

Love. *Appropriation*. Music. Baby.: Gwen Stefani and her Harajuku Girls

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ABSTRACT

LOVE. APPROPRIATION. MUSIC. BABY.:
GWEN STEFANI AND HER HARAJUKU GIRLS
Rachel Matlow

With the release of her debut solo album, 2004's *Love. Angel. Music. Baby.*, No-Doubt front-woman Gwen Stefani turned to the street fashions of Tokyo's Harajuku district for her inspiration. The platinum-blond Stefani promoted herself by being constantly surrounded with an entourage of four voiceless Asian women, dubbed her "Harajuku Girls". They were on her CD cover, she dedicated a track to them, they performed in her videos, and they danced on her Harajuku Lovers live tour. Stefani even re-named them, "Love", "Angel", "Music", and "Baby" after her new record and clothing line, L.A.M.B.. The Harajuku Girls function as Stefani's human accessories – silent, sexed-up, submissive, school-girl muses sent to save her from her dull whiteness. I introduce Stefani as an *intertextual celebrity* who appropriates, absorbs and cross-references cultural texts and ethnicities in order to market and brand herself as a distinct entity in the worlds of music and fashion - all while resisting any static signification or "authentic" identity. This thesis questions: (1) how Stefani has appropriated Harajuku culture in ways that reinforce Orientalist ideas of Asian women; (2) how Stefani has used Harajuku culture in order to reinforce her whiteness and distinguish herself as a distinct celebrity brand; (3) if Stefani's representations reveal the performative nature of ethnicity and destabilize essentialist ideas of authenticity; (4) how we may compare the transcultural differences between Harajuku appropriation of American culture and Stefani's appropriation of it; and (5) what the political and cultural implications of Stefani's ethnic signifiers may be.

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Chapter One

GWEN STEFANI: THE INTERTEXTUAL CELEBRITY

INTRODUCTION

The modern celebrity's fame does not depend on any talent achievements as much it relies on an ability to garner public attention. These days, it is not enough for contemporary A-list celebrities to merely be musicians or actors; they need to be both, as well as have a clothing line, perfume fragrance, book launch, baby bump, endorsement deal, sex tape, and confession to Oprah – thereby marketing themselves into every aspect of our lives. Their private lives must attract as much, if not more, attention than their professional lives and they must generate enough intrigue to maintain themselves within the covers of *US Weekly* and *Star Magazine*.

Yet, celebrities are not merely famous people; they are discursive categories, commercial commodities, and objects of consumption. In *Understanding Celebrity*, Graeme Turner argues that celebrity “is a genre of representation and a discursive effect; it is a commodity traded by the promotions, publicity, and media industries that produce these representations and their effects; and it is a cultural formation” (9). More than anything, celebrities are *signs* infused with power. In *Celebrity and Power*, David P. Marshall states, “Like the sign, the celebrity *represents* something other than itself” (56). As a sign, a celebrity's own subjectivity is shed in favour of being a ‘personality’ endowed with heightened cultural significance. Comparing the function of celebrity to Foucault's “author-function,” Marshall argues that, “As in Foucault's interpretation of the author, the celebrity is a way in which meaning can be housed and categorized into something that provides a source and origin for the meaning” (57). Importantly, a

celebrity's meaning is always indeterminate and never fully naturalized, as it is continually subject to a process of negotiation and signification.

A global pop superstar, fashion designer, movie starlet, blonde bombshell, rock-star wife and mother, Gwen Stefani is something to everyone, though she is a one-of-a-kind celebrity sign. Celebrities such as Stefani must exude universal appeal so that audiences can identify with them, but at the same time, the commodified star must create their value and meaning by distinguishing themselves as individual and different from other celebrities, thus offering something distinct to sell. From Elvis to Eminem to Madonna, there is a history of popular white musicians borrowing from other cultures in order to brand and construct their hyperindividuality via the commodification and appropriation of exotic otherness.

This thesis explores Stefani as a perfect case study for examining how celebrities mark their "individuality" and "difference" through sampling and exploiting various texts and cultures. As I argue, Stefani's *intertextual referentiality* – her symbiotic partnerships with various cultural texts - has enabled her to boost her star power, cultural capital, and record sales, as well as help brand her fashion and accessory lines - all while resisting any static signification or "authentic" identity. This chapter introduces the phenomenon known as "Gwen Stefani," starting from her middle-class upbringing in Orange County, to her band No Doubt's claim to fame, to her emergence as an individual superstar. I characterize Stefani as a "postmodern icon" who embodies a multiplicity of identities and as an "intertextual celebrity" who appropriates, absorbs and cross-references cultural texts and ethnicities in order to market and brand herself as different, thereby able to shine a little brighter amongst an ever-competitive constellation of stars.

JUST A GIRL?

When No Doubt front-woman Gwen Stefani first exploded as a mega music star in 1995, she sported skater style clothes, Doc Martens, a bared-midriff, 40s style platinum blonde hair, and an Indian bindi on her forehead. Her first single “Just a Girl,” off her ska-rock band’s Diamond-selling album *Tragic Kingdom*, reached #10 on *Billboard*’s Top 200 and became an instant modern feminist pop classic. In the song she sings, “Cause I’m just a girl, little ‘ol me/Don’t let me out of your sight/I’m just a girl, all pretty and petite/So don’t let me have any rights/Oh...I’ve had it up to here!” And at concerts she would coax her audience of young girls into singing with her, “Fuck you, I’m a girl” (Wald 585). As *Vogue* writer Jonathan Van Meter describes, “She was clearly a post-Madonna, ironic blonde; she spent a lot of time in the video pouting and batting her eyelashes but had rock-hard abs, was dressed half boy and cheerleader, and stomped around like a bad-ass rocker chick” (par 14).

In her examination of female rock stars and their representations of girl culture, Gayle Wald argues that Stefani’s strategic performance of “girlhood” simultaneously promoted cultural visibility of women in rock while helping sell products to her teenage girl fans, dubbed “Gwenabees”. Wald claims that “female artists have ventured to celebrate girlhood as a means of fostering female youth subculture and constructing narratives that disrupt patriarchal discourse within traditionally male rock subcultures” (586). Yet, at the same time, Stefani’s subversion of patriarchy in “Just a Girl” relied on her pretty, girlish, white femininity. Wald states, “Stefani’s self-conscious ‘innocence’, ‘helplessness’, and ‘charm’ are not only crucial to her critical disarticulation of girlhood from its meaning within patriarchal discourse, they also enable her to naturalize national

and racial identity” (587). During this time, questions of national, cultural and racial appropriation, in this case, her negotiation of Indian symbolism and Jamaican ska, became eclipsed by her transgressive gender performance.

This thesis critically questions Stefani’s use of national, cultural, racial and gender signification, specifically in the period between 2004 and 2006 in which she appropriated and commodified Tokyo’s fashion conscious Harajuku culture and the stylish young Japanese women who live it. During this time, Stefani promoted her debut solo album *Love.Angel.Music.Baby*. as well as her clothing and accessory lines by being constantly surrounded by an entourage of four subservient Japanese women, dubbed her “Harajuku Girls”. They were on her CD cover, she dedicated a track to them, they performed in her videos, followed her around to various red carpet events, bowed down to her, and back-up danced on her Harajuku Lovers live tour. Stefani would even dress them up and re-name them, “Love”, “Angel”, “Music”, and “Baby” after her new record and clothing line, L.A.M.B..

Stefani's appropriation of this Japanese subculture of young women known for their crazy colourful street fashions has drawn criticism from Mihi Ahn at Salon.com, and others who feel that Stefani has stripped Japanese street fashion of its authenticity and created yet another Orientalist image of the "submissive Asian female". Ahn argues, “Stefani has taken the idea of Japanese street fashion and turned these women into modern-day geisha, contractually obligated to speak only Japanese in public, even though it's rumored they're just plain old Americans and their English is just fine... she's swallowed a subversive youth culture in Japan and barfed up another image of submissive giggling Asian women” (par 6-7). And, in her blog, stand-up comic Margaret

Cho labeled the Harajuku Girls a "minstrel show" that reinforces ethnic stereotypes of Asian women (par 3).



(Stefani and her Harajuku Girls, Ahn 2006)

This thesis project seeks to question: (1) how Stefani has appropriated Harajuku culture in ways that reinforce Orientalist ideas of Asian women; (2) how Stefani has used Harajuku culture in order to reify her whiteness, distinguish herself as a distinct celebrity, and brand herself in the worlds of music and fashion; (3) if Stefani's representations reveal the performative nature of ethnicity and destabilize essentialist ideas of authenticity; (4) how we may compare the transcultural differences between Harajuku appropriation of American culture and Stefani's appropriation of it; (5) and what the political and cultural implications of Stefani's ethnic representations may be.

METHODOLOGY: FEMINIST, POSTCOLONIAL AND CULTURAL STUDIES

Popular culture has become exceedingly invasive, pervasive, and pleasurable. Feminist and post-colonial theories have stressed how "everyday" culture needs to be taken seriously as it most often goes under the radar of our critical gaze, which makes it

all the more insidious and enveloping. In terms of methodology, I am undertaking a critical cultural, feminist and postcolonial analysis of Gwen Stefani and her recent appropriation of Harajuku culture (2004-2006). This means that my critique is primarily taking into consideration the gender politics, race relations, and transcultural power dynamics involved in Stefani's representation of this Japanese subculture of young women. My theoretical approach seeks to shed light on how particular truths and knowledges are constructed and reified in western popular culture, thus illuminating how the perpetuation of popular images can relegate certain peoples as subordinate. My analysis will take close readings of popular texts and representations of gender, race and ethnicity that are often undervalued, yet extremely significant and persuasive. Importantly, my methodology aims to be self-reflexive and exploratory, rather than moral and definitive. By fleshing out some of the nuances of power and representation involved in Stefani's appropriation of Harajuku culture, I hope to make some sense of my "everyday" world which involves constant simultaneous love for and skepticism of Gwen Stefani and popular culture in general.

In cultural theorist Henry Jenkins' Blog, *Confessions of an Aca/Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins*, he explains how his work on popular culture, including his seminal book, *Textual Poachers*, is written from the perspective of an "Aca/Fan". He describes this term as "a hybrid creature which is part fan and part academic" (par 8). Jenkins asserts that the goal of his work is to bridge the gap between the worlds of academia and fandom. He states, "I take it as a personal challenge to find a way to break cultural theory out of the academic bookstore ghetto and open up a larger space to talk about the media that matters to us from a consumer's point of view" (par 8).

Similarly, I approach this work on Stefani not only from an academic perspective, but also from the position of being an avid consumer of popular music and culture. At once, I am writing from the position of someone who has access to certain academic theories of popular culture as well as a fan who possesses particular “everyday” knowledge of popular music and celebrity. While one may argue that there are risks in not retaining “objective” distance between researcher and the subject of study, one cannot deny that we are all inextricably bound to dominant forms of pop culture. The two standpoints I occupy, as well as my hesitation to identify solely in either position, keep me in a self-reflexive state of liminality. I do not understand my ambivalence towards popular culture as necessarily contradictory, as I believe that popular culture can be both pleasurable and political. Coming from a dual position of critic and consumer, I intend that this thesis be theoretically engaging and stimulating, as well as humorous and accessible, and that it speaks to readers’ everyday lives.

In terms of my theoretical framework, I am engaging primarily with various cultural theorists on celebrity (Turner, 2004; Marshall, 1997), Madonna Studies (Gairola, 2004; Tata, 2004; hooks, 1992), post-colonial theory and Orientalism (Said, 1979; Praso, 2005; Ortner), intertextuality (Kristeva, 1986; Barthes, 1974/1977; Allen, 200), cultural appropriation (Hart, 1997; Ziff and Rao, 1997), Japanese history and culture (Kubo, 2005; Kinsella, 1995) transculturation (Iwabuchi, 2002; Joseph, 1999), commodification (Marx, 1951; Williamson, 1986; hooks, 1992) and discourse and power (Foucault, 1977). I have chosen these specific areas of thought because my research questions are situated at their intersection, and I have selected these scholars because their theoretical

advancements in their respective fields are pertinent and especially applicable to my analysis.

I have researched a wide range of corpus material which includes Stefani's music albums, videos, lyrics, media appearances, concerts, and clothing lines. I have examined approximately twenty articles about Stefani (which quote her) from various popular magazines (online and print), including *Marie Claire*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Salon.com*, and *Rolling Stone*. The key music albums that I have examined are No Doubt's 1995's *Tragic Kingdom* and Stefani's solo debut album, 2004's *Love. Angel. Music. Baby.* While I have taken Stefani's history with No Doubt into consideration, I am focusing mainly on the contents of, and events surrounding, Stefani's first solo album.

The songs that I will focus on from *Love. Angel. Music. Baby.* are "What You Waiting For?," "Rich Girl," and "Harajuku Girls" - all of which contain lyrics that reference Stefani's Harajuku Girls. I will also be analyzing Stefani's music videos for "What You Waiting For?," "Rich Girl," and "Hollaback Girl," which also all feature the Harajuku Girls. As well, I will discuss Stefani's cover art for her debut solo album which features her as a queen with her Harajuku Girls posed subserviently in the background. In this instance, I will also look at how Stefani relates to her Harajuku Girls in public and during interviews such as in a Much Music 2005 interview in which Stefani tells her interviewer that the Harajuku Girls standing behind her (that she supposedly cannot see) are figments of her "imagination" (MuchMusic, 2005).

Like other celebrities such as Jennifer Lopez and Sean "Diddy" Combs who have crossed over to other business endeavors, Stefani too has embarked on her own clothing, accessory, doll, and perfume lines. I will examine not only Stefani and her Harajuku Girls

in regard to her music, but also in relation to her L.A.M.B clothing label, Harajuku Lovers accessory line, and limited-edition doll collection in order to reveal how she uses an intertextual format to name, brand, and cash in on her caché . I have chosen this corpus material to research because Stefani's own thoughts, actions, and representations are the primary sources of her Harajuku appropriation, and examining them gives us the greatest insight into how she has chosen to dream her Harajuku Girls into existence.

Stefani's appropriation of Harajuku culture has sparked numerous opinions and debates on the subjects of cultural appropriation, race relations and celebrity. My research includes analyzing websites which highlight these debates such as japundit.com (a website devoted to Japanese popular culture), gwenihana.blogspot.com (a blog for the "Free the Gwenihana Four" movement), and hyphenmagazine.com (an Asian American independent media website), as well as several opinion articles, including Elizabeth Clark's "Gwen's Girl Trouble" (thefighting44s.com) and Mihi Ahn's "Gwenihana" (Salon.com), both of which critically analyze the Gwen/Harajuku phenomenon. A consideration of the various opinions, debates, and controversies surrounding Stefani's Harajuku Girls will hopefully lead to greater understanding of the effects and implications of Stefani's representations and reveal some of the nuanced complexities of cultural appropriation, transculturation, and authenticity.

My research is also informed by a personal trip I took to Japan in August of 2006. During the week I spent in Tokyo I had the opportunity to spend time in Harajuku and talk to some of the local girls (who spoke English) about their experiences with cute culture as well as informally question them about what they think of Gwen Stefani (or if they have even heard of her). My experience in Harajuku illuminated for me just how

different the various styles of dress and distinct groups are within this neighbourhood subculture of funky-fashioned young women.

