

Voices That Matter: Authenticity, Identity, and Voice in the Musical Career of Lana Del Rey

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Abstract

Discursive authentications of singing voices in pop music reception are often rooted in gendered expectations. Moving away from essentialist understandings of the 'authentic voice,' this article proffers that voices are formatively entangled in processes of subjectification. Lana Del Rey is a singer whose (vocal) career has been considered inauthentic in the discourse of journalists, particularly when she first rose to stardom in 2011 via YouTube. Del Rey is a prime example of the contemporary values of artistic personae in pop culture, as her career has been so bound to notions of authenticity and *sounding* authentic. Through an analysis of the vocal aesthetics of Del Rey and the discourse that surrounds her, the notion of 'vocal ontogenesis' is developed. This concept moves from subjectification as an ontologically complete instance to subjectification as a never-ending process. The notion of vocal ontogenesis becomes useful for comprehending the complex aggregations of which the voice is a component, and more broadly implies the need for further study of vocal materialism, setting an agenda for decentered examinations of voice, gender, and authenticity.

Keywords

Lana Del Rey, authenticity, vocal ontogenesis, performativity, voice, pop music criticism



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Human life is but a series of footnotes to a vast obscure unfinished masterpiece

- Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (1955)

In 2011, YouTube consumers witnessed the release of the tracks “Video Games” and “Blue Jeans” by Lana Del Rey, who was born Elizabeth Woolridge Grant. With these songs, this previously little-known artist sprang to stardom, as illustrated by articles from the time entitled “Lana Del Rey Lights Up the Internet”¹ and “Internet Sensation Lana Del Rey // Yay, Nay, or Just Okay?”² Lana Del Rey has five studio albums to date, with

¹ Tom Ewing, “Lana Del Rey Lights Up the Internet,” *The Village Voice*, January 18, 2012, 2019, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2012/01/18/lana-del-rey-lights-up-the-internet/>.

² Natalie Wall, “Internet Sensation Lana Del Rey // Yay, Nay or Just Okay?” *Le Blow*, October 3, 2011, <http://leblow.co.uk/lana-del-rey-yay-nay-or-just-okay/>.

four-time platinum *Born to Die* (2012) being the most successful.³ Del Rey embarked on a “world tour” to promote her latest album – *Norman Fucking Rockwell!* – in August 2019. This tour was set to be her most extensive and costly one to date. However, despite her recent success, this artist – like most – did not have an easy journey to pop stardom, nor has she evaded criticism. Journalist critiques of her work have often revolved around her (in)authenticity, arguments which are grounded in the relationship between her “real” self (if such a thing exists) and the persona through which she performs. Contrastingly, certain aspects of her persona – voice, image, identity – are used by fans and critics as signifiers of her so-called authenticity. These bifurcated ascriptions of (in)authenticity, from journalists and fans, make Lana Del Rey an important case study in the examination of the vexed relationship between female pop stars and “authenticity.”

Scholars have addressed authenticity as it pertains to artists of various contemporary genres.⁴ Allan Moore’s 2002 article, “Authenticity as Authentication,” best formulates the levels of

³ BPI: Certified Awards, *British Phonographic Industry*, certified March 13, 2020, <https://www.bpi.co.uk/brit-certified/>.

⁴ Allan Moore draws on folk in his article, “Authenticity as Authentication,” *Popular Music* 21, no.2 (2002): 209-223; for hip-hop, Cecilia Cutler, “‘Keepin’ It Real’: White Hip-Hoppers’ Discourses of Language, Race, and Authenticity,” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 13, no.2 (2003): 211-233; for rock, Chris Atton, “Challenging authenticity: fakes and forgeries in rock music,” *Popular Music* 38, no.2 (2019): 204-218; for pop, B. H. Coulter, “‘Singing from the Heart’: Notions of gendered authenticity in pop music,” in *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Stan Hawkins (London: Routledge, 2017): 267-280.

authenticity perceived by audiences, and will be discussed later. Importantly, he urges that:

Academic consideration of authenticity should ... shift from consideration of the intention of various originators towards the activities of various perceivers, and should focus on the reasons they might have for finding, or failing to find, a particular performance authentic.⁵

This paper, then, takes direction from Moore's *riposte*: it centres on gendered authentications of voice in contemporary popular music, arguing that the performative capabilities of voice destabilize dominant discursive exegeses of authenticity. The main case study for this exploration is Lana Del Rey, an American performer who has, until recently, been neglected in musicology. In other disciplines, Del Rey has been used unobtrusively as a case study. For example, in media studies, Del Rey was the focus of Arild Fetveit's article exploring nostalgic aesthetics, in particular the DIY, "precarious" film and photography of her 2013 music video, "Summer Wine."⁶ Within education studies, Federico Zannoni has examined Del Rey's voice, claiming that its "frailty," in combination with her "languid lyrics," plays a didactic role for teenagers exploring frailty as an

⁵ Moore, "Authenticity as Authentication," 221.

