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Issue 16: “This is What Makes Us Girls”: Gender, Genre, and Popular Music

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Editors’ Introduction for *NANO* Special Issue 16: “This Is What Makes Us Girls”: Gender, Genre, and Popular Music

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Abstract:

Boys don't cry. God is a woman. I can't talk right now, I'm doing hot girl shit. Popular music has a long history of defining gender for its listeners. Our introduction to *NANO* Special Issue 16, “This Is What Makes Us Girls,” offers a reading of contemporary singer Lana Del Rey as a participant in pop music's obsessive theorization of gender, race, and other intersecting genres of embodied identity. We propose that Del Rey's body of work provokes shared questions about how other artists (and their fans) use the tropes, sounds, and platforms of pop stardom to theorize raced, gendered, and national identity. On the road to introducing this issue's top-billed performers—Melissa Weber, Ebony L. Perro, Patrick Clement James, William Mosley, and David Wills—we map some of Del Rey's innovations and provocations without putting forth a unifying theory of gender or genre within the realm of pop music—a perhaps impossible task. Instead, we hope to encourage readers to ask what the genre of pop music—and the genres within pop music—teach us about race, femininity, and masculinity in our current moment.

Keywords: Lana Del Rey, gender, race, genre, pop music

What's Genre Got to Do (Got to Do) With It?

"We are all dizzy dames trying to think our ways out of the genres of which we are made." —Virginia Jackson

What can the genre of pop music—and the genres within pop music—teach us about genres of femininity and masculinity in our current moment? We posed this question in our special issue CFP through the example of Lana Del Rey's 2012 bad girls pop anthem, "This Is What Makes Us Girls." A song that, like "(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman," offers a master class in concisely theorizing the social construction of gender, "This Is What Makes Us Girls" proposes a definition of one of gender's genres: girlhood. Thus, while this issue is not about Lana Del Rey, it would not exist without her.

Indeed, Ryan and I first learned of each other's work when Ryan proposed a panel for the annual MLA convention on "The Passions of Lana Del Rey." We were both intrigued by Del Rey's textually-mediated engagements with representations of femininity and masculinity culled from literature and kitschy Americana. As Del Rey indicates in her 2012 single "Gods & Monsters," hers is a world that "imitates art," populated by James Dean look-alikes and sad girls in heart-shaped sunglasses and black bikinis, who share bottles of Pepsi Cola, drive aimlessly, sing along to Billie Holiday and Elvis Presley, recite sections of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, and wave around their battered copies of Nabokov's *Lolita*. When Del Rey first started to become famous, it was hard to tell whether she was being serious or tongue-in-cheek in her use of what Hannah Black identifies as "the imagery of American nationalism" and "the kind of iconic girlhood that white America goes crazy for." How does one interpret a chorus like "Be young, be dope, be proud / Like an American" or a verse like "I fall asleep in an American flag / I wear my diamonds on Skid Row / I pledge allegiance to my dad / For teaching me everything he knows," when both are delivered in a kind of breathy, affectless croon, without a smile or a wink? The humor of these lines, from the songs "American" and "Ride," respectively, points to what Ryan and I find compelling about Lana Del Rey. What at first may appear to be retrograde nostalgia actually signals a complex engagement with the genres and tropes (musical and literary) associated with articulations of gender in American pop culture.

We therefore begin our introduction with a proposition: that Lana Del Rey, a theorist of gender and genre whose medium is the pop song, helps us see how other artists and their fans use the tropes, sounds, and platforms of pop stardom to theorize raced, gendered, and nationally

identity. Our introduction maps some of Del Rey's innovations and provocations to chart a path through the articles in this issue, which do not put forth a unifying theory of gender or genre within the realm of pop music—a perhaps impossible task. Instead, we explore the messy, contradictory, multivalent ways that pop musicians, from Del Rey to Megan Thee Stallion to Lady Gaga to City Girls to David Bowie, propose theories about gender and genre in their work. In what follows, we offer a close reading of Del Rey-as-gender-theorist, a sort of warm-up act who sets the stage for this issue's top-billed performers: our interview with Melissa Weber and articles by Ebony L. Perro, Patrick Clement James, William Mosley, and David Wills.