This thesis takes a visual and representational view of Gwen Stefani, rather than a musical studies perspective. This is because I am much more concerned about what she and her music represent than I am in analyzing Stefani's actual music. So for this project, I am making the choice to focus predominantly on Stefani in terms of power and visual representation rather than her audio production. In terms of interpretive frameworks, I am employing a semiotics approach (the study of signs and symbols) and Foucaultian discourse (how knowledge is produced in relation to power) in my analysis of Stefani's gendered, ethnic, and racial signifiers. In his *Course in General Linguistics*, linguist Ferdinand De Saussure introduces the theory of "semiologie" which argues that all signs are arbitrary and subject to change - that there is no inherent connection between a sign and its meaning. Rather, a word is only a *representation* of something; it is a "signifier" that must be combined with its "signified" to form a meaningful sign. Saussure believed that by scientifically dismantling signs we could come to understand how we create meaning from the physical and abstract world (Saussure, 1916). Saussure's notion of semiology provided the foundation for the field of study known as semiotics, which is now applied to a wider range of cultural practices and objects. While semiotics is more concerned with the meaning of signs, Foucault's complimentary yet distinctive theory of discourse is more focused on "the relations of power, not relations of meaning" (114-115) in regard to language *and* practice.

Representation, whether through language, words, images, gestures, objects or sounds, is central to the process by which meaning is produced. Therefore, these two

theoretical models (semiotics and discourse) are best suited for this project because they can help us to understand how Stefani as a sign, as well as a manufacturer of signs, constructs and creates meaning through her discursive representations, expressions, and statements, in relation to systems of power. My social constructionist approach seeks to analyze and decode not only Stefani's representations and connotative messages, but importantly, how she produces knowledge and meaning in regard to workings of power.

A SIGN IS BORN

Gwen Renée Stefani was born in Anaheim, California on October 3, 1969, to an Italian American father and mother of Irish and Scottish descent. She grew up in a strict Catholic household with an older brother and a younger brother and sister. In 1987, Gwen's older brother Eric and his friend John Spence founded the band No Doubt, a southern California blend of ska, new wave and punk music and invited Gwen to sing harmony with them. They then added bass player Tony Kanal, and he and Gwen began their well publicized eight year relationship. After they played some local venues, Spence committed suicide and Gwen stepped into the spotlight as lead singer. They then signed with Interscope Records in 1991 and made their debut in 1992 with their self-titled album *No Doubt* which sold a meager 30,000 copies. The band would shift again as Eric left to become an animator on *The Simpsons* and drummer Adrian Young and guitar player Tom Dumont joined the band (Blankstein, 2005).

In 1995, nearly a decade (and three albums) into their career, No Doubt achieved mainstream commercial success with the release of *Tragic Kingdom* which sold over 16 million copies. This album catapulted Stefani to super star status - you could not turn on the radio that year without hearing their breakthrough catchy song "Just a Girl," or

“Don’t Speak,” a song that details her and Kanal’s painful breakup. The video concept for “Don’t Speak” also addresses the problem of how band members were feeling overshadowed by all the attention Stefani was receiving. Though No Doubt’s popularity went into decline with 2000’s *The Return of Saturn*, they regained commercial visibility with their Jamaican-inspired 2002 album, *Rock Steady*. Their 5th album in 16 years, it featured four hit singles including “Hey, Baby” and “Underneath It All”. In September 2002, Stefani married Bush front-man Gavin Rossdale who she met in 1995 (Blankstein, 2005).

Stefani laid the groundwork for her solo career in 2000-01 when she collaborated with Moby on “South Side” and with Eve on “Let Me Blow Ya Mind”. In 2004, Stefani released her first solo album *Love. Angel. Music. Baby.*, a retro 80s style dance record featuring hits such as “What You Waiting For?,” “Rich Girl,” “Hollaback Girl,” and “Cool”. In addition to her platinum-selling album, Stefani started her L.A.M.B. fashion label and Harajuku Lovers accessory line, inspired by the street fashions of Tokyo. While her hit songs were dominating the charts, she also began her acting career in 2004, playing Jean Harlow opposite Leonardo DiCaprio in Martin Scorsese’s *The Aviator*. On May 26, 2006, Stefani and Rossdale’s son, Kingston James McGregor Rossdale, was born and by December 2006, Stefani was promoting her second solo album, *The Sweet Escape*.

THE INTERTEXTUAL CELEBRITY

Coined by Julia Kristeva, though initiated by Mikhail Bakhtin, the term “intertextuality” was first used by poststructuralist theorists in their attempts to destabilize notions of fixed meaning and objective interpretation. Kristeva introduced the

term "intertextualite" in 1966 while building upon Bakhtin's concept of dialogism –his examination of the multiple meanings and value laden dialogue into which every word enters (Allen, 2000). Synthesizing Ferdinand De Saussure's structuralist semiotic notion that language is a system which pre-exists the individual speaker with Bakhtin's ideas of dialogism, Kristeva formulated a new post-structuralist approach to poetic texts in which ideas such as authorship, causality, and finality are eradicated. In her essay "Word, Dialogue and Novel", Kristeva argues that "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity" (37).

Roland Barthes too, problematized the category of "authorship", treating the writer of a text as the arranger of the "already-written" rather than as its originator (1974: 21). Barthes' intertextual view of literature argued that, "A text is... a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations... the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them" (1977: 146). In effect, theorists of intertextuality propose that no text is original and unique in itself; rather it is a blend of references and quotations, always informed by other texts. However overused or ubiquitous the term *intertextuality* may be, it generally refers to the idea that any text, either literary or non-literary, is thought to be lacking any independent or original meaning – that any text is really part of a larger network of textual relations which it refers and relates to (Allen, 2000).

Gwen Stefani is the embodiment of what I refer to as the *intertextual celebrity*. Stefani's various works and identities are a mixture of intertextual cultural connections and references. She was even named Gwen after a stewardess in the best-selling 1968 novel *Airport*, which her mother read during her pregnancy and her middle name, Renée, was inspired by the song "Walk Away Renée" ("Gwen Stefani" Wikipedia.com). I argue that Stefani is not an artistic author as much as she is an arranger of "already written" quotations and textual references. Stefani's career and construction of difference has always been based on appropriating/sampling/borrowing from previous texts and cultures starting from the first time she ever went on stage at her high school talent show where she sang "I Have Confidence" from *The Sound of Music*, wearing the same tweed dress Maria wore in the movie (Blankstein, 2005). Furthermore, Stefani sported the Jamaican red, gold, and green with her reggae inspired album *Rock Steady*, instigated the white girl Indian bindi trend during *Tragic Kingdom*, appropriated Harajuku culture with *Love.Angel.Music.Baby.*, *L.A.M.B.* and *Harajuku Lovers*, sampled "If I were a Rich Man" from *Fiddler on the Roof* in "Rich Girl", drew from *Alice In Wonderland* in her "What You Waiting For?" video, and yodeled samples from "The Lonely Goatherd," a song from *The Sound of Music*, in her first single off *The Sweet Escape*, "Wind It Up".

Stefani functions as a gestalt entity – a collective configuration of elements so unified that its properties cannot be derived from the sum of its parts. As an *intertextual celebrity*, Stefani is much more than the sum of her parts. In addition to her various intertextual references, Stefani embodies a multiplicity of concurrent identities – yet she remains a powerful cohesive celebrity sign. Stefani is simultaneously the "pop star" (she released six albums with No Doubt and in 2006 unleashed her second solo album), the

“ex-girlfriend” (*Tragic Kingdom* was inspired by her public break-up with band-mate Tony Kanal), the “rock star wife” (she is married and has a baby with Bush front-man Gavin Rossdale), the “movie star” (in 2004 she played Jean Harlow opposite Leonardo DiCaprio in Martin Scorsese’s *The Aviator*), and the “fashion icon” (in 2003 she launched her clothing line, L.A.M.B.).

By embodying a multiplicity of identities, Stefani has something to offer everyone, thus being a more marketable commodity. In November 2006 Stefani released a limited edition series of eight dolls inspired by her *Love. Angel. Music. Baby.* album and tour fashions. The series of eight dolls features Love, Angel, Music, and Baby in a variety of outfits and four Stefani dolls, reflecting her various onstage incarnations; “Hollaback Gwen” (baggy pants and baby tee), “Tick Tock Gwen” (Lolita meets French maid), “Cool Gwen” (ode to Marilyn Monroe), and “Bananas Gwen” (marching band leader). “I thought the dolls would be a good opportunity to capture some of the key looks from the album and the tour,” said Stefani. “The Harajuku Girls and I wore such wicked costumes we had to share them with the world again” (Gwenstefani.com 10/27/06).

Using images and characters from her music videos and onstage performances, each doll comes with interchangeable clothes along with accessory collectibles such as posters, pocket mirrors, lipstick, and trading cards. A metaphor for how Stefani offers multiple concurrent identities to her audience, this doll line offers different “Gwens” for different folks. Like potato chips, she comes in many different flavours and styles so that everyone can consume her brand.



(Stefani's doll line, Gwenstefani.com 10/27/06)

As a gestalt entity, Stefani references other celebrities in her music and appearance. Stefani channels icons such as Cyndi Lauper, Debbie Harry, and Betty Boop but most notably, she follows from the same lineage of peroxide blondes as Jean Harlow, Marilyn Monroe, and Madonna. So, it was quite fitting that she played Jean Harlow (her “great grandmother” of sorts) in Scorsese’s 2004 film, *The Aviator*. And, in her music video for “Cool” – her only video off the album that does not feature her Harajuku Girls - Stefani evoked Marilyn Monroe in her appearance which added an air of class and sophistication to her nostalgic concept. But, more than anyone, Stefani is most often compared to Madonna - her symbolic mother. Besides the fact that these two platinum blondes both had punk aesthetic before turning to high fashion, or that they both have English husbands and Italian fathers, and that they are apparently even related by marriage (Stefani claims that her great-aunt married a Ciccone from Detroit) (lyricsystem.com 02/15/07), they both engage in a system of intertextuality that keeps them, as star signs, from ever being grounded. From Madonna’s “blonde ambition”, “cowgirl getup” and “geisha-glam” to Stefani’s “Indian chic”, “Jamaican cool” and “Harajuku fashion”, their performative looks have resisted any type of static image or

signification, thus not allowing critics to pigeonhole them into any one “authentic” identity. Stefani may be “Just a Girl,” but like Madonna, she begs the question: “*Who’s That Girl?*”

As a result of Madonna’s ability to transform herself and her favoring of fragmentation and play over substance and authenticity, Rahul Gairola describes Madonna as a “postmodern icon”. Gairola argues that, “If indeed ‘postmodern’ as a theoretical adjective describes the evolution of modernity with its fragmentary experiences that bombard the subject and characterize life approaching the twenty-first century, few contemporary performers deserve to be characterized as such more than does Madonna. Her ‘identity’ cannot be relegated to a single specific look since its most discernable characteristic is the dynamic nature of metamorphosis, change and growth” (105). As a postmodern icon, Madonna’s constant re-invention, transformation, and emulation resist any stable definition of identity – she is no more the Material Girl than she is Kabbala Esther or English Madge.

Likewise, Stefani could be considered a postmodern icon in that she too signifies the liberating instability of signification found in the modern celebrity. While Stefani is most known for her signature platinum-blonde hair, washboard abs and cherry red lips, her look is ever-changing. For example, in 1995 she wore plaid pants and bedraggled suspenders, in 1997 Stefani fashioned a sari wrap and bindi, in 2000 Stefani had bright pink hair and braces, in 2001 she sported a skater punk-meets-reggae Rasta look, in 2002 she donned a John Galliano wedding gown for her nuptials, in 2005 Stefani was clad in Mad Hatter Harajuku styles, in 2006 a pregnant Stefani wore a L.A.M.B. designed

leopard print maternity dress for the Grammys, and in 2006 she styled a “coke whore lady” look inspired by Michelle Pfeiffer’s character in *Scarface* (Collis 34-35).

From So-Cal ska-princess skater gear to 40s Hollywood glamour to Japanese street fashion, Stefani’s chameleonic looks consist of fragmented pieces. Moreover, Stefani has marked her changing looks and differences through poaching, borrowing, and sampling various cultures, genres and texts. In P. David Marshall’s chapter, “The Meanings of the Popular Music Celebrity: The Construction of Distinctive Authenticity”, in his book, *Celebrity and Power*, he argues that pop stars’ new or transformed *styles* are techniques for establishing authenticity and difference. Marshall states that:

Style represents a statement of difference as well as a statement of solidarity with the particular audience. A change in style indicates a reassertion by the performer of his or her own authenticity. Any style eventually loses its power to represent difference, as the marketplace continuously appropriates the idiosyncrasies of codes of style for commodity innovation. Thus, the popular music performer is also continuously appropriating new representations of individuality through style.” (162)

These “styles” are often obtained by the music performer through embodying foreign subcultures or ethnicities. As a global media celebrity, Stefani’s embodiment of Indian, Jamaican, and Harajuku cultures underlies her claim to an authentic nature and to marking her own exotic difference. And as Williamson notes, “appropriation of other’s people’s dress is fashionable provided it is perfectly clear that you are, in fact, *different* from whoever would normally wear such clothes” (115). Whether Stefani is sporting an Indian sari and bindi, Jamaican Rasta wear, or Harajuku-inspired clothing, it is only fashionable because she is a white person wearing it. These foreign cultures are rearticulated by Stefani as a statement of individuality and difference. Marshall argues that “Fundamental to the construction of the popular music celebrity is the conveyance of both *commitment* and *difference*” (163). By *commitment*, he is referring to the audience’s

intimate relationship with the star and the manner in which the pop star conveys authenticity and solidarity with his or her fans - i.e. blogs, interviews, talking on stage. By *difference*, Marshall means differentiation from other performers through style, as it is necessary for commodity production.

In the celebrity galaxy, each star is a sign that is partially constructed in opposition to, in contradistinction to, or in relation to other celebrities. Stefani's cultural power depends on her differentiation from other stars; therefore, she uses exotic otherness in order to distinguish herself as a distinct entity. Stefani engages in a system of intertextuality in order to brand herself as a unique global celebrity 'personality' and fashion icon. She not only distances herself from other popular music celebrities, but perhaps Stefani's most poignant move of distinction was distancing herself from the collective identity of No Doubt, thus emerging as an individual star.

This chapter has so far introduced Gwen Stefani as (not just) a girl from Orange County, a discursive sign, a commodity of consumption, a postmodern icon, and in particular, an intertextual celebrity. I have claimed that in order for Stefani to distinguish herself in the worlds of music and fashion, she strategically appropriates and commodifies other cultures, ethnicities, and past texts. Because Stefani embodies a multiplicity of performative identities and constantly samples from what is "already written", her intertextual metamorphoses and cross-referencing separates her from other celebrities who consistently perform and purport one "authentic" subjectivity. Intertextual celebrities differ from celebrities who signify a constant and stable image and whose value is based on their talent achievements rather than their spectacle. Because most modern celebrities dominate predominantly in one area of public life and do not

draw as much from others, cross reference, or explicitly borrow from past texts, they cast a smaller symbolic net. Therefore, this lack of malleability and ability to transform and reinvent causes most stars to fall and burn out faster than the intertextual celebrity.

The next chapter will begin by looking at the launch of Stefani's solo career in 2004, examining her appropriation and commodification of Harajuku culture in regard to her music videos and lyrics, red carpet antics, interviews, and clothing labels. I will look specifically at how she reinforces Orientalist ideas of Asian women in her representation and treatment of her four Harajuku Girls.

Chapter Two

HARAJUKU GIRLS TO THE RESCUE: GWEN'S NEW-FASHIONED ORIENTALISM

HURRY UP AND COME AND SAVE ME

When Gwen Stefani set out to create her first solo album *Love. Angel. Music. Baby.*, she confessed to several interviewers that she had lacked inspiration. She had just set out on her own without her band, No Doubt, to create her own 80s style electro dance album and she had become overwhelmed with insecurity. Stefani told *Rolling Stone Magazine*, “I cried before I went into the studio...I was just terrified” (qtd. in Eliscu par 22). Plagued by “writer’s block” she needed a muse, or four for that matter, to come to her rescue.

