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My Superbrain is All Binary: Nostalgic Futurism as Robyn's Feminist Super-Persona

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Introduction: Meet Robyn

“If she wants to dress up like an astronaut or paint her face three colors and make robotic dancehall music, she will.” (Frere-Jones)

Robyn stands alone, center stage, holding her fists directly out in front of her. Dressed in harsh industrial silvers, whites, and blacks, moon-boot shoes and with ice-white short-cropped hair, the image here is clear: Robyn is driving a powerful, if invisible, space ship right at you. This is the position

assumed by the Swedish electro-pop musician every time she performs her 2010 hit song¹ “Dancing On My Own,” from the official music video, to festivals and other performances including *Saturday Night Live*, *The David Letterman Show*, and the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize Concert, and it is representative of a larger theme across the performer's opus: Robyn is an artist whose current public identity, from lyrics to costumes to dance moves, is deeply imbued with Space-Age RetroModernism, a sense of nostalgic Futurism that shapes both her work and our experience of it and that, I propose, can be interpreted as a refreshing new breed of celebrity feminism.

In 1969, Carol Hanish famously declared, “the personal is political”; now, as we roll into the second decade of the 2000s, Robyn and others like her are keen to demonstrate that, furthermore, the *popular* is political too. That, while it may be a full hundred years since Rebecca West pointedly observed the feminine dilemma of “doormat or a prostitute” (1913), these are still the categories women in the popular music industry are most often coerced into (and frequently into both at once). I seek to demonstrate how Robyn's retrofuturism, therefore, functions as a key component to her ongoing, performative feminist statement on and reaction to this heavily patriarchal industry. It is about the multilayered female-in-the-spotlight struggle for and establishment of independence, cutting herself free from the commodifying, objectifying, popular music machine that is too much both for and by the male perspective, and finding a way to thrive within that potentially alienating, potentially empowering, and, as here, often both-at-once space, indeed the “outer space.” “That's what the song Don't Fucking Tell Me What to Do is about. It's about me being my own boss” (Robyn, quoted in Petridis).

Robyn, (born Robin Miriam Carlsson), was first thrust into the international pop music spotlight in the 1997, when her Max Martin²-crafted album *Robyn is Here* (BMG) was released in the United States. By 1998, the album had gone platinum and Robyn seemed set for a sparkling career of teen-pop stardom. However, instead, she was struck down by what was diagnosed as exhaustion shortly thereafter, and quietly returned to Sweden. Although Robyn, described as “a teen pop star who stepped off the conveyor belt,” (Petridis), continued to make music with albums *My Truth* in 1999 and *Don't Stop the Music* in 2002, these were never released internationally and Martin moved on to a new teen starlet muse, penning *Oops... I did it Again* and *Hit Me Baby One More Time* for the newly discovered Britney Spears to release with phenomenal success in 1999 and 2000, respectively. According to Robyn herself, “it was frustrating for me to be a teen star ... it felt like this huge machine was taking me somewhere that I didn't decide to go” (Robyn, quoted in Eliscu).

Fast-forward to 2010, and Robyn has dropped the label and stepped back out into the international music spotlight with two self-written and released albums (on her own label, *Konichiwa Records*), *Robyn* (2005) and *Bodytalk* (parts I and II) (2010). The music is a more glitchy and unnerving electro pop, with titles like, “Fembot” (2010), “Bionic Woman” (2005) and “Robot Boy” (2005); lyrics like, “Hey little droid, let your x-ray shine” (2005) and “My superbrain is all binary” (2010); and stage wear in futuristic angles and sharp cuts, more off-putting and alien than sexy. Speaking of her former label's reaction to this new, DIY, style, Robyn says, “Of course they didn't like it. They thought it was weird and that this wasn't pop music at all” (Robyn, quoted in Eliscu). What's clear in this reawakening is that *this* Robyn is not the old Robyn. In the words of *The New Yorker's* Sasha Frere-Jones, “She has been the stand-in for older men's vision of a woman in pop, and no longer needs to play that role or bemoan its conditions” (2010). Instead, in a Ziggy Stardustesque burst of rockets and robots, Robyn's rebirth was and is marked by an empowering retrofuturist positioning, that, while part of a definite lineage of

spacey metaphor and presentation through the last five or so decades of pop, she make and directs as very much her own. "Whenever I talk about technology, for me, it's not about the future or about something that feels cold and robotic," she says. "It's more about describing the human condition" (Robyn on NPR).