Opening Act: What Makes Us Girls?

How, exactly, is Del Rey a theorist of gender and genre? Throughout her career, she has developed complex, controversial models of what contemporary feminine positionalities might look like, through lyrics and the visuals of her music videos. For instance, in "This Is What Makes Us Girls," what makes us girls lies not necessarily in our bodies or our clothes or the sounds of our voices, but in the fact that we "don't stick together 'cause we put love first." It is a song deeply invested in what Lauren Berlant named the female complaint: that "women live for love, and love is the gift that keeps on taking" (*Female Complaint* 1). Some critics have seen an anti-feminist acceptance of violent heteropatriarchy in Del Rey's glamorization of tortured love as a hallmark of femininity: on the song "Blue Jeans," for instance, Del Rey sings, "I know that love is mean and love hurts / But I still remember that day we met in December, oh baby." Writing for *Ms.* magazine in 2014, Emily Shugerman argued that "Del Rey not only perpetuates her helpless, damsel-in-distress image, but verbally promotes violence against women." And yet others (including Ryan and I) see a more complex set of dynamics at play. To be sure, for Del Rey, girlhood and womanhood are gendered social positions determined by their proximity to men; she often seems to accept the male gaze as a validating force, as when she repeatedly sings "Let me put on a show for you, daddy" on "Yayo." Just as often, however, she also trains her laconic, meditative gaze on men and men's bodies, signaling a genre of femininity in which gazing and being gazed at coexist in a bittersweet "game" of ephemeral and asymmetrical desire.

For example, the single "Music To Watch Boys To" (2015) conjures a scene in which "boys" are the "toy" objects of a woman's desirous gaze. The video features Del Rey in center frame lounging on a beach chair in a bathing suit, caftan, high heels, ankle bracelets, and a pair of headphones shaped like flower blossoms. As much as she displays herself for the boys, she also holds fast to the pleasure she takes in watching them, keeping the secret of her own autoeroticism to herself. In this sense, Del Rey seems to countersign Madonna's "Live To Tell" version of pop femininity, in which men "can tell a thousand lies" and women can only "hope [to] live to tell" the truth of the secrets they keep for men. But Del Rey also recasts Madonna's cant, instead envisioning an agonistic sphere where "only the girls know" that "lies can buy you eternity" ("Music to Watch Boys To"). Remapping the terrain of desire, Del Rey opens up a paradoxical space in which sexualities attuned to passivity and submission are empowered: resonating with those who relate to the back-and-forth dynamics of sexual objectification, as well as those who desire opportunities for counter-narratives of longing. Femininity here

constitutes a relation to looking and being looked at, one that can be occupied by almost anyone. For instance, gay male audiences might relate to Del Rey's articulation of forms of hypervisibility and sexual threat that, though primarily directed toward women, are often directed toward gender and sexually non-conforming men. (Not to mention lyrics that can harken to a historically specific lineage of American homosexual desiring; e.g. "Whitman is my daddy" ("Body Electric").) Del Rey thus gives voice to anyone who might take unauthorized pleasure in the forbidden act of objectifying, or "watching the boys" ("Music to Watch Boys To"). If the heterosexual male gaze largely determines the screen upon which popular cultural desires are projected, Del Rey shows us that the figure in the screen can always gaze back—or step out of it—"to destroy" the status quo.



Lana Del Rey, "Doin' Time." 03:30. Music Video (2019), dir. Rich Lee.

In the nearly three years we have worked on this issue, Del Rey (who, incidentally, holds a degree in Philosophy from Fordham University [Drumm]) has continued to use her music to offer theories about what makes us girls, most recently with the 2021 album *Blue Banisters*. On the track "Black Bathing Suit," she gives a sly nod to one of the most memorable lyrics of "This Is What Makes Us Girls" ("Running from the cops in our black bikini tops / Screaming 'Get us while we're hot, get us while we're hot'"), crooning that "The only thing that still fits me is this black bathing suit." "Black Bathing Suit" revises the flippant refrain of "This Is What Makes Us Girls" ("Don't cry about it. It's all gonna happen") to reflect a changed world ("Cause what I really meant is when I'm being honest / I'm tired of this shit"). "Black Bathing Suit" and *Blue Banisters* explicitly address the sense of apocalyptic dread attending the ongoing pandemic and climate change-related catastrophes ("If this is the end, I want a boyfriend," she sings at the beginning of "Black Bathing Suit"), along with more mundane concerns about pandemic weight gain and tabloid body policing ("The only thing that still fits...").