Stefani was then struck with the idea to dedicate a song to the Japanese fashionistas of Harajuku whom she had admired ever since her first visit to Tokyo in 1996. Stefani recalls, “Everyone had this crazy personal style... The last couple times I was there, it had evolved into all these different things like Gothic Lolitas and these girls with blond hair and dark tans and high-heel shoes...I did a shout out to them: ‘Harajuku girls, you got the wicked style.’ That’s when the dream started” (qtd. in Eliscu par 23).

According to *Marie Claire Magazine*, the idea of recruiting a quartet of Japanese back-up dancers came to Stefani in a dream (Swimmer par 18). In real life, Stefani manifested four “Harajuku Girls” who would submissively follow her around to interviews and red carpet events, perform in her videos and on tour, be referred to in Stefani’s lyrics, inspire her “Harajuku Lovers” accessory line, and in an effort to take

cross-marketing to the fullest, Stefani would name them “Love”, “Angel”, “Music”, and “Baby” after her new album (released November 23, 2004) and fashion label, L.A.M.B..



(Stefani and her Harajuku Girls, Hyphenmagazine.com 02/15/07)

This chapter examines Stefani’s appropriation and commodification of Harajuku culture by taking a closer analysis of the song lyrics, music videos, media representations, and clothing and accessory lines surrounding *Love. Angel. Music. Baby.* Although there has been no academic writing on Stefani and her Harajuku Girls, there are some popular articles such as Ahn’s “Gwenihana” and Clark’s “Gwen’s Girl Trouble” which have stirred up debate by critically calling into question Stefani’s appropriation of Harajuku culture. Siding with critics such as Ahn and Clark, this chapter reveals how Stefani represents and relates to her Harajuku Girls in ways which reinforce sexist and racist Orientalist concepts of Asian women, specifically how she renders them submissive human accessories. I contend that Stefani uses her Harajuku Others in order to highlight

her own blonde-whiteness, add exotic spice to her spectacle, and brand herself in the worlds of celebrity and fashion as a distinct entity.

HARAJUKU HIPSTERS

So who are the stylish hipster girls of Harajuku to whom Stefani has looked for her inspiration? The district of Harajuku came into its own in 1964 after the Olympic Games, when the once residential neighbourhood was stamped with a cool new modern image. Since the 1970s, Harajuku has been a trendsetter, a place that has symbolized youth decadence and rebellion. Today, Harajuku remains the epicenter of Tokyo's outrageous youth culture. Harajuku's main boulevard is home to Omote-sando which features high-end shops such as Louis Vuitton, Prada, Issey Miyake, and Gucci, while the narrow alleyway of Takeshita Street and its neighboring side streets offer the latest in trendy teenage kitsch and sub-cultural fetish. On Sundays, the Jingubashi bridge outside of Yoyogi Park serves as the meeting place for crowds of costume-clad teenage girls (and a few boys) who are known for their mixing together of bizarre styles and colours of clothing. While the majority of these girls wear school uniforms during the week, on Sundays they travel by train for up to several hours to Harajuku (toting small luggage bags) in order to dress-up, socialize, eat fast-food and pose for tourists' photos (Kubo par 6-9; Buckley 187-188).

While Stefani's Harajuku Girls' eccentric outfits are a mish-mash of several different Harajuku fashion trends (some ancient), the actual fashion-savvy girls of Harajuku belong to quite distinct genres of style which carry strict guidelines and rules for the girls who follow them – they dress crazily albeit in an orderly fashion. For example, the girls who hang out on the Jingubashi bridge embrace a Gothic-Lolita

(gosurori) look. Their Halloween-like styles resemble a mix of Victorian baby-doll cuteness and gothic noire, a look that became well-established in the late 90s.



(Gothic Lolita and baby doll looks, Matlow 2006)

A variation of this popular genre is “Cos-play,” short for “costume play”. The Cos-play girls mainly dress up as their favourite characters from manga, anime, video games and J-pop bands. The girls that Stefani seems to be singing about are the twenty-something Omote-sando hipsters whose hybridized fashions entail layering American vintage with traditional Japanese costume and the latest couture. Many make their own home-made costumes and then accessorize with high fashion pieces from designers such as Vivienne Westwood. These subcultures of Japanese women were previously generally unknown outside of Japan before Stefani “discovered” them and made Harajuku famous in America (Kubo par 13/18).

Stefani’s fascination and envy of Harajuku culture has led her to appropriate it in ways that often mock and undermine, making her performance one that always upstages her hired Harajuku help. For example, the Harajuku Girls function as background scenery during interviews while Stefani pretends that they are her invisible imaginary friends.

Stefani's four Harajuku Girls are not portrayed as the self-expressing fashionistas of Tokyo's most style-conscious neighbourhood, but more as Tamagotchi virtual pets. While the subcultures of young women who frequent Harajuku are quite complex and distinct, Stefani's Harajuku Girls are one note. On the album cover of *Love. Angel. Music. Baby.*, the Harajuku Girls are portrayed as Asian submissives in Stefani's royal court - Stefani is depicted as a queen, sitting on a throne, complete with crown and scepter while the Harajuku Girls are blurred behind her as to represent dream images. This cover art surely sets the tone.

GWEN IN WONDERLAND

Stefani likes to pretend that she actually dreamt her Harajuku Girls into existence – that they are figments of her imagination who have appeared to save her from her uninspired state. The music video for her first single “What You Waiting For?” portrays this concept. It begins with Stefani feeling the pressure to create her album as a managerial voice on the phone insists that she get started in the studio but Stefani repeats back that she “needs inspiration!”. She then answers a bulletin, advertising a remedy for writer's block. As the chorus for this song goes, “You got your million dollar contract/And they're all waiting for your hot track” - obviously the pressure was on. An oversized pocket-watch (perhaps also symbolizing her maternal clock) begins the back-beat, “tick-tock, tick-tock”, and Stefani is transcended from her piano to an Alice-in-Wonderland dream world.

The video goes back and forth between Stefani at the piano in her studio creating the song and her as Alice, chasing a Harajuku-bunny in her psychedelic rabbit-hole existence. The Harajuku Girls appear to her in both scenes; in Gwen's Wonderland, they

are dressed as dolled-up Vivienne Westwood-clad geishas at Stefani's tea party (while she stomps on the table), and in her studio, they sit in a line wearing similar grey (yet funky designer) school-girl uniforms with pink circles on their expressionless faces. At one point, Stefani is drowning and she sings, "I can't wait to go back to Japan/ Get me lots of brand new fans/Osaka, Tokyo/You Harajuku girls/Damn, you've got some wicked style" while two of her Harajuku Girls come to save her in a pool on upturned umbrellas. Meanwhile, in the studio, Stefani sings and shakes her booty at the homogeneous quadruplets while they watch passively. At the end, the foursome put their hands up to their faces and giggle like perfect little Asian school-girls.

ORIENTALISM BACK IN STYLE

The "Oriental mystique" has long existed as a predominant fascination of the western world, as it has offered western culture a sense of exoticism and intrigue. In his 1978 book *Orientalism*, Edward Said explored how the West has discursively constructed the East in order to define itself by what it is not – exotic, romantic, mysterious, threatening, etc. For Said, Orientalism is the set of images, categories, and classifications that have produced the Orient as a fictional object of western understanding. "The Orient that appears in Orientalism, then, is a system of representation framed by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and later, Western empire" (Said, 1978). By creating a mythical image of the Orient, the West can rationalize its authority over its Asian other.

In *The Asian Mystique*, Sheridan Prasso clarifies how since the beginning of the 20th century, the "Orient" has come to be defined by the West as Asian countries of East Asia and Southeast Asia, whereas the West had previously defined the "Orient" as also

including the Middle East, South Asia, and Central Asia (25). Even though Said was writing in the context of the representation of the Middle East in Western literature and scholarship from a historical perspective, the legacy of Orientalism clearly lives on. Prasso states that, "Even now, centuries after the first mystical sexual fascination began, modern writers speak of being 'seduced' by Asia. Many attribute their interest, first of all, in Asian women and the lure of the exotic" (10). She argues that in the last 100 years, western popular culture, specifically Hollywood, has been the largest influence in the formation of racist and sexist "Oriental" images as the result of the way specifically Asian women have typically been depicted. Prasso notes how, "The image of the submissive, subservient, exotic Oriental is a pervasive one: the tea-serving geisha, the sex nymph, the weeping war victim, the heart-of-gold prostitute" (8).

Sumiko Iwao states in her book "The Japanese Woman" that, "The kimono-clad, bamboo parasol-toting, bowing female walking three paces behind her husband remains the image many Westerners hold of the typical Japanese woman" (1). Modern modes of communication have not dispelled the Oriental female exoticism that first captured western imaginations in the 19th century. Today, Stefani's fetishization of her Harajuku Girls does little to reflect the changing realities of Japanese women but rather reinforces old-fashioned Orientalist ideas of Asian women as exotic, subservient, mysterious, sexual, docile, and homogeneous. Yet, Stefani also offers a new retailored type of fashionable Orientalism. Through her particular branding of young stylish Japanese femininity, Stefani has managed to make old clichés new and trendy. Her Harajuku Girls do not evoke merely one Orientalist female archetype, but rather they present a pastiche of fashionable and exotic (traditional and modern) feminine imagery that is attractive to

men and perhaps even more palatable for her young female fans. The Harajuku Girls are super cute, cool, fashionable, and they walk “three paces behind” Stefani - their female, white, western love object of envy.

Stefani often has her Harajuku Girls bowing down to her or posing as Lolita-like school girls or “giggling geishas” in the backdrop while she stands strong and steady in the foreground. She stands nearly a foot taller than her Harajuku Girls and always situates herself in front or above them. She is the pastor, they are her l.a.m.b.s. Stefani perpetually plays up the Harajuku Girls’ exotic difference in order to highlight her white subjectivity. Her individuality is always accentuated, while the Harajuku Girls are portrayed as a homogeneous collective. The Harajuku Girls frame Stefani in public, on stage, and in photographs, wearing (mainly) uniform Orientalist costumes and make-up in order to reinforce Stefani’s hyper-blonde-white-difference.



(Stefani and her Harajuku Girls, Gwenstefani.com 05/01/06)

In her article “Gwen’s Girl Trouble,” writer Elizabeth Clark states that, “Like previous platinum blonde sex symbols (Jean Harlow, Marilyn Monroe, Madonna),

[Stefani's] peroxide whiteness is a beauty ideal that Asian women will never reach. Even white women have to work at it: Stefani herself isn't even that white without peroxide. She is whiteness heightened, whiteness constructed to an almost impossible standard of beauty" (par 15). Like Madonna (another faux-blonde white woman who has appropriated other cultures in order to leverage herself), Stefani was born a natural brunette from an Italian-American background and has developed a healthy dose of "blonde ambition". Stefani works hard constructing and maintaining her "blonde beauty" artifice. In order to help attain her goal of achieving racial aesthetic superiority, she defines herself in opposition to her fictionalized Harajuku Others; they are eastern, ethnic, girlish, the same, and silent, while she is western, white, parental, different, and vocal.

Cultural theorist bell hooks' 1992 essay, "Madonna: Plantation Mistress or Soul Sister?", argues that in order for Madonna to maintain her image as the "quintessential white girl", she must always position herself as an outsider in relation to black culture. hooks states that, "It is that position of outsider that enables her to colonize and appropriate black experience for her own opportunistic ends even as she attempts to mask her acts of racist aggression as affirmation" (159). Likewise, Stefani positions herself as an outsider to Harajuku culture, while masking her racist aggression under the guise of fascination: Stefani sings in her song "Harajuku Girls," "I'm fascinated by the Japanese fashion scene/Just an American girl in the Tokyo streets".

Stefani is constantly articulating and flaunting her fascination and envy for Harajuku culture, but as hooks remarks, "The thing about envy is that it is always ready to destroy, erase, take-over, and consume the desired object" (157). That is just what

Stefani does by exploiting and commodifying Harajuku culture for her own opportunistic purposes in ways that reinforce Orientalist notions of Asian women, and what Madonna attempted to do by commodifying and appropriating black culture in ways that mocked and undermined.

For example, in Madonna's music video for "Like a Prayer," the only role black women played was to catch the "angelic" Madonna as she was falling. hooks notes that, "the black characters in *Like a Prayer* remind one of those early Hollywood depictions of singing black slaves in the great plantation movies" (162). By portraying marginalized groups as subordinate, Madonna bolstered and perpetuated the white supremacist *status quo*. In the same fashion, Stefani's portrayal of Japanese women as sexed-up silent submissives sent to "save" her, such as in the video "What You Waiting For?", reinscribes dominant racist and sexist notions. Whether these two blonde white centerpieces are falling or drowning, both of them count on their racialized Others – who have been given the roles of accommodating scenery – to save them from their dull whiteness.

In her essay "Eating the Other," hooks explains that dominant white culture's interest in the Other is not indicative of equality, but rather the "...west's fascination of Otherness is because of its own crisis of identity" (22). Consequently, white culture seeks out other cultures in order to enhance its own experience of bland whiteness. hooks states that, "Within Commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (21). The Harajuku Girls function as exotic ethnic flavour, created to spice up Stefani's whitewashed, suburban, Orange County feel that people have associated with her and No Doubt in the past.

Stefani also wants to become one with her oh-so-fascinating Harajuku Others, part of the funky-dressed sisterhood. Anthropologist Sherry Ortner describes Orientalism as “not only a kind of racist ‘othering’, but also at the same time a yearning for solidarity and even identity with the other...” (140). Orientalist practices are not just forms of overt combative racism, but they also exist through more subtle identification with the “Other”. Stefani repeats several times in “Harajuku Girls,” “Harajuku girls you got the wicked style/I like the way that you are/I am your biggest fan”. Stefani wants to be a *white* version of a Harajuku Girl; she wants to embody their “wicked style” while maintaining her whiteness.

By positioning herself as their “biggest fan”, Stefani can deflect accusations of racism. Perhaps the reason that Stefani’s portrayal of her Harajuku Girls does not come off as racist to many people is because she masks her exoticization of Harajuku culture under the guise of praise which reinforces the notion of racism as negative stereotyping rather than a complex interplay of power relations rooted in white supremacy. For example, on one online message board, a poster named Tallulah states, “I have to say that if I thought Gwen were ‘parading’ these girls around to show dominance over another, I would be irate. However, she seems to adore and admire the beauty of the costume, the makeup, the culture” (popwatch.ew.com 11/20/05). In her article “Harajuku Girls Co-opted,” Kubo asks whether Stefani’s fascination with the Harajuku Girls is “Pure love or old-fashioned Orientalism?” (par 30). The trouble is that it is hard to distinguish the two. Just because Stefani may “adore” and “admire” her Harajuku Girls, does not exonerate her from being racist and domineering at the same time. In actuality, one dimensional

praise and admiration simplifies and often patronizes diverse and dynamic individuals into cartoon-like racialized stereotypes.

On an episode of *Seinfeld*, Elaine accuses Jerry of being racist because he declares that he “like[s] Chinese women”, and he responds by asking, “If I *like* their race, how can that be racist?” (qtd. in Clark par 19). In her article “Yellow Fever,” Vickie Chang notes, “Asian fetishism has a long history of being brushed off as a compliment, rather than offensive or bigoted. I’ve been told I ought to be flattered that so many non-Asian men ‘prefer’ Asians and Asian American women. But the coalescing of an ethnicity into a whole, whether exotic, erotic, oversexed or virginal, is a real issue, collectively and individually” (par 32).