Eyes on the Sky: Futurism and Retrofutursim in Culture

"In cultural production, retrofuturism describes a distanced interest in past visions of the future" (Sharp, 25).

Retrofuturism can be defined as a contemporary adoption of one or some of the futuristic (most often space and/or robot themed) memes that became popular in 50s and 60s culture and media. The era of Sputnik and the original moon-landing fostered a rich landscape of "spaciness" in art and life that accompanied a hopeful sense of the industrial-cosmic promises held by the future. Televised examples include *The Jetsons* (1962–1988), *Lost in Space* (1965–1968), the original *Star Trek* series (1966–1969) and the original *Dr. Who* series (1963–present). This was a hopeful time; space and related super-industrialized culture (e.g., robots) represented a movement forward, away from the devastation of two world wars, toward new, unexplored territories, and, with them, a new breed of human heroism. What is more, the subgenre of the idealized alien trope (e.g., the character of Klaatu from 1951 movie *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, Spock from *Star Trek* (first introduced in 1966), or, *Captain Marvel* himself (1967)) can be seen as representative of the growing sense of the power of the individual and detachment from the depressing repercussions of group-think as played-out in the fascist regimes that had recently swept Europe, and were looming ominously in the form of Soviet Russia. This Space-Age was primarily American-associated and went hand in hand with a global desire for a new cultural model to distract from sad, war-ravaged Europe. "In the hands of *democracies* ... scientific and technological innovations promised to deliver humanity to the heights of individual freedom" (Huebner).

The music business was especially taken by space-fever, and, as Ken McLeod outlines in his article "Space Oddities: Aliens, Futurism and Meaning in Popular Music," "Rock and roll developed roughly contemporaneously with the era of space exploration and the concomitant boom in science fiction." (340). As such, many of these new rock and rollers cast themselves within these themes. Examples include the spacey-named fifties rock group Bill Hayley and His Comets (1952–1981), the space-race inspired concept album "I Hear a New World" by Joe Meek (1960), the era's bolstered appreciation for and use of space-aged (in function, sound, or both) instruments such as the Theremin, tannerin, and color/light organs, and the entire genre of "Space Age Pop," defined by Wikipedia as "inspired by the spirit of those times [the 1950s and 60s], an optimism based on the strong post-war economy and technology boom, and excitement about mankind's early foray into space." As such, these Space-Age musicians inhabited their theme in many ways, including correlated names, as with Hayley and his Comets or Boyd Bennett and his Rockets; presentation, including costume and stage set-up; and their

sound itself, reflecting idealized space culture with the introduction of electric instruments and, eventually, the intergalactic audio effects of early dub. As McCleod notes, these musical thematics were indicative of a pervasive socio-political sense of freedom, possibility, and exploration: “many influential artists used space and space alien themes to represent political and sexual liberation” (MacCleod 341).

It is no accident that this spacey rock and roll cultural revolution developed alongside the newly emerging idea of the 1950s teenager, and, with it, the idea of teenage rebellion, both, again, primarily American concepts.³ The ideas of young newness and rebellion married well with the “otherness” of the teenage concept: no longer a child but not yet fully adult, it introduced and comforted by classification the teenager as excitingly volatile alien, as neatly evidenced in the 1959 film *Teenagers From Outer Space*. As MacCleod points out, “A leading candidate for the first ever rock ‘n’ roll record, Jackie Brenston's hot rod ode “Rocket 88” (1951), immediately linked space travel with 1950s teenage rebellion ... The fascination with such images involves, of course, a fundamental fascination with the unknown, the unidentified” (MacCleod 340, 337). But teenagers were not the only marginalized group to seize upon the space and alien theme as working metaphor for otherness; overall, societal roles in 1950s America were still very prescriptive, and, as McLeod states, the thematic identity of outer-space “provides an empowering voice to many marginalized identities ... use of futuristic space and alien themes denotes a related alienation from traditionally dominant cultural structures, subverting the often racist and heterosexist values” (MacCleod 338, 353).⁴