The songs on *Blue Banisters*, however, reimagine what makes us girls, turning to friendships between women as the foundation of domestic flourishing. On the title track, for instance, Del Rey sings about a man who “Said he’d fix my weathervane / Give me children, take away my pain / And paint my banisters blue.” But when the man disappears, “All my sisters come to paint my banisters green / My blue banisters grey.” Here, it is a group of women who create domestic space from the wreckage of a hetero dream of domesticity; in the absence of the fallible man, they continue to thrive in a world with “Chickens running, bare feet, there’s a baby on the way / And now my blue banisters are green and grey.” Between the “banisters” and “sisters,” Del Rey rewrites her sense of “how bad girls do” (“Black Bathing Suit”): they build their own world in the midst of all kinds of wreckage (romantic, political, material). If 2012 Del Rey embodied Berlant’s female complaint, 2021 Del Rey seems to be reaching toward what Berlant called a “potential openin[g] within and beyond the impasse of adjustment” (*Cruel Optimism* 7)—toward a new sense of the potential genres of femininity.

One way Del Rey’s work has expanded the territory for embodying femininity on the stage of popular music has been her juxtaposition of sexuality, visibility, and consumption with a palpable sense of modesty. While Del Rey’s lyrics are frequently explicit—she sings “My pussy tastes like Pepsi Cola” in “Cola,” “I was an angel looking to get fucked hard” in “Gods & Monsters,” and “I’m crying while I’m coming” in “In My Feelings”—her presentation and performances have been demure and sedate to the point of parody. Meanwhile, her album covers show her wearing such unprovocative attire as a shirt buttoned all the way to her chin, a plain white t-shirt, and a windbreaker, on covers that are cropped so that her entire body is not on display.

Del Rey’s refusal to play along with the boys might have a lot to do with the way the singer has sometimes drawn backlash in popular media. As Catherine Vigier has argued, it is largely Del Rey’s willingness to present herself against the grain of established norms for women’s sexuality that has singled her out for intense criticism, from bloggers to major media critics (2012). For instance, Del Rey was roundly mocked for her physically underwhelming 2012 performance of “Video Games” on *Saturday Night Live*, with entertainment critics hyperbolically wondering if Del Rey was maybe the “Worst ‘SNL’ musical guest of all time?” (Semigran). The memes spawned by this performance suggest that part of what critics found so objectionable was its lack of overt sexiness; many gifs juxtapose Del Rey’s listless spinning with the hypersexual, high-octane dance performances of Madonna and Lady Gaga. In other words, Del Rey flouted the demand that if she wanted to sing about how her pussy tastes she had to show off her body to the audience.



Lana del Rey dancing in front of Madonna, GIF, uploaded by Swordforge, <https://gifer.com/en/ZTf>.

By withholding her body as an object for visual consumption but dropping lyrics that still suggest an inner erotic life of seduction, violence, and sexual submission, Del Rey highlights and violates the tacit condition of women's participation in a male-dominated music industry: that they submit their bodies to a predominantly heterosexual male gaze while sounding excited and happy about it: "I pretend I'm not hurt / And go about the world like I'm havin' fun" ("Body Electric").