Prasso argues that most Americans associate “racism” with only overt discrimination or antagonism towards another race, and not also any classifications that are in the form of pre-judgments or prejudices. She proposes that, “Perhaps, then, we need to hyphenate the word to show its distinctions, ‘racism’ as negative, and ‘race-ism’ as neutral or positive” (133). Like white men who “love Asian women”, or politicians who label Asians “model minorities”, Stefani’s praising of Harajuku style may be the more “positive” side of Orientalism, but it is nonetheless part the discursive racist tradition of the West subjugating the East through reinforcing certain classifications.

ACCESSORY GIRLS

Stefani may “love” her Harajuku Girls, but she renders them human accessories, functioning in the same fashion as a Louis Vuitton hand-bag, Vivienne Westwood belt, or tea-cup Chihuahua. Stefani’s second single “Rich Girl” is an appropriation of *Fiddler on the Roof*’s “If I Were a Rich Man” (about Jewish ghetto life in Eastern Europe). In the

original musical, Tevye dreams of buying chickens, in Stefani's version, she dreams of buying Harajuku Girls. This song, a collaboration with rapper Eve, also echoes Stefani's wish to be "rescued" by Harajuku inspiration.

According to *Harper's Bazaar*, the David LaChapelle directed video was inspired by a classic Vivienne Westwood ad from the 80s (Eaton par 13). The video goes back and forth between four stereotypical young giggly Japanese school-girls playing with a toy ship and Gwen and Eve dolls in an aquarium (foreshadowing for her new doll line), and Gwen and Eve on a pirate ship dancing and singing surrounded by back-up dancers, including the Harajuku Girls. However, it is not Gwen or Eve who are portrayed as "dolls" in this video, but rather the Harajuku Girls - life-size dolls complete with big bows in their hair.

In "Rich Girl," Stefani talks about all the things she would buy if she (cough, cough) were a "rich girl". She sings, "I'd buy everything/Clean out Vivienne Westwood/In my Galliano gown/No, wouldn't just have one hood/A Hollywood mansion if I could/Please book me first-class to my fancy house in London town." Then at the bridge she sings, "I'd get me four Harajuku Girls to/Inspire me and they'd come to my rescue/I'd dress them wicked, I'd give them names/Love, Angel, Music, Baby/Hurry up and come and save me." As they get their split-second close-ups, the Harajuku Girls show no emotion and never look into the camera - only Stefani does. They either dance in the background or are caressed like mannequins by Stefani. As Clark observes, the Harajuku Girls "are not real persons in their own right, but figments of Stefani's imagination, objects to be bought and dressed up" (par 11). In this song, Stefani refers to

her Harajuku Girls as commodities to be bought (or shop-lifted) in the same manner as the mansions and clothes she would purchase.

LOST IN TRANSACTION

Marxist political economy claims that commodification takes place when economic value is assigned to something that traditionally would not be considered in economic terms. In this case, the Harajuku Girls and their exotic Otherness become marketable commodities, things to be bought, sold and exchanged. In *Capital*, Marx introduces the theory of “commodity fetishism” which refers to the illusion that commodities have a life of their own - that they magically appear for people to purchase or exchange. Marx states that, “the existence of the things qua commodities, and the value-relation between the products of labour which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no connection with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom. There it is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a *relation between things*. ... This I call the *Fetishism* ... of commodities” (165). Marx argues that objects become so fetishized by the market that it is no longer important what they are, or in this case, who they are – all that matters is the value that is associated with them.

As commodities, the Harajuku Girls’ value has nothing to do with them being individuals or subjects, but rather with what they have come to represent, or their external value, within a state of social relationships. They are not portrayed as people, but rather as Stefani’s stylish accessories - things to consume, things to help sell her products. Describing her feeling of being an Aboriginal object of consumption, Métis/Cree writer and filmmaker Loretta Todd argues, “By being fetishized, we become mere objects of

consumption, which initiates a production of desire: we become style, fashion, commodity; a source of script material, of choreographic inspiration, of literary realism” (417). The Harajuku Girls’ exotic otherness helps Stefani’s marketability, not only in dollar value, but in terms of symbolic and stylistic worth. Stefani’s Harajuku Girls are valuable commodities to her in that their cultural difference helps her to brand herself, her fashion and accessory lines, and gives her something unique to sell to her audience.

In "Woman is an Island: Femininity and Colonization," Judith Williamson looks at how “women” have been *vehicles* for the representation of difference and otherness within mass culture. Williamson argues that, like islands, women have been colonized and exoticized, exploited for labor and resources, and transformed into a “vacation” site. She notes how capitalism continuously searches for new areas, styles, and subcultures to colonize. Founded on imperialist relations, capitalism aims to destroy any genuine difference but the same time it must construct difference in order to signify itself at all. Williamson states, “Economically we need the Other, even as politically we seek to eliminate it” (112). In this case, Stefani’s exoticized Harajuku Others are “vehicles” for the representation of difference – their *meaning* becomes rearticulated as “difference” and “exotic otherness”. It is ironic that Stefani commodifies the Harajuku Girls for their difference and uniqueness, yet in the end, she is the only individual one, embodying a distinct style that upstages her homogeneous Harajuku background. As fetish and other, the Harajuku Girls’ difference becomes reduced to a mere symbol or concept.

Stefani fetishizes and commodifies her Harajuku Girl accessories, transforming them into a “vacation” site in which to play out her dreams of domination. In “Eating the Other,” bell hooks explores how the commodification and exploitation of Otherness

brings to the surface fantasies about contact with the Other that are embedded in the structure of white supremacy. She states, “When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground” (23).

For example, the way in which Stefani relates to her Harajuku Girls is reminiscent of the way Madonna related to her back-up dancers in the 90s. In the film, *Truth or Dare: In Bed with Madonna*, Madonna condescendingly asserts that she “like[s] to play mother” to her (emotionally crippled) inter-racial back-up dancers (163). Likewise, Stefani likes to “play mother” to her Harajuku Girls in the same way that a young girl would play mommy with her dolls – dressing them up, giving them names, and parading them around like the coolest new toys on the market. This has become even more apparent in her recent video for “Wind It Up” off her new album *The Sweet Escape*, in which she revisits the role of Maria from *The Sound of Music* – yet this time, her Harajuku Girls play the Von Trapp children.

ON THE L.A.M.B.

Stefani has taken her limited knowledge of Harajuku culture to brand and exploit this visible sub-culture of Japanese women - not only within her image and music, but also in her fashion lines. Wikipedia defines a “brand” as “a symbolic embodiment of all the information connected to a company, product or service” (“Brand” wikipedia.com). As a brand, “Gwen Stefani,” has extended herself beyond the arena of music production to the world of fashion. Williamson notes that, “fashion is the area of social communication where the function of difference is perhaps most vividly seen” (115). Stefani has commodified Harajuku culture’s exoticness, turning it into a marketable logo

and brand, in order to distinguish herself as unique in an ever competitive fashion market. Described by *Harper's Bazaar* as an “edgy clothing line stacked with wacky-waistline pants, Old English-lettered sweaters and va-va-va-vintage-looking halter tops and dresses” (Eaton par 9)), Stefani’s Harajuku-inspired fashion line L.A.M.B., named after her late dog Lamb, first appeared in February 2004. Stefani first started out designing bags for Le Sportsac, and that is when she decided that L.A.M.B. would also be an acronym for “Love. Angel. Music. Baby.”

Not only is her own fashion label, L.A.M.B., plugged at every chance – “See Stefani and her L.A.M.B., I rock the Fetish People, you know who I am...”, Eve sings in “Rich Girl,” but Stefani herself has become a walking/talking/singing advertisement for high-end Orientalist fashion houses. In “Harajuku Girls,” she sings about Comme Des Garcons, Vivienne Westwood, Hysteric Glamour, Yoji Yamamoto, John Galliano and of course, L.A.M.B.. On one UK talk show, Stefani also remarked, “Every time I fly into London, it’s like let’s see if I can go give all my money to Vivienne Westwood today. She’s such a genius.” When the interviewer asked if Westwood gives her a discount, Stefani replied in a baby voice, “Sometimes. She hooks me up... she knows that I’m her biggest fan.” (Popworld 04/05). And I thought Stefani was the Harajuku Girls’ “biggest fan”.

Stefani also has a (more pedestrian) fashion and accessory line of “Harajuku Lovers” merchandise which includes clothes, underwear, handbags, houseware, and other accessories, all adorned with the “Harajuku Lovers” logo. Stefani has also taken her influence to the world of technology by designing a US\$249 Hewlett Packard Photosmart 4.1 MP digital camera (50\$ more than the similar model made by HP w/o the “HL”

finish). This Harajuku Lovers camera was released in a limited edition with a Stefani-designed case and biographical DVD (Walker par 1).

Even though Stefani joked in *Rolling Stone*, “I was thinking about calling the album *Stolen Goods... Or It Was Yours and Now It’s Mine*” (qtd. in Eliscu par 25), she continuously frames her appropriation of Harajuku culture as “inspiration” and not “stealing”. In “Harajuku Girls,” she sings, “Did you see your inspiration in my latest collection?” In the same song she also praises them for their “visual grammar”, and tells them their “accessories are dead on”. However, not only is Stefani’s envy and admiration leading her to appropriate Harajuku gals’ style and repackage it for her own accessory and clothing lines, but she also plans to sell it back to them! - “Just wait till you get your little hands on L.A.M.B.”, she then sings.

What does it mean for Stefani to admire these Tokyo fashion hipsters primarily for their fashion-savvy shopping abilities and “visual grammar”, and in turn, Stefani fans (mainly young western women dubbed “Gwenabees”) consume her for her commodification of consumerism? *New York Times* columnist Rob Walker states, “The real star behind the camera is not Stefani, but a specific breed of global hyperconsumer – as translated by Stefani. If Stefani is a fan of these consumers, and you are a fan of Stefani’s, then you should buy her product/tribute to them. It is the commodification of commodification” (par 4). Stemming from Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism, Walker’s concept of “the commodification of commodification” describes a more developed, accelerated, intensified, and indirect process of commodification. Stefani is selling her products wrapped-up in the image of Harajuku culture – as translated by her.

She uses cultural difference and Orientalism in order to brand herself as a distinct entity and sell the idea of the exotic global fashion-savvy consumer to her consumers.

Jackie Stacey's essay, "The Global Within," explores the West's subjective embodiment of global cultures and argues that in consumer culture, commodities become "globalized" as a way of marketing universal appeal and offering a sense of global unity. Through consumption of "globalized" products, consumers can achieve a sense of transcendent mobility, connecting freely to the "others" of the world. Stacey argues that the "global provides ways of constituting new universalisms through a repertoire of images, products and practices that seem to come from elsewhere: third world icons, exotic ingredients, mystical practices" (141). Stefani uses her Harajuku Girls to offer a sense of exotic Otherness to her western consumers. Harajuku culture becomes a "consumable local" for which to offer Stefani fans personal transformation via their consumption of Stefani.

However, Stefani's commodification of fashionable foreign Otherness displaces and decontextualizes the actual subjects who live Harajuku culture. hooks notes how the world of fashion has realized that the commodification and exploitation of Otherness can help sell products. But, as hooks argues, "the commodification of difference promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, via exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other's history through a process of decontextualization" (31). Stefani has catapulted (her idea of) Harajuku culture from the catwalk streets of Tokyo, erasing any trace of its history and context in the process.

In her song “Vogue,” Madonna simultaneously ahistoricizes the underground vogue dance subculture by creating her own decontextualized – or simply false – historical account that works for her white agenda. Madonna sings, “Greta Garbo, and Monroe/Dietrich and DiMaggio/Marlon Brando, Jimmy Dean/On the cover of a magazine/Grace Kelly; Harlow, Jean/Picture of a beauty queen...Don’t just stand there, let’s get to it/Strike a pose, there’s nothing to it/ Vogue, vogue” (Madonna, “Vogue”). Arising from the Harlem ballrooms of the 1930s, and evolving in the drag ballrooms of New York during the 70s and 80s, the posing dance of *vogueing*, popularized mainly by black and Hispanic gay men, existed long before Madonna introduced it into mainstream popular culture. But in her song, Madonna creates her own white history of *vogueing* and in the process debases and erases her Others’ past.

Similarly, Stefani’s representation of Harajuku culture – her Harajuku Girls, music, clothing and accessory lines - is decontextualized. Her Harajuku Girls do not look anything like photographer Shoichi Aoki’s two books of portraits, *Fruits* and *Fresh Fruits*, which feature the stylish hipsters of Harajuku who are in charge of their own unique image and look directly into the camera with confidence. Aoki has documented the DIY street fashion of Harajuku since the mid 1990s and his photos situate and showcase the diversity, creativity and self-expression of this subculture of Tokyo youth (Aoki, 2001; 2005).

Stefani’s branding of this whole subculture of Japanese women has turned it into a mere logo, void of history and context. Because Stefani is the first global celebrity to tap into this subculture and mine it for mainstream popular culture, she therefore takes credit for Harajuku fashion - she is the one who “dress[es] them up wicked and give[s]

them names” (“Rich Girl”) – a sort of (re)writing of history. In the course of commodifying Harajuku gals’ fashion, Stefani debases their historical significance, reducing their complex culture and ethnicity into a mere sellable “style”.

SILENCE OF THE L.A.M.B.S.

Stefani has taken the street-styling gals of Tokyo and turned them into silent subservient clichés. During the multitude of red carpet walks and award show performances Stefani attended from 2004-2006, the Harajuku Girls’ movements were all choreographed and rehearsed – they rarely ever looked into the camera, and they did such things as follow silently behind her, giggle behind their hands, and bow down to her. Stefani renders the women in her entourage literally as silent as Hello Kitty (who has no mouth). It has been rumoured that Stefani has her Harajuku Girls under strict contract to speak only Japanese in public (or not at all) (Ahn par 6). During television interviews, Stefani surrounds herself with the Harajuku mutes who always appear bored-to-death (but who can blame them, Stefani repeats the same old recycled sound-bites in every interview).

Stefani not only silences her Harajuku Girls in public, but she pretends that they do not even exist. Ahn states, “In interviews, they silently vogue in the background like living props; she, meanwhile, likes to pretend that they’re not real but only a figment of her imagination” (par 4). When Jennifer Hollett, a VJ from Canada’s music channel Much Music attempted to ask one of the Harajuku Girls a question during an interview, Stefani quickly interjected, “Don’t talk to the girls...they are my imagination” (MuchMusic, 2005). And, when Stefani appeared on the British TV show *Popworld* with

Simon Amstell, she and the host chatted amongst Stefani's seemingly lobotomized

Harajuku Girls:

Amstell: "These guys with you?" (*Gesturing to the Harajuku Girls*)

Stefani: "Which guys?" (*Playing dumb*)

Amstell: "There are people right? There are people here?"

Stefani: "I don't know, do you see someone?"

Amstell: "I see four Japanese girls"

Stefani: "Oh, they might be my inspiration...that might be my inspiration you're feeling"
(Popworld 04/05)

Throughout this interview, Stefani continuously giggled and twirled her blonde locks while the cheeky Amstell occasionally directed questions towards a silent Baby sitting to his left, trying to provoke a response from her like a kid attempting to trip up a guard at Buckingham Palace (Popworld 04/05).