These politicized intergalactic themes in music, particularly, demonstrated remarkable staying power, continuing on from the 50s and 60s, though David Bowie's glittery alien persona, Ziggy Stardust, in the 70s, Michael Jackson's Captain EO phase in the 80s, The Smashing Pumpkins markedly retrofuturist single “Rocket” in the 90s, through to the glow-sticks and deely-boppers of the early 2000s techno and rave scenes.⁵ As these are just a few examples among myriad more, it is not difficult to draw a fairly clear and unbroken thematic line right through from Bill Haley and his Comets to Robyn's current embodiment of similar themes. However, as we move along chronologically through these later (post 50s and 60s) iterations of Space Culture and Futurism, we need to keep in mind the distinction between *contemporaneous* and *retro* iterations of futurism. Ziggy Stardust and Captain EO, built as they are on images of space and the future that are relevant to their respective time periods are examples of the former. The Smashing Pumpkins' “Rocket” video (1994), on the other hand, with multiple instances of 1950s symbology and the technical and the literal innocence implied by the child-protagonists, is a clear example of the latter. To return to the Sharp idea quoted earlier, “In cultural production, retrofuturism describes a distanced interest in past visions of the future.” (25), as opposed to contemporary ideas of future. Both styles of iteration can be rich in significance and impact, however, this study will predominantly be focused on the unique workings of *retro* futurism: Robyn's chosen Space-Age style.

FemBot: The How and Why of Robyn's Retrofuturism

“My superbrain is all binary

Circuitry and mainframe, tin-foil hair

I'm sipping propane topped with a cherry

Reboot”

(Robyn, “Fembot.”)

Robyn's retro spaciness manifests itself in several ways, as, as Imani Perry notes, “The space a musical artist occupies in popular culture is multitextual. Lyrics, interviews, music and videos together create a collage, often finely planned, out of which we are supposed to form impressions” (Perry, quoted in Levande 141). Robyn folds retrofuturism into her persona through lyrics and song titles, as discussed in our opening paragraphs, (e.g., titles: “Fembot” (2010), “Bionic Woman” (2005) and “Robot Boy” (2005); for example, lyrics: “Hey little droid, let your x-ray shine” (2005) and “My superbrain is all binary” (2010)), as well as through costume and presentation: her ice-blond, short, angular hair, a propensity toward bold shapes and colors in dress, and multiple pairs of specially-made Timberland “moon boot” platform shoes that even have their own dedicated Facebook fan site.⁶ The theme is further imbued in many of Robyn's music videos as well, whether it be in the form of nostalgic pastel claymation in clunky choreography for the “With Every Heartbeat” video (2010), or a costume/set-piece of alien-laboratory style tubing pumping variously colored liquids around Robyn's body in the “Indestructible” video (2010). The music itself primarily makes use of an impressive electro-pop palette, with the notable exception of occasional instances of classically stylized strings (e.g., in those same two songs, “With Every Heartbeat” and one of the two “Indestructible” singles). These occurrences of typically classical arrangement and instrumentation tucked within the otherwise modern electronic setting, in the words of McLeod, “allows for a type of aural time travel through the simultaneous representation and experience of past and present” (345).⁷ The retrofuturist theme can permeate even into Robyn's interview demeanor, as “one journalist sent to interview her found himself trying to direct searching questions to a woman wearing a large planet on her head” (Petridis). In recognition of this theme, Robyn was awarded Sweden's 2013 KHT Institute of Technology's Great Prize for “embracing technology” (NME, 2013), while “students at KTH started building a robot in honour of Robyn. The mechatronics class at Sweden's biggest technical university plan to dedicate an entire year to The Robot Project, in which they will build a live robot inspired by the singer, whose tracks like ‘Fembot’ and ‘Robot Boy’ show she has a penchant for all things android” (NME, 2013).

It is important to note that within this specific cultural zeitgeist inhabited by Robyn, the lines between technology and exploration are blurred, as, in terms of 50s and 60s *Sputnik* mentality, the two are essentially interchangeable; in that space-race heyday exploration meant technology and technology meant exploration (specifically of the intergalactic nature). “By the early 1950s, space engineers were talking with new urgency and realism about manned missions to the moon, life on other planets and cosmic uses for atomic energy. Thus, futuristic space journeys, alien incursions and sublime technologies—along with all the accompanying hopes and fears—appeared plausible” (Huebner 9–10). In terms of Robyn's work then, too, the performative and lyrical invocations of technology and the intergalactic references stem from the same thematic root. It is hopefully now apparent that through several layers of her multimedia persona Robyn demonstrates a decided, core, retrofuturist bent; the questions we must now consider are why and to what end?

When interpreting the choices and implications behind Robyn's current Fembot-futurist opus, the effects of her musical history, as outlined in this article's opening paragraphs, are strong. I propose that the “double-peak” shape of her career—first under the thumb of the western music machine at the height of its commodification of young women musicians, and then, later, as a self-released, self-directed package, very much in charge of her own music, image, and femininity—is reflective of the message behind Robyn's thematics, one that, at its core, represents a feminist ideal of empowerment through the “alienation” of individualized independence.