However, at the same time that Del Rey has challenged gendered expectations for pop performers, she has also reinforced many of the racist dynamics of American popular music, reminding us that, as C. Riley Snorton argues, it is imperative to read gender as "an always racial and racializing construction" (66). A white woman from upstate New York, Del Rey appropriates culture inveterately, as evidenced by a whole [genre](#) of [online articles](#) devoted to [tracking](#) all the [times](#) Del Rey has stolen from racially, ethnically, and economically marginalized groups: dressing as a Mexican-American gang member in her short film *Tropico*, donning a warbonnet in the music video for "Ride," and, in interviews, describing herself as "the gangster Nancy Sinatra" and "like Lolita got lost in the hood" (Bess). By her own account, her stage name itself came about because "she was going to Miami quite a lot of the time, speaking a lot of Spanish with friends from Cuba" (Bess). In the spring of 2020, Del Rey took to Instagram to complain that Black artists including Doja Cat, Nicki Minaj, and Beyoncé could sing "songs about being sexy, wearing no clothes, fucking, cheating etc.," while she was accused of "glamorizing abuse" for "singing about being embodied, feeling beautiful by being in love even if the relationship is not perfect, or dancing for money, or whatever I want" (*Paper Magazine*). As much as we value the way Del Rey has created space on the pop charts for nuanced and sometimes unpopular expressions of women's sexuality, we take issue with Del Rey's persistent

blindspot around the racialized hierarchies structuring the industry in which she participates. For instance, when Del Rey received criticism for essentially arguing that Black women in music have more leeway in representing sexuality than she does, Del Rey insisted that her comments had nothing to do with race and, instead, everything to do with women who expressed “fragility” as part of their sexuality (*Paper* magazine). Similarly, Del Rey’s other attempts to defend herself against criticism of these acts of cultural appropriation have rarely helped matters: in defense of her costuming in *Tropico*, Del Rey explained that “she was inspired by her life on the Eastside of Los Angeles and had ‘always spoken Spanish in all [her] songs” (Nardino). When she debuted the cover of her 2021 album *Chemtrails Over the Country Club* on Instagram, she included a caption explaining that she has “always been extremely inclusive without even trying to. My best friends are rappers, my boyfriends have been rappers. My dearest friends have been from all over the place” (Sultan). Even were we to grant that Del Rey is “just a girl whose intentions are good” (“Don’t Let Me Be Misunderstood”), her frequent elisions—of language, nationality, musical genre, and race—point to the ways that gender and musical genres are always already racialized and conscripted into narratives of identity or disidentification.

All the contributions to this special issue of *NANO* touch on the themes, challenges, and necessities of theorizing the genres and genders of popular music raised here by the visual and musical catalog of Lana Del Rey. Whether underscoring the African American roots of popular music, marking the racial differences of embodied pop femininity, stumbling in the wake of irrational desires, parsing the line between friendship and internecine competition, or deconstructing the narrowed definition of music as simply one genre of signification among others, *This Is What Makes Us Girls* comprises a kind of EP, or *extended playlist*, of new scholarship on gender and pop music. Listen at random or follow along with the set order of play. And don’t be afraid to remix your favorite hooks.

Main Stage

Our interview with Melissa Weber, curator of the Hogan Archive of New Orleans Music and New Orleans Jazz, grounds the issue by highlighting the fact that there is no pop music in America without Black culture, underscoring the necessity of analyzing gender and genre in pop music as racialized constructions. Weber draws attention to connections between popular music, dance, photography, and Black and queer life in New Orleans—the city where, as Weber puts it, Black artists created the “foundation of popular music in the United States.” Weber also discusses some of the barriers between institutional archives and the communities they are meant to serve, and reminds readers that “[a]rchives are for the community,” regardless of where those archives are housed. The Hogan continues to expand its collections under Weber’s guidance, and has already digitized much material. This particular archive thus provides a rich set of resources for anyone who wants to think about popular music, both contemporary and historical. We hope that our interview with Weber will lead readers to spend more time with the sounds, images, and stories the Hogan has preserved, online and in person.

The issue’s first article takes us from New Orleans to Houston, and back to the question of how expectations around sexual empowerment for women remain raced in contemporary pop music.

