deconstruction may be met with criticism. However, in doing so, also demonstrates she is not merely part of a “powerless elite.” For instance, during the 2012 Grammy Awards Nicki Minaj performed a catholic exorcism of her alter ego “Roman Zolanski” on stage. While religious groups were quick to condemn Minaj’s satire, numerous fans also took to Twitter to voice dismay (Chaney). The Washington Post observed that fans “First…were confused, then amused and then just plain angry (Judoku). Similarly, a poll by VH1 revealed nearly fifty percent thought the performance was “too controversial and very offensive” (George). In a nation that cannot wholly decide what its true beliefs are, parody of religious imagery is not novel. Years earlier, Madonna monopolized religious parody; for her this presented a semiotic rebellion against her catholic upbringing and the inherent imagery associated with her name. Yet, Minaj cannot claim the same. Instead, the backlash she received demonstrates that too much confusion leads to frustration and an even greater desire to dismantle the star. Nonetheless, Minaj’s performance is a perfect allegory for the trickster’s postmodern satire since religion, like extreme parody, “causes us both pleasure and pain, and forces us to experience more fully both the light and the dark, promising both ecstasy and despair” (Izod 100). We find pleasure in the mythical image of the star and discomfort in the fact that this newly-constructed star does not allow for dismantling. As a result, she asks us to accept this apparent dichotomy as an underlying structure that governs the feeling of exceptionality the star generates. This may create unease, but at least we will have a mythical star to comfort us. Like the anti-bullying campaign we shall subsequently examine, the discomfort Minaj inflicted upon her audience (which rebounded back onto herself by way of critique) forced audiences to confront inherent unresolved dichotomies in society by holding up a mirror with a distorted reflection.
Furthermore, the wave of (gay) teen suicides over the past two years inspired the women who define this syndrome to emphasize self-love in a barrage of anthems to console a postmodern loneliness. Yet, their simultaneous insistence on parody has made it problematic to distinguish sincerity, which demands authenticity, from construction. Throughout most of 2009 through 2011 a wave of teen suicides, mostly related to bullying and anti-gay sentiment, swept across schools in the United States. As we have seen, it is common for female stars to have gay followings. Consequently, many of the women associated with this syndrome started openly supporting organizations such as the “It Gets Better” project and releasing songs of self-love: “Born This Way” (Lady Gaga), “Firework” (Katy Perry), “We R Who We R” (Ke$ha), “Raise Your Glass” (P!nk), and several others. Since stars not only embody social values under threat but also compensate for qualities lacking in people’s lives, this self-love trend functioned as a strategy to instill hope and optimism (Dyer, Stars 28). As a result, we see these stars further embracing their assumed role as intimate confidante. Alex Hawgood observes, “Together, these artists represent a new wave of young (and mostly straight) women…providing the soundtrack for a generation of gay fans coming to terms with their identity in a time of turbulent and confusing cultural messages.” In an emotional sit-down interview named “Inside the Outside,” Lady Gaga describes herself as a “perpetual underdog” who was once thrown in the trash in high school (27:00-28:43). She confesses, “…it took me to get to know my fans and to see similar struggles in them for me to access that wound in myself…the fans have been a key to my heart unlocking things about myself…that make me a greater songwriter” (28:44-29:11). Her comments are perfectly timed in the current social landscape. She is the ideal example of someone who has risen above her bullied past and embodies “It Gets Better”; that is, if what she articulates is to be believed. While such attempts at sincerity are not deceitful tricks, “Lady Gaga” did not exist until 2008 and has gone to extreme lengths to obscure and de-authorize the bullied Stefani Germanotta for the
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audience. Therefore, it seems problematic for a syndrome, where effacing the self is paramount, to convey aspirations of embracing oneself.