“During the mid to late 1990s, the landscape of female musicians drastically changed from Sarah McLachlan to Sporty Spice and Britney Spears” (Levande 293). Although it cannot be argued that the sexual commodification and objectification of women in popular music did not exist before the nineties, this period, with its step away from Lilith Fair toward Spears and Spice,⁸ definitely marked an “increasingly hypersexualized landscape of women musicians” (Levande 294). The financial and cultural power of big-name record labels was just cresting (before breaking in the early 2000s with the advent of online music providers and file sharing) and with it, the pressure to churn out lowest-common denominator, highest profit-margin artists whose appeal was easy, high-impact, and nonchallenging. Charting popular music during this period was less about authenticity and voice and more about formula and bottom-lines.⁹ While it is arguable to what degree it was unhealthy to participate in this movement as a consumer,¹⁰ there is little doubt that it was not an easy, healthy place to be as a participating, performing young woman, as, “women who could play instruments, write songs, and sing were replaced with auto-tuned voices and air-brushed bodies” (Levande 314). We need look no further than the tragic trajectory of Robyn's successor Britney Spears, from Mouseketeer sweetheart to the desperation of head-shaving and rehab for evidence of this toxicity. As Moya Lockett points out, “this [break-down] is adeptly satirized in the *South Park* episode “Britney's New Look,” where the flailing starlet despairingly shoots herself in the head, leading the media to joke about her new image—just a jaw and the base of her skull” (Lockett 39). The commodification of women in this pop machine results in a heavily magnified version of the familiar catch-22, whereby to become noticed or successful one must give way to the controlling forces of the industry (or, on another scale, society at large) and, in so doing, lose the very self they were attempting to put forward, (while nevertheless personally taking on the responsibility for “selling out,” “whoring,” etc.).

A more recent example is the Miley Cyrus “self-sexualization” (Lamb, Graling, and Wheeler) media spectacle. The ongoing public debate as to whether Cyrus is “allowing [herself] to be pimped” (O'Connor) as Sinéad O'Connor insists in her open letter to the young musician, or “in charge of her own show” (Palmer) as stated by musician Amanda Palmer in her open letter response to O'Connor's open letter, reinforces the fact that a woman's place in popular music is still very much a tricky, controversial topic, reminiscent of the age-old female dilemma Greer summarizes as “when all unknowing she painted her face with preparations of white lead and died as a consequence, [a woman] was both the perpetrator of the crime and the victim” (Greer 34).

As cited earlier, in her “Mr. Chesterton in Hysterics” essay, Rebecca West famously said, “I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat or a prostitute” (1913); while western society may have undergone some monumental shifts over the course of and thanks to three waves of feminism since then, West's statement still rings unsatisfactory true when it comes to women in popular music. Women like Britney Spears and Robyn inevitably find

that their industry insist they be both: a doormat whose financial and executive control is for the most-part far out of their hands, and a prostitute, whose sexuality is bought, sold and molded for them. As Palmer states, “being a female musician/rockstar/whatever is a pretty fucking impossible and mind-bendingly frustrating job ... It's a Chinese finger trap that reflects the basic problems of our women-times: we're either scolded for looking sexy or we're scolded for not playing the game,” in an almost exact reiteration of West's point, one hundred years later.

Robyn's depression/exhaustion immediately following her teenage period in this industry's spotlight thing is just one more telling example. Her later/current-period retrofuturism can therefor in part be seen as a recognition of her past participation in this culture of objectified, puppeteered young women in music, or as, in the words of Tricia Rose, (quoted in Dery), “an understanding of themselves as already having been robots ... Adopting “the robot” reflected a response to an existing condition: namely, that they were labour for capitalism, that they had very little value as people... ” (770). This is addressed with satirical bite¹¹ in Robyn's lyrics, such as those for “Fembot” (2010):

My system's in mint condition
 The power's up on my transistors
 Working fine, no glitches
 Plug me in and flip some switches
 Pull up in docking position
 Pop the hatch and hit ignition
 Bu-bu-burn out baby
 Ready for demolition