Ebony L. Perro's "Thee Megan Movement: Defining and Exploring Hot Girl Rhetoric" helps to show that the freedom to express sexuality that Del Rey attributes to Doja Cat, Nicki Minaj, and Beyoncé is particularly hard won for Black women in music. Perro builds on work by Black feminists and womanists to explore how Megan Thee Stallion in particular has challenged the ratchet/respectable binary that gets used against Black performers who express sexual desire in their songs and choreography. Drawing on work by Bettina Love, Therí Pickens, and L. H. Stallings, Perro shows that the concept of "ratchetness" is often "wielded against Black women who fail to be respectable" (Love qtd. in Perro). Black women who are perceived to be ratchet by "adherers to respectability politics" are "coded ... as 'loud,' 'hostile,' and 'reckless'" (Love qtd. in Perro), as in Del Rey's description of women "wearing no clothes, fucking, cheating, etc." Megan Thee Stallion has joyfully celebrated and reclaimed ratchetness, as Perro demonstrates, putting Megan's work "in conversation with scholars who assert ratchetness as a means of emancipation" (Perro). Perro shows that what L. H. Stallings has called "the Black Ratchet Imagination" (Stallings qtd. in Perro) opens up "a tertiary space in which one can perform a racialized and gendered identity without adhering to the prescriptive demands of either," as Therí Pickens argues (Pickens qtd. in Perro). In reclaiming and redefining the term "hot girl," in part by rewriting the Hot Boys' 1999 song "I Need a Hot Girl," Megan Thee Stallion has thus created what Perro calls a "hot girl rhetoric," one that "problematizes one-dimensional readings of Black womanhood and generates a language for her fanbase to challenge oppressive ideologies." Perro illustrates how both Megan and her fans confront, evade, and change the very terms of the demands placed on Black women, both in the realm of pop music and in everyday life.

Touching on the fanaticism long associated with the seductively popular superstars that (paraphrasing Hannah Black) *fans go crazy for*, Patrick Clement James's "Stupid Love: Notes on a Lyric by Lady Gaga" refuses to settle down into a single genre, taking instead the Lady Gaga lyric "I want your stupid love" as the impetus for a fragmentary meditation on the intersubjective borders of erotic love, conceptions of stupidity, and Pauline theology. James's essay suggests that Christianity—and the fanaticism (or *fandom*) it has inspired for centuries—is underwritten by a pagan belief in the innate stupidity of love, a form of going crazy that is modeled by none other than Jesus himself. Drawing on philosophical and literary references from Plato to Erasmus, Wittgenstein to Barthes, Gaga to Beyoncé, James creates his own *Lover's Discourse* in which Jesus's love for humankind is understood as a stupid love, a love beyond logic, beyond empiricism, beyond any reason that can be given for loving humans. For James, Jesus's stupid love for humans leaves humans speechless, unable to account for the grace that stupidity has given. Echoing theories of queer negativity and self-shattering, James mines Gaga's lyrics and visual iconography for evidence that Christianity's "speechless" discourse on love is, in some fundamental sense, an irrational yet productive desire to be destroyed. The Christianized thirst for salvation through erotic self-destruction reappears throughout pop music's Crazy-in-Love songbook, from Patsy Cline to Beyoncé to Lana Del Rey's lyric, "Because I'm crazy, baby / I need you to come here and save me" ("Off to the Races"). Yet the self-destruction James locates in Gaga's lyrics reveals itself as a deconstructive fueling of the self, a self curiously most alive at the limits where it both eats and is eaten in turn. Gaga's frequent references to being devoured by her lovers—"Take a bite of my

bad girl meat / Show me your teeth” (“Teeth”), “He ate my heart / He a-a-ate my heart” (“Monster”), “I’m a hard girl, loving me is like chewing on pearls” (“Disco Heaven”), “You taste just like glitter mixed with rock and roll” (“Paper Gansta”)—echoes Christ’s injunction to his disciples that to eat him is to remember him; or conversely, that to remember Jesus presupposes his dismemberment. James’s queer reading of the erotic logic of Christianity suggests that when it comes to soteriological love, the potential for self-dissolution is an unavoidable and ultimately irrational risk.