Similarly, many of these “mostly straight” women not only attempted to convey sincerity by recalling stories of high school torment but also through alluding to bisexuality. When homophobia suddenly became an unavoidable national issue, these stars appeared to be in a state of sexual flux. Like the trickster, they demonstrate that “when social pressures intersect with libidinous energies, they take part in shaping the archetypal images that result” (Izod 103). Katy Perry hinted at bisexuality in her song “I Kissed a Girl.” Ke$hha tells Out she “likes people” and does not want to label herself (1:15-1:20). Lady Gaga admitted having sexual relations with women to Barbara Walters (5:25-5:30). Finally, Nicki Minaj noted she is content with being labeled bisexual but will not elaborate on it (Kondo). These stars do not simply celebrate sexuality but play with it through ambivalence; thereby proposing an identifiable figure to heighten their relationship with the audience. Baudrillard may opine that “[stars] embody one single passion only: the passion for images, and the immanence of desire in the image” (56). However, the emotional attachment fans foster to the star—and the extent to which these women are willing to go to intensify this bond—goes beyond the visual. Like Perry and Minaj, Gaga has been accused of using the gay community to sell records—another trick in an elaborate portrayal of parody. She responded by saying it was “one of the most ridiculous statements anyone can make about [her] as a person” and that “social justice and equality” where the “top things” in her life (qtd. in Kinser). Regardless of (unverifiable) truth, these women constantly amend their personas in order to present followers with something recognizable and desirable. Lady Gaga explains Born This Way as “being reborn over and over again until you find and become that unique and special person inside of you” and that “[s]ome people were not born to wear masks, but [she] was” (Ibid.). While their dismantled personas may prove irreconcilable with their statements, this does not imply the postmodern
construct is consciously disingenuous. Nonetheless, she is asking us to take her word for it, but some have learned not to trust her word. Like Lana Del Rey pleading to be our “National Anthem,” Lady Gaga screams in “Government Hooker” she can be anything we want her to be, as long as we “pay [her]."

However, none of the women part of this syndrome have been as publicly criticized for the irreconcilability between their constructed and dismantled personas as newcomer Lana Del Rey. Del Rey proposed to bridge the gap between authenticity and extreme artifice by navigating in-between the two. However, in doing so, she was unfavorably deemed the greatest trickster of all—leading to both public scrutiny but also incredible chart success. Before her infamous debut on Saturday Night Live, Del Rey was already an internet sensation as an elusive bohemian and Americana-inspired songstress. She appeared to be a counterweight to the extreme costumes and personas in the current pop music landscape; a breath of fresh air in hazy cloud of parody. Accordingly, many eagerly anticipated her debut on SNL; Del Rey herself even noted, “I am excited if it goes well. If it does not, I am going to kill myself!” (qtd. in Shepard). Suffice to say, it did not go well. Del Rey failed to live up to her own hype; her performance was awkward and not up to the standards of what one would expect from a musical outing on one of the nation’s most watched programs. Subsequently, viewers and news outlets alike voiced their outrage. Singer Juliette Lewis tweeted (and has since removed) that seeing Lana Del Rey was like “watching a 12 year old in their bedroom when they are pretending to sing and perform. #signofourtimes” (Emami). If Minaj forced unease upon the audience with her Grammy performance, Lana Del Rey, as a “pretend singer,” did the same—consciously or not—by making the audience’s desire for authenticity the very thing her persona appeared to parody.

Therefore, it is interesting that a nation often accused of being so grounded in a postmodern condition has grown so critical of its own constructs. When after her performance
it came to light Del Rey’s persona was as constructed as her extravagant peers, she quickly transformed from a “Del Rey disaster” into a “Del Rey dilemma.” Kristin Wiig later parodied Del Rey on SNL in April and noted, “Based on the public’s response, I must have…clubbed a baby seal while singing the Taliban national anthem” (38:47-38:55). She continued, “In this age of dangerous school bullying, you have sent an important message: if you think someone is weird, you should criticize them as much as possible” (40:42-40:51). The hostile reactions someone as demure as Del Rey managed to elicit demonstrate that she may have been the last straw in a trend of alluring women who refuse to be dismantled. Consequently, she only added to a growing craving for a cultural authenticity today’s constructs cannot offer. She proves that authenticity remains a “perpetual dilemma for both the celebrity and the audience” (Rojek 17). The audience desires an intriguing persona but simultaneously wishes to deconstruct her in order to unearth some coherent structure that governs her proposed uniqueness and valorizes the mystique we feel she exudes. While scrutinized, Del Rey was not exiled nor did she kill herself. Instead, her notoriety secured her top five chart positions all over the world for her debut album. When authenticity proved absent, what remained was a moderately intriguing trickster. A trickster who forced audiences to oscillate between a desire for authenticity or forgive and settle: “The songs are good. Who cares?” (Mullally). Finally, Del Rey may have been forgiven and her music celebrated; however, the outrage her construction elicited was a very loud warning beacon for the future female pop star. She may tempt us with tricks, but audiences have grown fatigued by her construction.
Conclusion
Metamodern Construction Fatigue