Here, Robyn is taking “the common pop trick of fusing woman and machine, usually from the male perspective” (Frere-Jones) and turning it on its head; asking: how do the fem-bots feel about their role? And, ultimately: what happens when the Fem-bots get to program themselves? This same sentiment is conveyed by Robyn's wardrobe. The mix of over-sized and tight, cut-aways and angles, can certainly be seen as sexy, but as much weird, awkward and over-bold at the same time, as though in a bombastic reaction against “normal” pop-culture ideas of sexuality, or, as Adorno puts it, the sort of normalized “sexy” identity that results in “the very disintegration of the subject” (171). In opposition to this, Robyn's wardrobe is often not only self-styled, but self-made too, “Robyn uses her downtime on the road to modify her outfits; the Swedish pop singer has done things with her wardrobe that the inventors of the Bedazzler never in their wildest dreams thought possible...” (Lucas) further reinforcing the pop star's conscious and active driving of her own persona-vehicle. “It's a lot of work ... For instance, with the costumes I wear on stage, like my astronaut outfit ... I'm always driving back and forth to fetch them the day before a tour. Its total freedom, so it's great, but there are crazy little details to go through to get there” (Earls).

The nostalgia of retrofuturism, the looking back to an optimistic, idealist way of looking forward, can be seen as a method of rewriting or, perhaps, overwriting, Robyn's own past; imbuing it with the strength

and empowerment that was lacking in her own musical youth, spent as “older men's vision of a woman in pop” (Frere-Jones). Retrofuturism allows Robyn to reinhabit the hopeful space of 50s and 60s idealism as stand in for her own youth, and as a representation of her own ideas of the empowering, ideal role of music, musicianship and performance. This resonates with our earlier brief discussion of the overlap between the dawning of the Space-Age and that of a new definition and understanding of adolescence and the “teenager” concept. Of course, this can also be seen as a disconnect with Robyn, as her space-persona is, in our definition, a distancing from her own teenage self; however, this is neatly tied into the retro side of her spaciness, the underwriting nostalgia. It is not the 50s anymore, and Robyn is not a teenager anymore. Instead she is taking on the empowering and hopeful symbology of 50s-esque futurism in order both rewrite this past position as well as her present, continuing struggle within and against the ongoing patriarchy of pop.

“Retrofuturism can function as a rhetoric in which the past and future become vehicles for working through problems of the present and for creating visions of how things might have been and might still be” (Sharp 26).

Dancing on My Own: The Distinction between Group and Individualized Statement

Of course, as MacLeod points out, Robyn is not the only one to inhabit spaciness to this end, recognizing, as he does, that the theme has long been “Providing an empowering voice to many marginalized identities” (Sharp 388). One example subculture that has embraced both retro and contemporary space thematics is that of rave/dance culture. “Rave culture, with its idealistic emphasis on creating a temporary classless, raceless and genderless society on the dance floor, found alien images to be a powerful symbol of that ideal” (Sharp 350). Likewise, as briefly mentioned earlier, in early dub and hip-hop, “... the use of synthesizers and other electronic effects associated with the latest in music technology, and Clinton [Dr. Funkenstein]'s futuristic lyrical references served as powerful markers of the potential for black wealth and power—a futuristic vision in which, in effect, the previously marginalized aliens assume control of the world... In general, rock, pop, dance and hip-hop music's use of futuristic space and alien themes denotes a related alienation from traditionally dominant cultural structures, subverting the often racist and hetreosexist values of these genres themselves” (Sharp 353).

In Robyn's case, the marginalized group seeking empowerment through these themes is that of women, or, more specifically, young women in the music industry. The distinction, in her case, however, is that while the former groups are seeking a cohesive revolution, a group statement fixed to the idea of cohesion within itself, Robyn's uses her retrofuturism as and for her individualism. While rave culture is about finding a place and a way for everyone to dance together, Robyn's retrofuturist opus is about finding a way to dance all on her own. She is pulling away from the conventions of her group, as experienced in her 90s first wave, to a place where she, on her own label and with her own music and marketing, can stand, be, and yes, dance, very much on her own, empowered by individualization or “alienation.”

The solitary nature of Robyn's retro revolution is demonstrated by a notable pattern in her

performances, both live and in music videos. In the former, Robyn consistently places herself markedly separate from her band, front and center-stage. She may have the support of her backing musicians, but the use of physical space on the stage as a barrier between herself and them emphasizes the solitary nature of her performance opera. Her music videos reaffirm this further. In the videos for *BodyTalk*'s two singles, "Indestructible" and "Call Your Girlfriend," Robyn is alone, with no interaction whatsoever apart from with the camera (and even this is distanced, a recording, not a personified voyeurism). The same holds in the videos for her popular songs "Every Heartbeat" and, of course, "Dancing On My Own." In all four of these, her contemporary chart-toppers, Robyn runs, jumps, sings, and above all, dances, but always in the striking absence of an entourage or partner.