Furthermore, in an interview at the 2004 MTV Europe Music Awards, Stefani, surrounded yet again with her entourage of silent side-kicks, was asked "Who are your friends?" Stefani responded, "You see them?...I thought that was my fantasy. Suddenly I had these beautiful Japanese girls following me everywhere I go. It's bizarre." The interviewer then asked, "Do they talk?" and Stefani answered, "I don't know. In my dream they do. I don't know about yours" (MTV 2004). And, when asked about her Harajuku Girls during an interview on MTV's Total Request Live with Carson Daly, she replied, "Can you even see them? I mean, are they even there?" (qtd. in Kubo par 3). Apparently, only a white-blond mega star like Stefani can afford the luxury of being blind to racism, and not having to see her own perpetuation of racist Othering.

Stefani's phantasmatic friends have become her foil against which to affirm her power. Another way she has done this is by literally naming these human accessories of hers. At a Harajuku Lovers concert in Montreal that I attended on December 11, 2005, Stefani introduced her band and male back-up dancers by their first and last names, and

then went on to introduce her Harajuku Girls as “Love”, “Angel”, “Music”, and “Baby” (Harajuku Lovers Tour 12/11/05). I went on her website, gwenstefani.com, to see if I could find any personal information about “Love”, “Angel”, “Music”, and “Baby” such as their real names. Instead, next to Stefani’s own lengthy personal history in the “biography” section, I found dictionary definitions of their “names”, accompanied by Orientalist caricatures of them clad in lingerie. Gwen too is caricaturized, but her figure stands a foot taller and has a big head of blond hair adorned with a crown (gwenstefani.com 05/05/06).

Jamaica Kincaid explores how language is an assertion and reflection of power, as the power to name is the power to possess. This is what is so significant about Stefani’s re-naming of her Harajuku Girls. Kincaid writes that “This naming of things is so crucial to possession – a spiritual padlock with the key thrown irretrievably away – that is a murder, an erasing...” (22). Kincaid describes how European colonizers replaced the names of Aztec plants (among many other things) with names more pleasing to them and explains how naming has been an issue of critical importance in the context of slavery in the United States. While I am not attempting to make any direct comparisons or parallels between Stefani and slavery, I am arguing that by naming her Harajuku Girls, Stefani is exercising her power over them, marking them as her territory and as her possessions.

PERFORMING ASIANNES

A link on Stefani’s website takes us to the HarajukuLovers.com website, devoted to her accessory line as well as its mascots, the Harajuku Girls. On this site there are (well-scripted) video interviews of Love, Angel, Music and Baby in which they talk about such things as why Stefani named them what she did, as well as far-fetched origin myths of

how they got involved in “Gwen’s fantasy world” (Harajukulovers.com 05/01/06). For example, Angel, who is the only American Harajuku Girl and who speaks without a translator, explains that Stefani named her Angel because she is from the city of angels (Los Angeles) and because she has angelic traits. Angel then describes how she first got involved with Stefani:

I first realized that I was part of Gwen’s fantasy world when I was in Amoeba records (a store) on Sunset, I was walking down the aisle, the racks of CDs just turned into bushes. Then this maze appeared and the walls were made of bushes. Then I see this white rabbit run by, then Gwen Stefani’s following it and I’m like, “What the heck is she doing here, this is crazy!” (Harajukulovers.com 05/01/06)

The Harajuku Girls exist as Stefani’s alibis – they hold up her fantasy by playing along with the charade. They are no doubt being paid quite well to play into Stefani’s dream, but who are Stefani’s Harajuku Girls? What did they do before they were dreamt into Gwen’s Wonderland? Even several months after their debut, there was nothing published on the Harajuku Girls’ real identities until May 2004 when *Jane Magazine* identified them in their *Dish* column: they “aren’t just another Asian fantasy/speechless wonder. They are professionals repped by the same talent agency Kevin Federline’s managed by... Maya Chino (Love), San Diego State University alum Jenny Kita (Angel), former Japanese pop star Rino Nakasone (Music) and Mayuko Kitayama (Baby)” (qtd. in Clark par 22). So they were not teleported from the streets of Harajuku after all, but rather they are professional dancers represented by Bloc agency.

Contrary to much public perception, the Harajuku Girls are not from Harajuku, but rather Kita is from LA and Chino, Nakasone and Kitayama are from various cities in Japan. There has been discussion within the blogging community about the Harajuku Girls’ actual lineage and point of origin. For example, one blogger named Linda defends

Stefani by arguing, “[The Harajuku Girls] love her and she takes them everywhere. And in Harajuku they lived well too...I mean they wear Versace and Chanel everyday there” (Hyphenmagazine.com “Linda” 12/03/05). However, the Harajuku Girls are indeed *performing* a part - they are not playing themselves (as Stefani is thought to be). In “Gwen’s Girl Trouble,” Clark poses the question, “If a ‘banana’ is an Asian girl acting white, what do you call a white girl hiring an Asian girl to act ‘Asian?’” (par 1). Like Stefani’s “quintessential white girl” image, the Harajuku Girls’ “Asianness” and Harajuku street fashion are highly constructed and crafted by Stefani and her team of stylists. They all bear the exact same heavily stylized makeup, either empty or giggly school-girl expressions, and Orientalist baby doll costumes - with the exception of subtle distinguishing markers that any quadruplets would have.

Stefani has racialized her Harajuku Girls to *play* her version of funky style-conscious gals of Harajuku. In her video clip on harajuku-lovers.com, fourth generation American Jennifer Kita a.k.a. Angel admits, “I didn't speak a lick of Japanese when I first started”. And Maya Chino a.k.a. Love was not even that aware of her Japanese identity until Stefani asked her to play it up. In her video clip, Chino says, “I had never been conscious of being Japanese but in Gwen [sic] world I had to be aware of my nationality” (Harajukulovers.com 05/01/06). As part of their indoctrination into Stefani’s fantasy world, these professional dancers had to learn *how* to be “Asian”, *how* to be “Japanese”, and *how* to be “Harajuku Girls”.

THIS SHIT IS RACIST...R-A-C-I-S-T

Released in 2005, the third single off her album, “Hollaback Girl”, became the first digital download to sell over a million copies. Written in collaboration with Pharrell

Williams, this song is Stefani's "attitude song". It is rumoured to be a response to Courtney Love's statement in *Seventeen Magazine* that, "Being famous is just like being in high school. But I'm not interested in being the cheerleader. I'm not interested in being Gwen Stefani. She's the cheerleader, and I'm out in the smoker shed" (qtd. in Eagleson par 5).

The video begins with a plug for Stefani's new limited edition Harajuku Lovers digital camera, as the video focuses in on Stefani taking a picture of the Harajuku Girls. Stefani remarks, "Super kawaii!" and then "click" goes the shutter. Stefani and the Harajuku Girls then drive around in a yellow 1962 Chevrolet convertible with a bunch of high school kids following behind. They cause commotions at a high school and in a supermarket, and dance around in a gymnasium adorned with a banana logo in its centre. Stefani is the head cheerleader and she is always framed in the centre while her Harajuku Girls follow behind her.

However fun and frivolous this video is, perhaps it is also a comment on the Harajuku Girls' strive for "whiteness" – because everyone wants to be like Stefani! For the most part, the Harajuku Girls are individually gangstered-out with corn-rows, teased hair, track suits, and bandanas (is acting this "black" so "white"?), and their main cheerleader costumes bear their own individual initials in Old English lettering. The Harajuku Girls no longer fade into the background as a homogenous unit, but rather they are characters in their own right – individual members of Stefani's posse who look into the camera. This time it is the Harajuku Girls who are framed by tens of uniform Asian cheerleader extras, promoting them to second-in-command.

During the song, Stefani sings, “This shit is bananas...B-A-N-A-N-A-S”, while the Harajuku Girls dance around in banana-crested cheerleader outfits, including Baby who opens her eyes with her fingers as to make them more “white” seeming. This video makes me wonder whether Stefani is commenting on the pettiness of high school rivalry, or on Asian people who want to be “white” (a “banana” is metaphorical slang for Asian people who act “white” – “yellow on the outside, white on the inside”). What would happen if, instead, Stefani had a posse of black back-up dancers wearing Oreo cookie clad costumes and doing seemingly “white” acts while she sang, “This shit is Oreos... O-R-E-O-S”? Would more people find it racist and offensive?

How is it that Stefani can be racist towards and exploitative of Asian people and at the same time be a vocal critic of racism, specifically towards black people, on the same album? In the making of *Love. Angel. Music. Baby.*, Stefani collaborated with several black artists including Pharrell Williams from the Neptunes, Eve, Dr. Dre, and Andre 3000 from OutKast. Her otherwise carefree bubble-gum pop album features a track about interracial dating entitled “Long Way To Go,” in which she collaborated with Andre 3000. In the chorus they sing, “We’ve got a long way to go/When snow hits the asphalt, cold looks and bad talk come/We’ve got a long way to go/It’s beyond Martin Luther, upgrade computer”. Besides her auspicious use of metaphors (“snow” and “asphalt”) and that she probably meant Martin Luther *King Jr.*, it appears in this song that Stefani is a proponent of civil rights and equality, so how is it that her treatment of these Asian women does not communicate to her and many others as racist?

If Stefani had hired a troupe of four black back-up dancers and paraded them around, dressed them in minstrel clothes, forbid them to speak, and sang about how she

wants to possess and name them, wouldn't more people be up-in-arms? Why does Stefani's exploitation of Asian culture register as "stylish" rather than racist? In "politically-correct" popular culture, is it more acceptable to be racist towards Asian people than black people? Chang argues that, "Any other ethnicity and a hit would have been taken out on Stefani, or at least her recording career. But for some reason, if it's Asians—cute, little Asians—we let it slide. Which explains why Stefani's use of human accessories has been barely criticized, objections limited to the occasional irate blogger" (par 52).

Furthermore, in comedian Sarah Silverman's film *Jesus is Magic*, she tells the audience about how she was about to go on a talk show to talk about the idea of how we make fun of people we are not afraid of. She explains how the segment producer came up to her and said: "Instead of saying the word 'Nigger' say 'the N word' and [she] said, 'Great, what do you want me to say for Chink?' And he said without pause, 'Say Chink'" (Silverman, 2005). Evidently, *we've got a long way to go*.

REINFORCING THE STATUS QUO

Perhaps Stefani is somehow consciously playing with racist and sexist Orientalist stereotypes? Perhaps her over-the-top cliché representations are tongue-in-cheek? And maybe they somehow expose the performative aspects of ethnicity, possibly even destabilizing essentialist ideas of Asian women? While it is somewhat obvious that Stefani is aware that she and her Harajuku Girls are indeed *performing*, she does not seem to be challenging any dominant notions of Asian women in western culture as anything more than docile creatures. Rather, it appears that she is exploiting racist imagery to add excitement to her show and distinguish herself as unique. Judging from

various Gwenabees' responses, the Harajuku Girls are not being read as ironic but more literally as cool accessories. Even if this were some sort of racially-informed parodic and satirical performance art like Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Pena's "Year of the White Bear" in which they played caged-up exotic tribal figures from an 'undiscovered' land (Fusco and Pena, 1992), fans are not reading Stefani and her Harajuku Girls' performance as critical commentary. As with Fusco and Pena's experiment, people have been for the most part either genuinely upset with Stefani's treatment of her Harajuku tribal figures or happily amused and entertained with these newly discovered "Harajuku Girls". But, whereas Fusco and Pena were intentionally commenting on the colonial practice of putting Native peoples on display, Stefani leaves us with no reason to believe she is critically reflecting on anything.

Parody can be a powerful tool for debunking racist ideas. Linda Hutcheon argues that "through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference" (93). But, because parody is "doubly coded," it runs the risk of legitimizing that which it parodies more than subverting it. Parody can be problematic when it fails to foreground the politics of representation. For example, if a racist depiction is not exaggerated enough, it runs the risk of simply being reinforced as true. Whether or not Stefani is intentionally parodying Asian stereotypes, the end result is that her representations merely reinforce the dominant racist *status quo*, as they (unlike Fusco and Pena's) do not invite a radical re-questioning of representation. Clark also wonders, "Should we be reading irony into the dancers' giggling behind their hands?", though concludes, "It's hard to know when we know that the Asian women aren't in charge of

this show; Stefani is telling them what to do” (par 19). It is indeed impossible to detect whether the Harajuku Girls are mocking such simplistic stereotypes when they are not the ones in charge of their own representations – Stefani is the mastermind, she is the puppet-master.

So far we have looked at how Stefani renders her Harajuku Girls human pets in her song lyrics, music videos, media representations, and accessory and clothing lines, thereby reinforcing racist and sexist Orientalist imagery. I have also explored the polemics of peroxide in Stefani’s constructions of both her whiteness and the Harajuku Girls’ Asianness, as well as how she uses Harajuku Otherness in order to brand herself as a distinct entity in the worlds of music and fashion. While Chapter Two has been more on the descriptive side, setting the scene of Stefani’s Harajuku dream (and reality), Chapter Three takes a closer look at the debates surrounding Stefani’s appropriation of Harajuku culture. I will look at the politics of cultural appropriation (i.e. is there a difference between “inspiration” and “stealing”?), and the differences of power involved between Stefani’s cooptation of Harajuku culture and its appropriation of western culture.

Chapter Three

A PING-PONG MATCH: POWER AND APPROPRIATION IN A TRANSCULTURAL CONTEXT

FASHION FORWARD OR THREE STEPS BACK

Numerous fans and critics alike have been arguing via opinion articles, internet blogs and message boards over whether Stefani's appropriation of Harajuku culture is a new fashion-forward concept or yet another act of cultural hijacking. As a celebrity sign, Stefani has been a vehicle for instigating discourse and debate on ideas of authenticity, cultural appropriation, and transculturalism. In her article "Gwenihana," Mihi Ahn argues that "[Stefani's] taken Tokyo Hipsters, sucked them dry of all their street cred, and turned them into China dolls" (par 4). One blog has even started a movement called "Free The Gwenihana Four" (FTG4) and has sold t-shirts and mugs sporting this slogan with the goal of rescuing "the pseudo harajuku girls" from "serving an unspecified term in the custody of pop singer Gwen Stefani." (gwenihana... 11/02/06). Others argue that Stefani is doing no harm because the Harajuku Girls are getting paid very well and are not being "forced" to be Stefani's sidekicks, or that Stefani's appropriation of Harajuku culture is not a form of domination because Harajuku culture borrows from western culture as well (a two-way street of sorts). The controversy surrounding these arguments is quite complicated and nuanced. Therefore, this chapter explores these debates by taking a closer look at the politics of cultural appropriation, art and authenticity, and the differences of power involved in Stefani's cooptation of Harajuku culture and its appropriation of western culture.

THE POLITICS AND POETICS OF CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

Defining cultural appropriation in his essay “Translating and Resisting Empire: Cultural Appropriation and Postcolonial Studies,” Jonathan Hart states that, “cultural appropriation is about whether speaking for others or representing them in fictional as well as legal, social, artistic, and political work is appropriate or proper, especially when individuals or groups with more social, economic, and political power perform this role for others without invitation” (137). Cultural appropriation is pervasive, but it is also an indeterminate term, as many practices can fall under it – cultural ventriloquism, dispossession, or translation (figurative or literal). While cultural appropriation is usually used to describe a dominant group taking from a subordinate group, it also can work in a multidirectional manner - via cultural assimilation or transculturation.

Bruce Ziff and Pratima Rao write in *Borrowed Power* that, “the term *cultural appropriation* has been defined as ‘the taking-from a culture that is not one’s own-of intellectual property, cultural expressions or artifacts, history and ways of knowledge’” (1). However, it can be hard to define “taking” when the line between “sharing” and “stealing” is a blurry one. In fact, Stefani frames her cultural appropriation as a mutual stealing of inspiration. According to *Marie Claire*, Stefani remarked: “I was really inspired by the kids there... They were all about self-expression through fashion, and this whole ping-pong match between Eastern and Western and how we steal each other’s ideas” (Swimmer par 17). By using the metaphor of a ping-pong match, Stefani erases the differences of power between herself and the young fashionable women of Harajuku.