Finally, the reception of this syndrome presents a paradigm for the subsequent development of both the star system and American culture; a collective post-postmodern era that navigates between a desire for the modern autonomy of art and postmodern irony. For the star system, this means that it is our desire for the spectacle which ultimately distorts it and ascribes different meanings to it; we want the allure, but we desire to deconstruct it without it disappearing simultaneously. Consequently, the refusal of this new generation of constructed postmodern pop stars to be dismantled has since led to construction fatigue and the search for something different. The ambivalent desire for both mystique and dismantling is not due to some hypocritical desire on the part of the audience but instead a symptom of a new sensibility that is not strictly postmodern, but oscillates between modernist codes and postmodern parody. At times, it may even attempt to reconcile both; however, since no fusion between the two could fully encompass either sensibility, we are left in an ambivalent state—as reception of some of the women who define this syndrome demonstrates. This ambivalent, yet insatiable, desire has been deemed a characteristic of “metamodernism.”

Metamodernism assumes that the new millennium is characterized by a pendulum that swings from modernist to postmodern tendencies depending on what the audience desires. Like Nicki Minaj’s schizophrenic glances, metamodernism is a continuous oscillation between “hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy…totality and fragmentation” (Vermeulen and Van Den Akker 5). As increased scrutiny for the constructed female star demonstrates, whenever “enthusiasm swings toward fanaticism, gravity pulls it back toward irony; the moment its irony sways toward apathy, gravity pulls it back toward enthusiasm” (Ibid., 6). The romantic myths of stardom, discovery, and rags-to-riches signify an authentic lost modern experience that is now imitated and parodied by these constructs. Conversely, the constructed nature of these mythical stars
demonstrates we cannot fully return to either sensibility and draws focus to “what it cannot signify in its own terms (that what is often called the sublime, the uncanny, the ethereal, the mysterious, and so forth)” (Ibid., 10). In other words, that which makes the star exude mystique. Therefore, we are forced to use (meta)modern romanticism to explain qualities, such as charismatic authority, that dismantlement and deconstruction cannot uncover. Consequently, we are persuaded “to believe there are matters Reason cannot account for” (Ibid.). This is why some stars fail and some succeed and why constructed stars have since become increasingly scrutinized. The irreconcilability between their dismantled and constructed personas reveals an attempt to (artificially) realize something romantic that can never be fully realized. Why is it only the constructed “Lady Gaga” that appears mythical and not Stefani Germannota? Why is this down-to-earth all American girl Britney Spears worthy of being a global icon? Why are women like Madonna and Cher able to move an audience to tears simply by stepping into a spotlight? These are postmodern questions we can only partly satisfy with a modern or metamodern answer.

If this is the condition we find ourselves in, it appears the pendulum has been swinging greatly towards the postmodern since the emergence of this syndrome. However, it has since swung away from the parody of the visual spectacle in favor of something seemingly more modern or “authentic”—something these constructs cannot provide. We now find ourselves in a state of construction fatigue after reveling in an endless array of sparkles without truth. While these constructed stars defy existing binaries and attempt to deconstruct assumed notions and concepts—initially placing them outside categorization—they have since transformed into a new category that can be scrutinized. The recent backlash against this constructed star reveals that her forced oscillation between (attempts at) sincerity and parody is unable to produce a balance that satisfies the entire audience. This is not to suggest the audience no longer craves the extravagant mythical star; however, some have become
ambivalent of her overt construction and desire a more authentic counter-weight. If her enormous success over the past year is any indication, the person most able to supply this authenticity is Adele. As we know, each star is subject to a degree of staging. However, Adele seemed to have satisfied the hunger for a pop star who still moderately defies and intrigues—she is not a size-zero, nor is she American—but appears to maintain an apparent authenticity and sincerity. Her melancholy love songs of heartbreak are relatable in times of social and financial unrest. Additionally, there is no need for her to spray fireworks from a metallic bra or yield to extreme portrayals of parody; we already have stars waiting at the other end of the pendulum willing to oblige. Perhaps it was Adele’s immense success that prompted Lana Del Rey to attempt an Americanized recreation of this authenticity—still, her construction only transformed her into an overt parody of authenticity itself. The backlash she faced reveals that by that time the pendulum had already swung away too far.