Robyn's dancing itself follows the trend set by her fashion choices; it is more bold and strange than sexy, and it fits her exactly. Described by *Rolling Stone* as rife with "avant-garde impulses," it is not something she *does* for the spectating pleasure of an outside audience like the unsubtle sexual grinds and kicks of the Britney Spears school, but, instead, something she *is*. If someone happens to be watching, that is just fine, but if they are not, that is fine too, and would not change anything. Herein lies the individualized empowerment of Robyn's "Dancing on her Own," an empowerment both bound up in, and symbolized by, her retrofuturist positioning. "The electro-pop of ... Robyn immediately marked her out as one of the decade's few innovators in an era of reality TV-led conformity" (Grundy).

Bad Romance: Why Robyn Succeeds Where Gaga Falts

On the surface, Robyn has much in common with her American pop-goddess contemporary, Lady Gaga. Both emerged (or, in Robyn's case, re-emerged) around the same time,¹² both make highly danceable, up-tempo pop music, both are petit, blond women, and, most important for this study, both incorporate retrofuturist elements into their musical personas and have been looked to as modern pop representations of empowerment and feminism. However, the methods, and, I would argue, results, of the two musicians in this regard are very different. Robyn's retrofuturist persona is uniquely successfully empowering, while Gaga's gestures in this direction often simply rehash and reinforced old tropes and patterns of self-destructive false or "façade" empowerment, or, alternatively, dazzle and confuse audiences with an overwhelming glut of imagery and mixed messages.

As a starting point, let us consider Gaga's most successful video and single to date, *Bad Romance* (2009) (acharts.us). Like many Robyn videos, *Bad Romance* has multiple futuristic (albeit contemporary futuristic) and "alien" elements, including the clinical, cold and clean "future laboratory"-style setting, with matching costumes in slick black and white PVC and vinyl, and much emphasis on the angular, alien and bizarre. Curtis C. A. Fogel and Andea Quinlan further describe the video's set-up and premise in their article, "Lady Gaga and Feminism: A Critical Debate": "In the music video *Bad Romance* (2009), Lady Gaga is drugged, tied up, kidnapped, and put up for auction, to be bought by the highest paying man at a futuristic auction... the video is essentially a depiction of a futuristic form of human trafficking" (185). As the video concludes, Gaga is shown to have taken violent revenge on her purchaser/violator, incinerating him with her flame-thrower bra to nothing more than a charred skeleton left resting on his opulent bed of sin. (How the bed avoids incineration is not clear.)

There is, undeniably, something satisfying (and amusing) about this type of melodramatic, visceral retort to sexual violence, and it is a pattern that Gaga returns to often. Further examples include her videos for *Telephone* and *Paparazzi*; “These three videos depict extreme violence against women. Whether it is physical violence or sexual exploitation, these videos offer vivid depictions of male dominance over women's bodies... these videos similarly end with images of retribution as men are seen to be violently killed. Lady Gaga appears strangely empowered through her violent revenge” (Fogel and Quinlan 185). Much as Gaga's success stems from a decided push toward the quirky-to-uncomfortably bizarre, once you strip away the fantastical costumes and set, the pattern here is tiredly familiar and hardly bizarre or alien at all. In short: Lady Gaga portrays herself as damaged/deranged victim of society's violent sexualization of women, bent on revenge, embodying a trope that, despite her surface sheen of unique strangeness, is well worn, that we have seen over and over again in everything from Tarantino's *Kill Bill* (2003), to *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (Originally titled *Men who Hate Women*) (Larsson), *Tomb Raider*'s Lara Croft, (Square Enix), and many, many more, generally accepted by critics as more harmful than empowering to the feminist/egalitarian agenda. On the feminist blog *The F Word*, Melanie Newman states, “Male novelists have for decades been selling graphic capture-rape-torture-kill novels by chucking in “strong” female characters for balance, and have even gained plaudits for highlighting violence against women in the process... the kick-boxing girl has become a 21st century literary cliché.” She concludes with the hypothesis that, “in a one-dimensional world where women are sex objects and men are action heroes, the only route to female agency is to lend women some of the action while preserving—or enhancing in Salander's [from *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*] case—their conventional femininity.” Under this light Gaga fares no better than the Larsson heroine: “She becomes a commodified feminist symbol that equates female empowerment with sexuality and violence” (Levande 186), and, as such, “The status of women as the inevitable victim of male violence remains unchallenged. It is not merely that viewers might become desensitized to the impact of gendered violence, but that it comes to be seen as normal and inevitable” (Fogel and Quinlan 186).