In the age of globalization it can be difficult to locate a distinct group, author, or cultural expression, especially when concepts such as *intertextuality* or “pastiche”

propose that any work is based on several passed creations. Pastiche is often referred to as a “hodgepodge” of several works as well as “imitation”. According to Frederic Jameson, "Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter" (17). In contrast to Hutcheson's view of postmodern parody as a self-reflexive practice infused with historical awareness and political critique (Hutcheon, 1989), Jameson's notion of postmodern pastiche lacks any individual recognizable styles, political consciousness, or connection to history. Postmodern cultural productions therefore amount to "the cannibalization of all the styles of the past" - all we have is “random stylistic allusion,” and cultural signs with no referents (Jameson, 1991). From the Vivienne Westwood pirate ad of the 80s and the *Alice in Wonderland* motif, to her evocation of Marilyn Monroe in the video “Cool” to her current yodeling homage to *The Sound of Music* in “Wind It Up,” Stefani's work is a pastiche of intertextual cultural connections, genres, styles, and codes.

However, people do not seem to get upset when Stefani borrows from things other than ethnic cultures. In fact they praise her artistic intelligence for creatively paying homage in the above examples. So why is it that so many criticize her reference and representation of Indian, Jamaican, and Japanese cultures? Where is the line between pastiche and plagiarism? While it is true that art of all kinds has always depended on the mixing of cultures, transcultural borrowing, and cultural exchange, problems arise when there is an uneven playing field, when one dominant group profits more than a subordinate one, and/or when one culture suffers negative consequences as the result of

another taking from it. The politics of cultural appropriation are very messy, but relations of power are central to the concept. The debates surrounding it mainly centre on questions of who owns what, who gets to speak for whom, and who gets to represent what. In this case, Stefani's appropriation of Harajuku culture is also situated within a history of western economic and political subordination of Japanese people. For example, in 1942 Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King invoked the emergency War Measures Act which labeled Japanese Canadians "enemy aliens" and a national security risk, resulting in the incarceration of 22,000 Japanese Canadian civilians (Gagnon, 2006). As well, many Japanese Canadians were stripped of their citizenship and deported.

GRAND THEFT FASHION

When Stefani first achieved mega-star status with No Doubt's 1998 album, *Tragic Kingdom*, she sported stomach-revealing halter tops, pink hair, and an Indian bindi on her forehead. Stefani explains, "I went out with Tony Kanal for eight years, he's Indian, and I grew up watching his mom. She'd get all made up, with her sari and her jewels on, and I thought she was so glamorous. I bought those stick-on earrings and started wearing them on my forehead as bindis" (qtd. in Swimmer par 8). However, in her article "Stealing Beauty: Indian Chic Is All The Rage", Indian-Canadian writer Anne Bains points out the contradiction of how, "A pop star adopting a foreign culture or style is seen as embracing the global village. For someone within that group – say, my aunt – clinging to her own culture is seen as individualistic, as rejecting this supposed ideal of oneness" (par 20).

Bains argues that, "The problem is, Indian chic isn't a mark of the wearer's knowledge of another culture, it's just a passport to the hip global village – a fashion accessory as an expression of worldliness and exotic adventures. Suddenly, a culture,

thousands of years old, becomes a Disneyland of the exotic – a theme park for Western trendsetters to play in. A symbol laden with history and meaning is stripped of both for the sake of style” (par 11). Like numerous pop stars including Madonna, Alanis Morissette, and the Beatles, Stefani has a history of looking to Asia for her inspiration. However, problems have arisen as many Asian people feel ripped off by how Stefani has chosen to represent their cultures and her luxury of getting to pick and choose what she wants, discarding the rest. For example one blogger states:

I do think Gwen Stefani is a decent person, hell I even like her songs from No Doubt. But does anyone remember how she was a ‘wannabe Indian’ when No Doubt first made it big? She used to wear a bindi (the dot) and parade around. Being brown myself, I felt this was annoying, and I do feel the pain of my East Asian brothers and sisters. It doesn’t seem very genuine, sorry Gwen. (Hyphenmagazine.com “anon” 12/20/05)

Asian-New Zealander Hannah Bhuiya’s 1998 article “Major Asia Theft” argues that when western fashion designers such as Galliano, Dior, and Gaultier look to Asia for their inspiration, “they are certainly not envisioning the rags of squalor of urban Calcutta, the rice farming peasants in Wuhan, or the drab uniforms of Osaka factory workers. Instead, fashion imagery references times of grandeur and opulence, to construct an imagined, Orientalised Asian past” (par 6-7). From Madonna’s henna tattoos and kimonos to Stefani’s bindis and Harajuku symbolism, Oriental-inspired Asian femininity has infiltrated all corners of western culture and fashion. Bhuiya notes how many trendy young women, guilty of “grand theft fashion,” are sporting combinations of dragon-print mesh tops, satin slippers, sparkling bindis, and chopstick hair ornaments, which has left her feeling that “benign appreciation has become blatant appropriation and exploitation” (par 23). In the same fashion, Stefani has mined Harajuku culture for the bits and pieces

she finds appealing, exploiting only the sellable aspects for her own profit, leaving the complex cultural context behind.

APPROACHING AUTHENTICITY

In thinking through what kind of approach to take to Stefani's appropriation, I have looked to Michael Angelo Tata, author of "East is Hot!: 'Madonna's Indian Summer' and the Poetics of Appropriation", in which he explores how in the summer of 1998 Madonna went through a Hindu goddess phase which included a photo spread of her in *Rolling Stone* as a Hindu Goddess and performing songs such as "Shanti/Ashtangi" against a backdrop of super-sized images of Hindu deities. Then, during the *Drowned World Tour* in 2001, she swapped her bindi dot, mendhi henna tattoos, and Hindu gods in favour of a kimono-clad geisha look, as seen in her "Nothing Really Matters" video. After pondering what kind of approach to take to Madonna's "skin-deep Beverly Hills spiritualism" and lifting of cultural property, Tata asks "how, in this complex era of appropriation and counter-appropriation... one can begin to assign origins" (95). Indeed, how can we define "property" or "authenticity" when postmodern social-constructionist concepts such as *performativity* and *simulacra* pose that "essential identity" and the "real" do not exist?

For example, Judith Butler's theory of performativity refers to how gender is not "natural" or fixed, but rather, it is culturally constructed through repetitious, stylized bodily "acts" which she argues are *performative*. This concept applies beyond the doing of gender, often understood as general theory of subjectivity (Butler, 1990). Furthermore, Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacra refers to how in the world of hypersimulation, images bear no relation to any 'reality' – they are copies of copies with no original.

Therefore, all we have is the copy or the simulacrum; there is no longer a distinction between reality and its representation, nature and the artifice (Baudrillard, 1981).

While many, such as the FTG4 movement, argue that Stefani's decontextualized representation of Harajuku culture is offensive because her Harajuku Girls are "pseudo" in contrast to the "original" girls in Tokyo, I certainly do not want to fall into a stalemate of debating how "genuine" they are. Although Stefani may need to take more responsibility for her use of ethnic signifiers, I think it is important for critics not to reinforce essentialist ideas of ethnicity by deeming her representations "inauthentic". Stefani's Harajuku Girls are not "real" or "fake" but, like all forms of identity, their constructions are primarily performative.

When I refer to Stefani's Harajuku Girls as Oriental "stereotypes", I am referring to the manner in which she simplistically represents them as one-dimensional *simulations*, devoid of the complexity Tokyo's Harajuku culture embodies. I am not arguing that the Harajuku Girls are stereotypes themselves, even though at times they do evoke certain stereotypical images of Asian women, i.e. "the China Doll" or "Giggling School Girl". I am also not attempting to suggest that Stefani's Harajuku Girls are fixed "false" imposters, as there is still room for some negotiation within their decontextualized portrayals. Stefani's Harajuku Girls are merely *different* "types" of Harajuku girls, albeit simplistic ones that evoke traditional Orientalist ideas of Asian women. Richard Dyer describes a "type" as "any simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized characterization in which a few traits are foregrounded and change or 'development' is kept to a minimum" (qtd. in Hall 257). Although Stefani's Harajuku

Girls may challenge our notions of “authentic” ethnic identity, they still reinforce certain dominant characterizations of Asian women, which have real social effects.

Just because Stefani’s Harajuku Girls are performative or “imagined,” does not mean that they do not have material consequences. In “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Louis Althusser argues that, “Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (109). Meaning, individuals are living illusionary relationships, having world outlooks that do not correspond to their real conditions of existence. For Althusser, “ideology is the system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or social group” (141). Thus, ideology works by dominating people’s imaginations which, in turn, have material effects, as it is always grounded in an apparatus, practice or subject.

Furthermore, in her 1987 book *Technologies of Gender*, Teresa De Lauretis claims that gender, as a system of representation, is the product of various social technologies such as cinema and literature which constitute individuals as gendered subjects. De Lauretis equates “gender” to Althusser’s concept of “ideology”, proposing that gender, like ideology, is an imaginary distortion that has the function of constituting concrete individuals as subjects. For example, every time we check an “F” or “M” box we officially enter into the sex/gender system, and even though this system is “imaginary,” we still become classified and en-gendered (10). And, although the category of “Woman” is an invented construction, women as historical subjects are still governed by real social relations. De Lauretis argues that technologies of sex and gender, such as M/F boxes, reinscribe certain knowledge, which in turn, have real effects such as the

dominant notion that there are essential and determined differences between men and women.

In this era of transcultural exchange, Althusser and De Lauretis' concepts can be applied not only to ideology and gender, but to technologies of race and ethnicity as well. Similarly, Stefani has an *imagined relationship* to the Harajuku district of Tokyo and the young stylish women who frequent it – she likes to pretend that she “imagined” her four Harajuku Girls into existence and that they are a part of her “fantasy” world. However, even though Stefani's ethnic constructions, creations, and representations are not “real,” “authentic” or determined, they, like ideology and gender, have very real material outcomes. For example, Stefani's fantasy foursome has helped her generate large amounts of capital, her Harajuku dream images have reinforced certain Orientalist ideas about Asian women in western popular culture, and they have also spurred numerous discussions on the subject of cultural appropriation and authenticity.

HARAJUKU APPROPRIATION, TRANSCULTURATION AND CUTE CULTURE

In response to Ahn's article in which she states that Stefani has “taken Tokyo hipsters, sucked them dry of all their street cred, and turned them into China dolls” (par 5), Schaugn Bellows writes “Ms. Ahn seems to making the point that cultural appropriation is wrong if the original context is missing. Hello! What has Japan been doing with American culture for the past 40 years?” (Bellows 04/12/05). Many fans have defended Stefani's cultural appropriation of Harajuku culture because of the fact that Harajuku culture appropriates many aspects of western culture as well. But is it an even exchange? Do they appropriate for the same reasons with the same implications? A blogger named Marie Mockett asks, “Japan is full of t-shirts with curious phrases and

charming uses of English. Is that cultural appropriation? Or is it only cultural appropriation if we Americans dress up like someone else? Where do we draw the line?" (Mockett 11/10/05). How may we compare the differences between Japanese Harajuku gals' appropriation of western culture and Stefani's appropriation of them?

With the onset of globalization and transnational mobility, new modes of identification have arisen, breaking down the division between what is "east" and what is "west". The post-war east-west fashion exchange between Japan and the West has created an economy of tradable signs, thereby blurring ideas of "authenticity". Bhuiya explains how "Modern street fashion, as seen on Tokyo youth, is an amazing fusion of ancient past, pop-culture present and cyber future, a truly eclectic selection of luxury Western labels and traditional gear" (par 17). Many girls in Harajuku wear t-shirts with cute nonsensical English phrases, American vintage, and anything Disney, while eating a McDonald's hamburger or Kentucky Fried Chicken.

In our increasingly hybridized world, these converging cultures are quite intermingled. Globalization has created various transnational cultural practices and hybridities in societies around the world. It can no longer be reduced to simply the "Americanization" of the rest of the world, or by contrast, a harmonious "global village". In *Performing Hybridity*, May Joseph states, "Through historical excavation, cultural reclamation, and aesthetic appropriations across different national contexts, new forms of internationalism are articulated" (1). While the young women of Harajuku appropriate American culture partly as an effect of globalization's so-called "Americanization", they also do it as a means of personal expression. They draw on local and transnational identifications for their hybrid aesthetic appropriations. For them, appropriation and

imitation are not only about subscribing to an American fantasy; they are also liberatory ways of performing and expressing identity.

Today, the district of Harajuku in Tokyo, specifically Takeshita Street, is home to cute culture and the funky teenage fashionistas who live it. One common characteristic that most of the style genres have is, as Stefani would put it, “a fatal attraction to cuteness” (Stefani’s tag line for Harajuku Lovers). Many adore Disney characters, carry stuffed animals, wear pink ribbons in their hair, and are obsessed with all things “super *kawaii*” (super cute) – the adjective that Stefani also chooses to describe her own label, L.A.M.B.. Online writer Peter Shuttlewood describes Takeshita as “a sort of a pop-art meets pop-culture meets Western decadence kinda street where often a t-shirt with a western image like Mickey Mouse can go for several hundred dollars a pop” (par 4). He explains how since the end of World War II, “consumerism” and “consumption” have become the national past-time for most Japanese girls. Because they often live at home with their parents well into their twenties, their rent free existence provides them with enough money to buy clothes and hang out in Harajuku.

In *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transculturalism*, Koichi Iwabuchi explores how Japanese consumption of western pop culture can be understood not as mere “assimilation”, but rather as a strategy for creating and reinforcing a distinct Japanese national and cultural identity. His theory of decentering globalization questions the unidirectional “cultural imperialism” position that culture flows asymmetrically from the dominant West to the dominated rest. He uses the term *transculturation* to refer “to this process of globalization, in which the asymmetrical encounter of various cultures results in the transformation of an existing cultural artifact

and the creation of a new style” (40). Mary Louise Pratt defines “transculturation” as “the process whereby marginal groups ‘select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture’, using the occasion to locally re-appropriate Western commodities” (qtd. in Gairola 117).

By contrast to the idea that the world is becoming homogenous as a result of Americanization, transculturation focuses on local sites of negotiation and articulation. Iwabuchi’s view, “suggests that foreign goods and texts are creatively misused, recontextualized in local sites, differently interpreted according to local cultural meaning” (40). Therefore, Harajuku gals’ mixing of the foreign with the local, such as the (mis)use of English phrases, is actually a way of differentiating their unique identity from the West rather than assimilating to it. Transculturation opens up space to re-appropriate and reclaim agency while setting aside essentialist notions of ethnicity.

Iwabuchi explores how Japan is often thought of as an assimilating cultural entity in the face of western domination. He states, “The Japanese modern experience is described in terms of appropriation, domestication, and indigenization of the foreign (predominantly associated with the West) in a way that reinforces an exclusivist notion of Japanese national/cultural identity” (53). In this regard, Iwabuchi argues that Japan’s ability to borrow and appropriate from other cultures is not simply an assimilative hybridizing process but rather it is indicative of its capacity to strategically absorb other cultures without changing its national/cultural core.