Thus, this signals a new dawn in American popular culture and the pop music landscape. At the present time, the engulfment of this mystification syndrome and its postmodern constructs have led the audience to seek out a past(ness) that proves a more authentic experience. Even Madonna has returned to MDNA for her latest album and tour—the drug that is Madonna herself and everything we want to see from her. There is no new persona to accompany her album but an intertextual revisiting of all the past Madonnas we have gotten to know while still appearing as something novel. Perhaps in an attempt to control and supply the “authentic” gaze the audience desires, she has even permitted glances at a Madonna in sweatpants without make-up to a select few by rehearsing with fans present on her latest tour—something we have not seen in this mystification syndrome. Stars like Madonna and Cher are not superior to the constructed mythical star; all are well-crafted stars who carefully respond to what the audiences desires. However, their endurance and longevity has given women like Madonna and Cher the ability to swing with the pendulum. Since they
do not originate from overt construction, they retain a degree of authenticity. Still, their ability to endure and succeed in the entertainment industry has transformed them into icons that we assume naturally exude mystique. Consequently, they are not confined to the same category as the women who define this syndrome. If Madonna senses we have become more discriminatory of postmodern construction, she can forgo a new persona and perform without make-up. However, the audience will not allow the postmodern constructed star to shed her construction since it is all she has offered us. We doubt her attempts at sincerity since she lacks the authenticity and longevity of those before her. As a result, the future will certainly remember the star who can successfully navigate between mystique and authenticity.

Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that through her parody on contemporary society, the postmodern constructed star has generated an interest in the past. Regardless of whether this past is out of reach or not, metamodernism urges both the star and its audience to “pursue a horizon that is forever receding” (Ibid., 12). Finally, when “Dita” wrote SEX for Madonna, a book filled with explicit stories and photographs, the last line on the first page reads: “Nothing in this book is true. I made it all up.” If she wants to be remembered, we may expect a similar line from the constructed female pop star in the future. Yet, that does not mean what she has told us was not what we wanted and needed to hear.
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Fig. 1 & 2. Gaga wandering the streets for her *Monster Ball* documentary.

Fig. 3. Gaga as Jo Calderone for Japanese *Vogue Hommes*.

Fig. 4. Nicki Minaj for *Out* Magazine.

Fig. 5. Nicki Minaj on the cover of *Pink Friday*.

Fig. 6. Minaj Barbie doll.

Fig. 7. Minaj on the cover of “Starships.”

Fig. 8. Cover for *Pink Friday: Roman Reloaded*.
Fig. 9. Imagery for Pink Friday: Roman Reloaded.

Fig. 10. Minaj for Vogue.

Fig. 11. Minaj in “Stupid Hoe.”

Fig. 12. Promotional poster for The Born This Way Ball.

Fig. 13. Del Rey in “National Anthem.”

Fig. 14. Promotional image for “National Anthem.”

Fig. 15. Fergie in a “Lego Dress” in 2011.

Fig. 16. Fergie at the World Cup 2010 with finger appendages.

Fig. 17 and 18. Rihanna in a PVC and inflatable outfits.
Fig. 19. Rihanna performing.

Fig. 20, 21, 22. Katy Perry in various “California Girl” outfits and at the 2011 VMAs.

Fig. 23 & 24. Perry in various curious outfits.

Fig. 25. Perry in her video “ET.”

Fig. 26. Kathy Beth Terry.

Fig. 27, 28, 29, 30. Beyoncé as “Sasha Fierce” throughout 2010.

Fig. 31. Ke$ha in “We R Who We R.”

Fig. 32. Gaga, Rihanna, Ke$ha, and Minaj.

Fig. 33. Natalia Kills in “Free.”