Robyn, on the other hand, embodies no such trope. While her songs often revolve around the tired and true pop music topics of love and relationships,¹³ her empowerment does not stem from a—violently sexualized or otherwise—reaction to (or performance for) the male gaze implied in such contexts. Her opus is less about waging war within previously established camps, and more about breaking free from the implied necessity of such camps, establishing her own voice and position, and, in so doing, establishing that such an individual definition and empowerment is possible for all women and girls.

It would be remiss, however, not to consider another Gaga work, her more recent video for the 2011 single *Born This Way*. This work more directly uses genre-play to address and highlight the struggle for acceptance of the “alien” other; although the imagery here is more in line with Surreal Horror, there are certainly a number of notable retrofuturist overtones, for example, what Atlantic journalist Aylin Zafar describes as “a heavy nod to Metropolis” (2011), as well as several large floating Vs formed of compounded triangles, strongly referencing the original early 1980s sci-fi series, “V,” as well as a set that has been likened to the 1978 *Superman* film where, “the man of steel's home-planet of Krypton is made almost entirely of shards of crystal, which also seems to have influenced the production design of ‘Born This Way.’” (Montgomery). With lyrics like, “Don't hide yourself in regret/Just love yourself and you're set” and “No matter gay, straight or bi/Lesbian, transgendered life/I'm on the right track baby/I

was born to survive.” Gaga's message here seems markedly direct: “It's a pulsating dance track with a message meant to empower the lonely, the disaffected, the discriminated against” (Kinser). Nevertheless, Gaga's own explanation of it is more complex: “It's not about just being born in one moment; it's about being reborn over and over again until you find and become that unique and special person inside of you that is the most brave and the most sure and the most ready to take on the world,” (Gaga quoted in Kinser). So, are the multiple, graphic birth references in this video meant as literal, as in the “alien” (whether in race, gender, sexuality) is powerless in who they are, fully “born that way,” and must/can then draw Gaga's message of empowerment via unashamedly inhabiting that unchangeable self, as evidenced by lyrics like, “I'm beautiful in my way/Cause God makes no mistakes,” or metaphorical re-births, wherein the empowerment lies in the individual's ability to mould themselves into whatever identity they choose, as Gaga's comments themselves suggest. Is the message one of acceptance or of choice, or, somehow, paradoxically, both? The strength of “Born This Way's” statement is therefore arguably diminished and even altogether lost in this dichotomy. It is worth considering that Gaga herself may be intentionally muddling the matter; as, as we have learned from the BTW video and much else of her opus, Gaga is hardly one to settle for simple or straight-forward messages; gaudy baroque over-complication and flourish are her trademarks, and her artistic position on issues such as gender are no exceptions. As noted by *Bitch* magazine, “Gaga's [work] contains a mixture of feminism, outright anti-feminism, and everything in between” (Smith), or, as *Ms Magazine* states, “She'll say something feminist one minute and equate feminism with man-hating the next” (Williams). Finally, the confused state of Gaga's stance is perhaps most potently highlighted in comparing two interview quotes from Gaga herself, both from 2010:

“Yes. Yes I am. I am a feminist” (Gaga, quoted in Smith).

“I'm not a feminist” (Gaga, quoted in Williams).

The issue here is that this indecision, this over-complication, is so decadently packed with differing and contradictory meaning that, in the end, it can be rendered meaningless, like a mash-up of the brightest colors ending in murky brown. Nevertheless, whether one agrees or disagrees with it as a feminist positioning, it is undeniable that Gaga's work, both retrofuturist and non, has stirred up discussion in these areas, as any quick Google search of “Lady Gaga and feminism” yields hundreds of magazine articles (from *Jezebel.com* to *Rolling Stone*), a number of scholarly papers (including those previously cited here), the book *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (Halberstam), and even a course at the University of South Carolina, titled, “Lady Gaga and the Sociology of Fame,” illuminating the fact that if there is one thing Gaga is undeniably adept at, it is getting people talking. The result of all this over-stimulation and over-saturation within the Gaga opus is that, arguably, the subject itself is lost. As Gaga herself states, “I am not real. I am theater” (Gaga, quoted in Halberstam). This end seems to be the antithesis of Robyn's pursuit, wherein the layered “alien” can ultimately be seen as an ongoing struggle toward the empowerment and establishment of the individual, Robyn as Robyn, and no-one/nothing else, no matter distant this may be from the “vision of a woman in pop” (Frere-Jones).