Like Perro, William Mosley, in “‘Y’all don’t work jobs. Bitch, y’all is a job’: Deconstructing Friendship and Labor with the City Girls,” is interested in how Black feminist critique can illuminate pop music as a space where new relations and expressions of identity can come into being. Like Del Rey, whose vision of friendship between girls and women is both interlinked with channels of support and fractured by competition, Mosley tracks the frictions and solidarities forged between Black pop artists differently positioned within America’s racial, gendered, and sexual vectors of power. Mosley argues that Black feminist critique makes it possible to see how the music video for the song “Jobs” by City Girls creates “a deviant representation of friendship that imagines a future in which femininity, gender, and sexuality can account for a wider range of practices and performances.” Drawing on Jacques Derrida’s thought on friendship, Mosley shows how “Jobs” stages a working-through of differences between Black women and Black queer men—not by erasing differences, but by tarrying with them. Mosley folds City Girls’ public homophobic comments back into their appearance with Saucy Santana in the “Jobs” music video, exploring how friendship is “work,” or a “job,” in which identitarian differences are both consolidated and put to the test. Through this exploration of friendship among Black popular musicians facing different experiences of racial and gendered marginalization, Mosley asks us to consider popular music as an important semi-public space for contestation, reconciliation, and collaboration.

David Wills’s genre-bending “The Solicitation of Deconstruction (*If I never see the English...*)” could be said to turn up the reverb on James’s fragmentary form and Mosley’s deconstructive reading of friendship. First given as a keynote address at the 2016 Derrida Today conference in London, the performative context of Wills’ address has been preserved yet reworked into a new, or remastered edition. Offering an elegiac meditation on the life works of Jacques Derrida and David Bowie, Wills explores “a chiasmus of one falling across the other, a new cross Derridabowie intersection” that turns on to new questions about the relationship between deconstruction and music. Investigating Derrida’s early use of “*solicitation*, in the sense of shaking, making tremble,” as a possible name for *différance*, Wills proposes that music also solicits: “Music arrives from far or near, from around, to invade or pervade a body, and by extension a subjectivity, making its corporate boundaries tremble.” Poetically evoking the trembling of the leaves of poplar trees, or aspens, Wills suggests that the trembling and shaking of solicitation marks a musicality that is already popular, a movement in the body, or the self, that bears evidence of something gathered, collected, yet dispersed and dispersing. Wills explores the structural resonances between this deconstructive “autobiographic ‘I’” and “the [musical] sound of an uttering ‘I’ that similarly begins and at the same time breaks, falters, cracks, trembles,” concluding that “autobiography shares with music its having, as form or

structure of utterance, spectrality.” Wills’s argument highlights the hauntological priority of alterity, or the irreducible difference that conditions speech and song alike. Popular music, with its canon of love songs—its most abundant genre—might serve, then, as an exemplary archive of our indebtedness to the otherness of the other. Or, as Del Rey sings on repeat, “It’s you, it’s you, it’s all for you / everything I do / I tell you all the time” (“Video Games”). By provocatively arguing that the “I” that can account for itself, tell stories about itself, and perhaps sing a love song, is already shaken or solicited by an alterity that no “I” can sufficiently account for, Wills suggests, in turn, that “music” might be the most apt term for the way *différance* conditions the formation and deformations of identity. Going further, Wills suggests that an indeterminacy best described as *musical* might already be in play before something like a genre, gender, or identity has stepped up to the mic.

Together, these articles cut differing paths through music’s popular charts. They present no single hypothesis that can be put forward about popular music and gender. Rather, they each draw on popular music to reflect on urgent questions about musical culture as a living archive that lends us a sense of who we are—sometimes through identification and celebrations of self, other times through violence, exclusion, and appropriation. They also remind us of the autobiographical or confessional roots of popular music—that is, the way popular musicians often try to let us know who they are, what they’ve been through, what they think about the world, and why they think what they think. In this way, popular musicians actively theorize the world they purportedly describe. Along the way, they let us know what makes us girls and what makes hot girls hot. They tell us about their stupid loves and let us know why friendships take “work.” They remind us that music has a history and originates from specific historical contexts, even if the exact origins of music remain fantasmatic, differential, and ineffable. If music has a gender, you won’t find it here. What we hope you will find is something more than any single gender, or genre, could ever tell you on its own.

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