In her 1995 essay “Cuties in Japan,” Sharon Kinsella describes how the specifically Japanese culture of *kawaii* is the first truly Japanese post-war style. She explains that “‘kawaii’ or ‘cute’ essentially means childlike; it celebrates sweet, adorable,

innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak, and inexperienced social behaviour and physical appearances” (220). Kinsella recounts how cute style became popularized in the early 1970s when Japanese consumer goods were expanding rapidly, along with the cute handwriting craze - a new style of stylized rounded characters written laterally with hearts and stars inserted into the text. In the 90s, kawaii gradually changed from just a pink, romantic, and infantile style to a more androgynous, kitsch, and humorous look. Kinsella notes how by 1992, 71 percent of young people between 18 and 30 either loved or liked kawaii-looking people, and the word “kawaii” was estimated to be “the most widely used, widely loved, habitual word in modern living Japanese” (220). From the Lolita-like dresses and cute caricature accessories to the stuffed animals and infantilist outfits, most of contemporary Harajuku fashion can be described as “kawaii”.

While Shuttlewood maintains the perspective that “Harajuku Girls unlike the Goths, punks and bond girls that came before are not about rebellion from society... these girls, like most Japanese, are often extremely polite and happy to pose for photographs” (par 6), I would argue that Harajuku youth culture is in fact radical, counter-cultural, and subversive, albeit within its own set of prescribed rules and customs. Although Harajuku youth are not aggressive and provocative, the root of their kawaii style is about rebellion and refusal of the conservative norms of traditional Japanese culture that come along with adulthood. Kinsella states that “Underpinning cute style are the neo-romantic notions of childhood as an entirely separate, and hence unmaligned, pure sphere of human life” (241). She explains how Japanese teenagers have thought of adulthood not as a time of freedom or independence, but as a time of hard work, responsibility, compromise, and

conforming to societal expectations – including marriage. “Cute fashion was, therefore, a kind of rebellion or refusal to cooperate with established social values and realities... It was a demure, indolent little rebellion rather than a conscious, aggressive and sexually provocative rebellion of the sort of thing that has been typical of western youth cultures” (243). As an interviewee named Aiko comments in a *Sunday Times* article entitled “Tokyo Teen Spirit”, “When I’m in my look, I’m telling the world that I like being beautiful and that I’m not going to just go and work in an office for the rest of my life” (qtd. in O’Flaherty par 18).



(Two girls on the Jingubashi Bridge, Matlow 2006)

Though teenage boys have been somewhat active in cute culture, young women have been the primary generators of and actors in it - whereas nearly all western youth cultures such as punk and hip-hop have been dominated by young men. While the girls of Harajuku may not be understood as “rebellious” in terms of western understandings (they are not cocky, aggressive, or loud), what they have been doing is quite defiant by their standards. Their styles are about personal expression and rebellion from the dreaded “grown-up salary worker”. For them, there is a liberating quality in style for them – their use of camp, costume and appropriation are ways of subverting dominant fashion norms

and resisting a conformist culture. Cute culture is about avoiding controlled societal adult obligations, prolonging youth, and rebelling from the moral demand for self-discipline. Their consumption is not just passive; it is also an active form of empowerment and agency.

GWEN'S POWER TRIP

Even though Stefani stated at her Harajuku Lovers concert that I attended in Montreal that, “this album is about different cultures coming together...it’s modern...it’s cool” (Harajuku Lovers Tour 12/11/05), these new discourses of internationalism are still embedded in contexts of ideology and power. Though Stefani may wish to subsume cultural differences within the “global village” paradigm, her cultural collisions are far more complex. Though we may live in an increasingly complex intercultural world where local agency can be exercised, power inequalities remain. For example, racial profiling, discrimination, and violence are still rampant in western societies.

Ahn argues that Stefani’s appropriation of the Harajuku subculture “makes about as much sense at the Gap selling anarchy t-shirts... While aping a style that’s suppose to be about individuality and personal expression, Stefani ends up being the only one who stands out” (par 7). It is ironic that Stefani admires them for their individuality – she sings in “Harajuku Girls”, “Your look is so distinctive like DNA/Like nothing I’ve ever seen in the USA” - but then she goes and packages this “DNA” for mass consumption. Describing Harajuku culture, Stefani stated, “I first went there with No Doubt. I love the naïve recycling of cultures, the way they suck everything in and make it their own” (qtd. in Collis 36). Stefani loves their individuality so much that she sucks it all in and makes it *her* own. But while Stefani gets to enjoy her new co-opted “original” style, the girls of

Harajuku and their individualized style achievements become reduced to a national essence, or erased entirely.

Many critics have echoed this fear of cultural degradation, claiming Stefani has misrepresented, silenced and spoken for the girls of Harajuku, profiting financially and otherwise off of them. Though the USA and Japan may be on a more leveled playing field today in terms of economic power, there is still a distinct power imbalance between Stefani's American entertainment industry and the stylish teenagers of Harajuku – young women everywhere being a typically vulnerable demographic. Although in her song "Harajuku Girls," Stefani describes their relationship as, "A Ping-Pong match between eastern and western," there does not seem to be much back and forth in terms of who is profiting. There is a difference between Harajuku culture profiting from their own cultural exports and having a say in their own representation, and Stefani appropriating their culture for her own profit. Thanks to her Harajuku inspiration, Stefani has sold over seven million albums of *Love. Angel. Music. Baby.* and her L.A.M.B. and Harajuku Lovers labels are expected to bring in a combined US\$90 million in retail sales by the end of 2006 (Collis 34).

As I have argued above, Harajuku gals' playful appropriation of western culture is not for the purpose of generating profit (quite the opposite), but rather for the purpose of individual self expression. Kinsella notes that "Cute culture was not founded by business, but in the disillusioned calm known as the *shirake* after the last of the student riots in 1971" (225). Even though it did not take companies such as Sanrio (makers of Hello Kitty) very long to capitalize on it, dressing crazily began as youth rebellion to traditional Japanese culture. Stefani, on the other hand, appropriates Harajuku culture primarily for

the purpose of generating capital and elevating her own personal agency. Stefani has basically mined this subculture of young women for anything sellable in order to elevate her career and profit at the expense of other's style achievements.

HISTORY AND CONTEXT

We also cannot consider operations of power without an understanding of history and context. This scenario is not occurring in a vacuum; it exists within a history of American/Canadian and Japanese power relations, and a context of colonialism and postcolonialism. While Japan was never subordinated to 16th-19th century western colonialism – rather Japan has been a colonizer of other Asian countries and has a reputation for being homogeneous and exclusionist - its relations with the West can be analyzed in colonial and neo-colonial terms to a certain extent. After all, Japan has had to conform to western norms, engage in trade, open its ports up to western commerce, and cooperate with American military presence in order to avoid colonization. Japan was also subject to invasion and domination during World War II, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, military occupation, not to mention the American and Canadian Japanese internment camps. Importantly, the West has a long history of intellectual colonialism, especially in the arts. From Hollywood to literature, western culture has appropriated Japanese symbols and traditions, exoticized Japanese culture, and created pervasive Orientalist ideas and images. And today, many Japanese-Americans/Canadians, as all minorities living in the West, still face racism, discrimination and are often treated as second-class citizens.

For example, Roy Miki argues that Canada's policy of "multiculturalism" may project a political and cultural notion of "tolerance" and "inclusiveness", but "for those

who have internalized the networks of racialization, this narrative remains a fantasy that deflects the colonial history of white supremacist power” (Miki, 1997). He states, “The ‘asian’ inside ‘canadian’ has a long and painful history... The colonial legacy manifested the ‘not-white’ body as a sign of the monstrous “asiatic,” then later as a deviancy to be assimilated, and more recently as a variance that is scripted as the ‘multicultural’” (Miki, 1997). Although we would like to think of Canada as a pluralistic cultural mosaic, there is still much inequality within the diversity of our population, especially for racial and ethnic minorities.

THE POWER OF ART

It is often the case that those with power, such as Stefani, have no idea how powerful they are, and are therefore often disconnected with the impact of their actions. It is ironic that one often feels power only when one loses some of it. When you have power, you are comfortable and operate blind to it, but when you are made to feel uncomfortable, its effects become strikingly clear. For example, Korean-American comedian Margaret Cho’s observations inspired her to speak out publicly against Stefani’s racist and sexist representations of Asian women. Cho (sarcastically) stated in her blog: “I want to like them, and I want to think they are great, but I am not sure if I can. I mean, racial stereotypes are really cute sometimes, and I don't want to bum everyone out by pointing out the minstrel show” (Cho 10/31/05). However, Stefani actually seems surprised that people such as Cho have accused her of being racist. In response to Cho’s charge, Stefani told *Entertainment Weekly*:

She didn’t do her research! The truth is that I was basically saying how great that culture is. It pisses me off that [Cho] would not do the research and then talk out like that. It’s just so embarrassing for her. The Harajuku Girls is an art project. It’s fun! (qtd. in Collis 35)

Cho then humourously responded to *EW*, “I absolutely agree! I didn’t do any research! I realize that the Harajuku Girls rule!!! How embarrassing for me!!! I was just jealous that I didn’t get to be one...I dance really good!!!” (qtd. in Collis 35).

By presenting her appropriation of Harajuku culture as an “art project” of admiration, Stefani excuses herself from having to see the power relations involved in representing Asian women as submissive and co-opting another culture for her own profit. Stefani dismisses the controversy by pleading “artistic immunity,” simply framing her Harajuku project as “fun!”. But can “art” be an excuse for racism and sexism? While Stefani and many of her supporters may like to think this scenario exists in a vacuum, it cannot be understood outside a larger social context. Though some traditional perspectives on art purport that art can exist in a pure space, devoid of social context, much contemporary art criticism has challenged and critiqued this assertion, arguing that aesthetic representation is inescapably tied to politics and systems of knowledge (i.e. Gagnon, 2000; Todd, 1990). For example, Kim Sawchuk asserts, “Whether it deals with colonialism explicitly or implicitly, art in Canada occurs within a field of colonial and imperialist relations of power and domination” (83). Always occurring within a system of power relations, artistic representations have the ability to interrupt and critically comment on dominant ideas and values, yet they can also constitute and reinforce racist, sexist, and other discriminatory ideologies.

For example, Leni Riefenstahl, most famous for making documentary propaganda films for the German Nazi Party, was criticized for knowingly helping Hitler even though she always disclaimed knowledge of or any responsibility for the Holocaust, saying in 1997 to the *New York Times*, “I did not know what was going on. I did not

know anything about those things" (qtd. in "Leni Riefenstahl" About.com). Although I am not arguing that Stefani's situation is the same as Riefenstahl's by any means, it is interesting how Riefenstahl, too, characterized her film "Triumph of the Will" as a "work of art," rather than taking responsibility for the fact that it was also a documentary about the 1934 Nazi Party convention in Nuremburg, labeled the best propaganda film ever made. Riefenstahl always insisted that art and politics were separate and that what she did was in the world of art ("Leni Riefenstahl" About.com). However, artists such as Riefenstahl and Stefani need to be accountable for their work, as they are not separate from the politics and power dynamics surrounding it.

Ironic as it is, Stefani actually goes so far as to accuse others of being racist in regard to her Harajuku Girls "art project". She states, "I was surprised how racist everybody was about them. Especially when I came over [to the UK] and they'd make all these jokes like Jonathan Ross" (qtd. in Collis 35). In his article "The Good Girl," *EW*'s Clark Collis explains how Ross, a British TV host, asked Stefani whether an "imaginary hand job" from one of her "imaginary" dancers would count as cheating on his wife. Stefani tells Collis, "Everybody's making jokes about Japanese girls and the stereotypes. I had no idea [I'd be] walking into that" (qtd. in Collis 35). Is Stefani really that naïve to think that people would not make fun of or respond critically to her representation of four silent subordinate Asian women? Evidently it is Stefani who has not done her research.

Many have also defended Stefani's appropriation of her Harajuku Girls, arguing that because the back-up dancers are getting paid well to follow her around and they are not being "forced" to do anything, there is no problem. For example, a blogger named Sabrina argues that, "the girls known as Love Angel Music and Baby aka The Harajuku

Girls have not been forced into being silent, pretty little dolls that bow to Gwen. I am sure they all signed a contract to act, and the key word is ACT, like quiet little China dolls” (raining-frogs.livejournal.com 01/17/06). However, just because four career savvy Asian women are consensually taking well-paying jobs, does not mean there are not larger effects in terms of Asian female representations in popular culture. It is a very individualist perspective to only be concerned with Stefani’s four back-up dancers, rather than the larger social context they are operating within. Besides, for the individual minority performer, why not take financial compensation for the visual exploitation that occurs towards Asian women everyday? And, we do not know how Chino, Kita, Nakasone, and Kitayama really feel about their jobs as Stefani’s Harajuku Girls because they have not been allowed to speak. Either way, it is irrelevant whether or not the Harajuku Girls are literally being held captive in terms of the implications Stefani’s racist representations have in the larger social context.

The absence in all these debates is the voices of the stylish girls of Harajuku to whom Stefani has looked for her inspiration. The great irony of this controversy is that they are neither upset nor happy with what Stefani is doing with their imagery because they do not even know who Gwen Stefani is!!! The majority of girls in Harajuku (some of whom I talked to) have never heard of Gwen Stefani (Kubo par 29). Stefani may be shouting out, “Harajuku girls you got the wicked style/I like the way that you are/I am your biggest fan,” (“Harajuku Girls”) but they do not hear her. The costume playing youth of Harajuku are functioning in their own realities unaffected by Stefani’s fantasy world. Basically, Stefani has created an illusion of alliance with these women by hiring

four dancers to play her idea of them, when really her relationship with the fashion-conscious girls of Harajuku is only a dream.

Even though taking from the girls of Harajuku without their consent or authority is highly questionable, I believe the greater problematic surrounding Stefani's appropriation of Harajuku culture has more to do with the consequences of how Stefani has chosen to dream and imagine this culture into existence, and less to do with whether Stefani is "stealing" from or being "inspired" by the girls of Harajuku (after all they do not care); the four individual women who play her Harajuku Girls (they seem content with the conditions of their contracts); or by the Harajuku Girls' "genuineness" or "falsity". Stefani's appropriation of Harajuku culture is mainly a crisis of representation. Who has the power to represent Harajuku style? Who has the power to speak?

In *Power/Knowledge*, Michel Foucault argues that to have knowledge is to have the privilege to say what is "true". For Foucault, all knowledge and truth is arbitrary - it is through discourse where power operates and meaning is created. He was less interested in overt forces of power and more in the pervasive and insidious mechanisms by which power "reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives" (39). In this case, Stefani has the power and means of communication, and through her Orientalist discursive actions and statements, she reinforces traditional racist and sexist ideas of Asian women and structures of western dominance.

Stefani is literally speaking for the Harajuku girls of Tokyo by practicing cultural ventriloquism through her four Harajuku Girl puppets – who also cannot speak. If they cannot speak for themselves, their agency is taken away. Stefani represents Harajuku

girls as silent, submissive, docile, obedient, homogenous, child-like, and exotic. She names them and treats them like pets. What we are left with are visual images; representations that speak, especially in this case, louder than words. Stefani and her Harajuku Girls' discursive actions, signification and imagery communicate to her consumers certain ideas about the girls of Harajuku and of Asian women in general. Though it may be easier to dismiss these images as "fun" or "art" they do have implications not only for how people in western culture perceive Asian women, but also in terms of international relations, business negotiations, and cross-cultural relationships.

CONCLUSION

What has become apparent in all this controversy is that Stefani's representations have more consequences for Asian women in western culture than for the young stylish girls of Harajuku. After all, Stefani's imagery is circulating predominantly in the West. The girls in Harajuku do not care; it is mainly Asian western women and cultural critics like me who are uneasy about Stefani and her Harajuku Girls and want to contribute to the conversations and debates about them. Yet, are we too contributing to the cultural ventriloquism of Harajuku youth? By speaking out are we speaking for them? I personally do not seek to speak for the girls of Harajuku, to make any moral judgments concerning Stefani's work, or to be the cultural appropriation police.