Conclusion: Konichiwa Bitches

Although I, up until now, have refrained from much overt comparison with Bowie's Ziggy Stardust due to categorical differences in his and Robyn's futurist styling (he, contemporary-futurist, while she, retro-) now that the distinction has been established, we can allow ourselves here to draw one further comparison: Bowie famously turned to Stardust to project and publicize, and, through a filter of spacey "weirdness," normalize, his queerness, while Robyn's use of similar tactics underlines an ongoing pursuit toward a goal both less and more subversive: the projection of a queer, new, straight. My use of straight here is not, specifically, in terms of sexuality, but, instead, in terms of overall being. Straight meaning normal, everyday, everyone. Robyn's positioning as the nostalgic retrofuturist alien, full of hope for the triumph of self-directed and therefore empowered voice, body and career is not, at the end of the day, an expression of elitist apartness, but of the dream of such ongoing empowerment for every woman and girl, within popular music and beyond; "what women's lives could be like if they were free to define their own values, order their own priorities and decide their own fate" (Greer 2–3).

There is a short section in the video of Robyn's live performance at V Festival (RobynVevo) where the camera scans the crowd for a few seconds before returning its focus to the stage. Although the clip is brief, it is enough to get a sense of the overall demographic of Robyn's fans. They are overwhelmingly female, teenagers or slightly older, arms in the air, singing along, reaching toward the stage, not in an effort to become Robyn, their star, but to become what she, with her moon boots and awkward dance moves represents: the power to be, in the end, whatever it is they want to be, each and every one able and happy to be dancing on her own. In the words of the lonely pop-astronaut herself, "If it were to boil down to what my music is about, it would be what it's like to be a girl" (Wirfällt).

Notes

- 1 "Dancing On My Own" made the charts across seven countries throughout 2010–2011, hitting number eight in the United Kingdom and number one in her native Sweden (acharts.us, 2012).
- 2 Real name Martin Karl Sandberg, Martin has written and produced mega-hits for a long-list of budding and established stars including Britney Spears, Katy Perry, Kelly Clarkson, and Taylor Swift (Maratone, 2012).
- 3 For further, contemporaneous, insight into this phenomenon see Jessie Bernard's 1961 article "Teen-Age Culture: An Overview," or Louis Smith and Paul Kleine's 1966 article "The Adolescent and His Society."
- 4 For more on this as related particularly to African-American culture, see Mark Dery's noted discussion of mid-century "Afrofuturism" in his "Black to the Future" essay, included in his 1995 book, *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*.
- 5 "Rave culture, with its idealistic emphasis on creating a temporary classless, raceless, and genderless society on the dance floor, found alien images to be a powerful symbol of that ideal"

(McLeod, 2003 , 350).

- 6 <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Robyns-Shoes/151591034946390>
- 7 In its original context, McLeod is applying this quote to the practices of sampling and multitracking within African-American musics; however, I feel its ethos is just as apt here, in our given context.
- 8 There is much debate as to whether the “Girl Power” motto of the Spice Girls was more empowering or detrimental to the feminist cause in popular music, and myriad papers have been written arguing for either side. For an introduction to the debate, see “Spice World: Constructing Femininity the Popular Way” by Dafna Lemish or “I’ll Never Be Your Woman: The Spice Girls and New Flavours of Feminism” by Tara Brabazon and Amanda Evans.
- 9 For more on this, see Charles Fairchild's *Pop Idols and Pirates: Mechanisms of Consumption and the Global Circulation of Popular Music* .
- 10 According to D. Roberts and P. Christenson, authors of *It's Not Only Rock and Roll: Popular Music in the Lives of Adolescents* , “Music alters and intensifies their moods, furnishes much of their slang, dominates their conversations and provides the ambiance at their social gatherings. Music styles define the crowds and cliques they run in. Music personalities provide models for how they act and dress” (1998, 8).
- 11 Or, perhaps, for the sake of our theme: “byte.”
- 12 Gaga's debut album, “The Fame,” was released in 2008, while Robyn's “Robyn” and “Bodytalk” albums were released in 2005 and 2010 respectively. (Gaga, 2008 and Robyn, 2005, 2010)
- 13 Although they do, just as often, also explore less conventional topics; Robyn's “in-between” album “My Truth” [1999] (not released outside Scandinavia) features two songs about her experience of abortion.

Discography

Lady Gaga, “The Fame” Santa Monica: Interscope Records. 2008. Audio.

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Robyn, “Robin is Here” USA: BMG Records. 1997. Audio.

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Spears, B. "Baby One More Time." USA: Jive Records. 1999. Audio.

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