My aim so far has been to shed light on how Stefani's symbolic power has the power to influence western culture, specifically in terms of western understandings of race and gender. While power does not work in only one direction and there are no clear-cut separations or allotments of power in regard to Stefani and the girls of Harajuku, there are still power imbalances which exist that have potent repercussions. And although

Stefani may be genuinely enamored with the fashionistas of Harajuku, she is not entitled to a free pass on her problematic representations of Asian women. My concluding chapter will further examine the implications of “Asian cool,” and will question whether Stefani’s Harajuku Girls could lead to greater acceptance and diverse representations of Asian women in popular culture, or if she is merely reducing Harajuku culture to a disposable, forgettable, consumable “cool”.

Chapter Four

ASIAN COOL: IMPLICATIONS OF GWEN'S GIRLS

ASIAN COOL AND JAPANOPHILIA

In recent years, there has been an increasing fascination with and commercialization of all things “Asian” in western culture. From Japanese anime and karaoke, to Pocky, manga comics, video games, kanji tattoos, and the ubiquity of sushi, Japanophilia is the latest manifestation of “Asian cool”. So it is not a coincidence that aspects of Japanese culture have manifested themselves simultaneously in Stefani’s imagination and in western commodity culture. As Kubo notes, “Harajuku girls, like sushi restaurants, have become another Japanese cultural export and yet another addition to the image of ‘Japan Cool’” (par 6). Japanophilia has translated into big bucks for western appropriators who are riding this wave of coolness and Stefani is but one link in the marketing chain that exploits ethnicity and exotic otherness in order to profit financially and otherwise. This concluding chapter begins by considering Stefani’s relationship with ethnicity and the global market. I will explore the implications of Stefani’s appropriation of Harajuku culture and “Japanese cool,” and question whether it could lead to more complex representations of Asian women in popular culture. Ultimately, I argue that Stefani reduces Harajuku culture to a mere disposable, forgettable, consumable “cool” cliché.

THE COOLEST COUNTRY ON EARTH

Rather than collapsing under its political and economic misfortunes of the 1980s, Japan has reinvented itself in the new millennium as the coolest country on earth. From pop music to fashion, architecture, design, food and art, Japan is now a global trendsetter.

It could even be argued that Japan has more cultural influence now than it did as an economic superpower in the 80s. In his article, "Japan's Gross National Cool," Douglas McGray argues that Japan's unique ability to accept, synthesize and spin a host of foreign influences into something both global and local has set Japan on its way to becoming the world's next cultural superpower (Pokémon alone has sold \$15 billion in merchandise worldwide). McGray states, "National cool is an idea, a reminder that commercial trends and products, and a country's knack for spawning them, can serve political and economic ends" (par 44). Japanese exports of fantasy and entertainment goods have skyrocketed in the last decade, generating ample revenue, and establishing Japan as a leading cultural producer in the global market place. While a "made-in-Japan" stamp used to be associated with "cheapness" back in the 1950s and 60s, today it connotes high-quality electronic gadgets, televisions, DVDs, hybrid cars, and toys.

Resulting in greater political and economic power, Japan's global imaginings are indeed challenging western domination and American hegemony. Yet, in the process, Japan has grown to be perceived more as a "cool" style by western culture than as a nation. What is appealing about Japanese cultural exports is not so much that they are from "Japan" as much as that they are from some place "different". In *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination*, Anne Allison argues that, "it is not Japan in some literal or material sense that is captured and transmitted in the new global craze of Japanese cool, but rather a particular style. And it is as trademark and producer of this distinctive style that Japan has acquired new notoriety in the global marketplace of popular culture today" (22). "Japan" has become a signifier for "coolness," "cuteness," "foreign-ness," and "difference," operating more as a particular *brand* of fantasy-ware.

As Allison notes, “Japanese ‘cool’ is traveling popularly and profitably around the world and insinuating itself into the everyday lives and fantasy desires of postindustrial kids from Taiwan and Australia to Hong Kong and France” (5). “Japan” has become a myth and a marker of fantasy; a bizarre and intriguing otherworld, a foreign producer of fun and cuteness.

CONNECTING TO COOL

Stefani’s appropriation of Harajuku culture did not happen in isolation, but rather, it occurred at the same time as various other cultural texts, specifically Hollywood, established relationships with Japanese culture. In 2002, Hayao Miyazaki’s anime film *Spirited Away* - released by Disney - won the First Prize at the Berlin Film Festival and the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature. That year also saw the release of *The Ring*, a Hollywood remake of the 1998 Japanese mystery thriller, *Ringu*. Quentin Tarantino’s 2003/2004 *Kill Bill* movie volumes featured spoken Japanese, an anime sequence, as well as incorporated Japan’s ancient traditions with Tokyo’s modern pop culture in tribute to Japanese coolness. In 2003, Tom Cruise starred with several Japanese actors in the epic film, *The Last Samurai*, and the concluding sequel to *The Matrix* series, 2003’s *Matrix Revolutions*, featured costumes and atmosphere gleaned from Japanese manga. Also in 2003, the film *Lost In Translation* followed “lost” Americans in the bizarre and strange city of Tokyo, as perceived by them through their western filters. A month before Stefani released her debut solo album in November 2004, *The Grudge*, another U.S. remake of a Japanese horror film (this time *Ju-On*), hit theatres. And during the same time Stefani was on her Harajuku Lovers tour in 2005, the film adaptation of Arthur Golden’s bestselling book *Memoirs of a Geisha* had its cinematic release.

Gairola also notes how in January, 1999, Madonna donned a kimono and paraded around as a geisha in her “Nothing Really Matters” video, the same month Vintage Books published the second edition of Golden’s *Memoirs of a Geisha* (112). The movement known as “geisha glam” had just become the new chic craze and East Asian themes were appearing everywhere from George Lucas’s 1999 film *Star Wars Episode I* with its displays of Japanese inspired costumes, to the spring collections of Dolce and Gabbana and Jean Paul Gaultier who featured obis – broad sashes that tie into large bows on the back of kimonos (112). Madonna even confessed that her costuming was inspired by the character Hatsumono from Golden’s novel, leading him to remark that “the thought I kept having was, my goodness, if it wasn’t for me, Madonna would be wearing something else” (qtd. in Gairola 113). Gairola argues that this intertextuality of cultural texts – this cultural partnership - works “in a symbiotic relationship in which the cultural capital... of both Madonna and Golden’s commodified work, like capital itself, amasses from the proliferation and promotion of the other ‘text’” (112). Similarly, Stefani’s Harajuku Girls have become market signifiers for Japanophile products, whose successes then become cultural signifiers for the brand known as Gwen Stefani.

HYPERVERISABLE OR OUT OF SIGHT

Will this new visibility of “Asian cool” lead to more progressive political change and dynamic representation for Asian people in western popular culture? Or has it created new problems? In the introduction to *East Main Street*, the editors write, “Paradoxically, this current visibility of global ‘Asianness’ renders the cultural presence of Asian Americans in mainstream American culture conceptually problematic: simultaneously hypervisible or out of sight” (Dave/Nishime/Oren 1). The proliferation of “Asian cool”

may increase the visibility of “Asian-ness” in western popular culture in the form of stereotypes and clichés, but it is highly doubtful that these essentialist images will lead to greater complex, three-dimensional portrayals of Asian people in popular culture. And although Asian-Westerners are making some visible headway in western mass media, there are still very few images of specifically Asian women, which makes Stefani’s Harajuku Girls all the more powerful in terms of audiences’ perceptions of Asian women.

Perhaps the Harajuku Girls are a “first step” towards more complex representations of Asian femininity in the West because they are at least some measure of visibility. Maybe for minorities of any kind it is better to exist as a sound-bite, a stereotype, or a cliché than to not exist at all. hooks states that, “marginalized groups, deemed Other, who have been ignored, rendered invisible, can be seduced by the emphasis on Otherness, by its commodification, because it offers the promise of recognition and reconciliation” (26). Like most marginalized peoples in western culture, many Asian people have been so starved for popular representations of themselves that they are almost willing to settle for cartoon-like imagery such as Stefani’s Harajuku Girls. Margaret Cho expresses this ambivalence (with sarcasm) on her blog:

I think it is totally acceptable to enjoy the Harajuku girls, because there are not that many other Asian people out there in the media really, so we have to take whatever we can get. Amos 'n Andy had lots of fans, didn't they? At least it is a measure of visibility, which is much better than invisibility. I am so sick of not existing, that I would settle for following any white person around with an umbrella just so I could say I was there. (Cho 10/31/05)

However, hooks maintains that stereotypes only invite cultural essentialism whereby the Other must then assume and conform to recognizable forms (26). Jane C.H. Park argues that “while this kind of crossover brings visibility to Japanese and East Asian peoples and cultures in the West, it often tends to mark them as permanently foreign, since their salability depends on their difference from the perceived norm” (297). Stefani’s depiction

of her Harajuku Girls as docile “giggling geisha” accessories support the claim that Asian people must continue to conform to recognizable, essentialist imagery or else be rendered invisible. Rather than paving the way towards greater complex and dynamic representations of Asian people in western popular culture, Stefani is reinforcing traditional racist and sexist images of Asian women as well as this dichotomy of “hypervisible” or “out of sight”.

WHEN COOL BECOMES UNCOOL

What will occur when this new visibility of “Japanese cool” becomes yesterday’s news? In “Eating the Other,” hooks expresses her over-riding fear that “cultural, ethnic, and racial differences will be continually commodified and served up as new dishes to enhance the white palate – that the Other will be eaten, consumed, and forgotten” (39). What will happen when Japanophilia is no longer the tastiest dish of the moment? Once Stefani has exhausted all she can from her Harajuku Girls routine, they will be discarded like last season’s clothes. The problem with “cool” is that it ultimately becomes “un-cool”. As the fashion world continues to demonstrate, there is a very small time frame for what is cool and trendy.

In their book *The Rebel Sell*, Heath and Potter argue that, "Cool has become the central ideology of consumer capitalism" (Heath/Potter 2004). They explain how based on exclusivity and competition, “cool” is used to sell products in our accelerated commodity culture. Things are only cool if they are different and not everyone can have them. And once they saturate the market and lose their air of difference and exclusivity, they become uncool. This pattern fuels the market, as brands (such as Gwen Stefani) continually try to come up with the next cool thing in order to preserve their distinction

and consumer identity, thus the cycle of cool and consumption continues (Heath/Potter 2004). Stefani has commodified this counter-culture of young Japanese women who dress in crazy, colourful, non-conformist styles, because as Heath and Potter argue, *the rebel sell[s]*. What will happen when Japanese fantasy exports become “so last season”? The Harajuku Girls *will* eventually go out of style, and Stefani will have to mine another untapped exotic foreign subculture.

CONCLUSION

As this thesis has argued, Stefani has appropriated and commodified Harajuku culture in order to enhance her desirability, brand herself in the worlds of music and fashion, and distinguish herself as individual and distinct celebrity. Stefani is an *intertextual celebrity* who strategically appropriates and cross-references various cultures, ethnicities, and “already-written” texts, and a *post-modern icon* who embodies a multiplicity of performative identities, thus resisting any static signification or “authentic” identity. As a *gestalt entity*, Stefani has become much more than the sum of her parts. Moreover, Stefani is a discursive sign, a manufacturer of signs, an object of consumption, and a producer of commodities. She has packaged this subculture and ethnicity for mass consumption, selling the idea of global exotic otherness and “difference” to her western consumers.

The Harajuku Girls may have come to Stefani in a dream, but they have eye-opening implications in the wakeful world. Her exploitation of “Japanese cool” has many not-so-cool repercussions, as imaginary constructions do have material consequences. Clark states, “Gwen Stefani reaches a wider Western audience and so she has more power to shape views than any Asian or Asian-American. A white celebrity is using her

position of power to perpetuate Western stereotypes of Asian women and the idea of Asian (specifically the Japanese) as 'Other' in a media environment where the visibility of Asians and Asian-Americans, especially women, barely registers" (par 21). Stefani's powerful representations of her Harajuku Girls as silent, sexed-up, submissive Asian school-girls have perpetuated traditional racist and sexist Orientalist knowledge of Asian women, as well as reinforcing this double bind of being either "hyper-visible" or "out of sight".

However, Stefani's Harajuku Girls have provoked us to challenge our understandings of authenticity, compelling us analyze this case as not just a problem of Stefani not representing the "real" girls of Harajuku, but as an issue of how Stefani has chosen to imagine them. In this instance, Stefani has had the power to (literally) speak for the young women of Harajuku and how she has chosen to represent them has far more implications than the debate over how "authentic" her depictions are. Stefani's Orientalist representations and appropriations of Asian women have reinforced white western dominance, thus continuing a history of western intellectual, symbolic, and cultural colonialism. Even though Stefani believes these figments of her imagination have been brought to life in a culturally positive manner, her images are still embedded in contexts of ideology and power.

In this era of transculturalism, new internationalisms have been articulated, resulting in less of a distinction between what is "West" and "East". But as I have argued, though power may work in many directions, there are still imbalances of power between these converging cultures which have very real consequences. For example, Dorrine Kondo points out, "The Orientalisms deployed vis-à-vis Asia still produce transnational

effects, as continuing anti-Asian violence in the U.S. graphically demonstrates” (10). Stefani’s racist and sexist images of Asian women, however meant to be “positive”, are still part of the discursive tradition of the West maintaining its superiority over the East through reinforcing certain classifications. As I have contended, there are many power differences between Stefani’s appropriation of Harajuku culture and its appropriation of western culture. Simply put, Stefani has been playing with a bigger ping-pong racquet on a table tilted in her favour.

Importantly, the fact that Stefani has reinscribed racist and sexist Orientalist constructions of Asian women has largely gone unnoticed by the mainstream media, which has hardly undergone any critical analysis of Stefani’s appropriation, never-mind holding her accountable for her ethnic signifiers. Perhaps if journalists did, they would have to examine themselves as accomplices in the perpetuation of racist and sexist ideologies. “But no matter how blind the entertainment press is,” Clark says, “the fact remains that Stefani is treating these ‘foreign’ women as less than people. She’s the star, and they don’t even get their real names in the credits” (par 24). Indeed, Stefani is the sparkling white star; her homogenous Harajuku Girls merely function as backdrop in order to reinforce Stefani’s blonde whiteness and add some exotic seasoning to the show. Meanwhile, Stefani takes all the praise and glory for “discovering” Harajuku even though her fetishization of Harajuku culture has reduced its complexities to a mere symbol of “exotic otherness,” thereby erasing any trace of its history and context.

In conclusion, we can still love Stefani for her cool style, platinum hair, bizarre antics, catchy bubble-gum pop songs, and the way she systematically organizes her wristbands into separate Ziploc baggies (Cho 10/31/05). And at the same time, we can

still be critical of the ethnic and racial signifiers she chooses to appropriate and commodify for her own purposes of empowerment. After all, Stefani is a strong female artist who was not manufactured in a studio overnight. She toured clubs for over ten years with No Doubt and slowly worked her way to the top. However, the fact that Stefani is an enduring female pop star in a male-dominated industry does not entitle her to unreservedly speak for, represent, appropriate, and exploit others who have less power than her. Stefani may be a popular culture icon, but she is not above critique. Hopefully, one day Stefani will not have to dream up exotic ethnic others to save her, but instead, wake up and learn how to save herself.

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