⁶ Arild Fetveit, "Death, beauty, and iconoclastic nostalgia: Precarious aesthetics and Lana Del Rey," *European Journal of Media Studies* 4, no.2 (2015): 187-207; this paper explores the use of iPhone and polaroid filters as part of Del Rey's 50s/60s image.

“ontological part of human experience.”⁷ Another scholarly writing from the limited literature on Del Rey is Vito Pinto’s 2015 paper, “Geboren, um zu sterben. Lana del [sic] Reys melodramatischer American Dream.”⁸ Focusing on Del Rey’s 2012 music video “Ride,” Pinto’s analysis is primarily visual. His argument, however, rightly locates the “Mode of the Melodramatic” within the music video as an overall characteristic of the pop phenomenon Lana Del Rey.⁹ Though Pinto’s and Fetveit’s respective ideas of melancholia and precariousness in Lana Del Rey are vital to an understanding of her artistry, and indeed affirm her importance in popular culture, much of the “Lana Del Rey phenomenon” is still left untouched. Not only does a mainly visual analysis limit discussion to aspects of film and cinematography, it also only obliquely addresses the crucially important concept of authenticity.

Del Rey’s absence from wider scholarly literature is surprising, as in 2011 and 2012 her perceived lack of authenticity

⁷ Federico Zannoni, “Sei così bella quando piangi. Lana Del Rey, voce e fenomeno della fragilità che è in noi,” *Ricerche di Pedagogia e Didattica – Journal of Theories and Research in Education* 10, no.2 (2015): 163.

⁸ Vito Pinto, “Geboren, um zu sterben. Lana del Reys melodramatischer American Dream,” in *Pop-Frauen der Gegenwart: Körper – Stimme – Image. Vermarktungsstrategien zwischen Selbstinszenierung und Fremdbestimmung*, ed. Christa Brüstle (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2015): 115-133.

⁹ Pinto, 124. “... inwiefern Lana del Rey hier den American Dream in der Perspektive eines melodramatischen Modus aufruft - ein, wie ich meine, Charakteristikum für die Gesamtkonzeption des Pop-Phänomens Lana del Rey” [... in what way does Lana del Rey invoke the American Dream as a result of the prospect of a melodramatic mode – a characteristic, as I see it, of the overall concept of the pop phenomenon Lana del Rey]. Translation by the author.

was one of the “hottest topics” for journalistic critics to discuss.¹⁰ Indeed, none of the studies cited above provide a detailed examination of Del Rey in relation to journalistic and fan-based criticisms concerning perceived inauthenticity. Going beyond Del Rey herself, moreover, whilst discussions of gender, voice, and authenticity have often intersected, there is yet to be a formative study that combines all three in a thorough, nuanced account. The significance of this paper is, thus, twofold: first, it aims to bring Del Rey, an important figure in contemporary popular culture, into current musicological debates; second, it is a preliminary attempt to triangulate gender and the “authentic voice” in popular music. Despite the enigma that is Del Rey’s cultivation of her public identity throughout her career history, this paper will examine the criticisms of the singer as inauthentic on the basis of her persona and voice. Moreover, I argue that these criticisms are gendered; the ways in which women’s voices are policed and authenticated are ultimately discriminatory and show that sexism engenders notions of authenticity and voice.

Interest in “voice” in contemporary musicology can be traced to Roland Barthes’ 1972 essay, “Le grain de la voix,” in which he claims that “the ‘grain’ is the body in the voice as it

¹⁰ See articles from her emergence in 2011 such as: Lucy Jones, “Real or fake? Lana Del Rey, the internet sensation that will break your heart,” *Independent*, October 28, 2011, <https://www.independent.ie/entertainment/music/real-or-fake-lana-del-rey-the-internet-sensation-who-will-break-your-heart-26786465.html>.

sings.”¹¹ This paper is perhaps the first theoretical study to treat voice as a critical object and medium representing and constructing meanings and identities. In subsequent discussions of voice, musicologists and psychoanalysts have gone on to examine voices as Lacanian objects, exploring the ways in which the object-voice formulates subjectivity.¹² Lacanian studies, of course, are often concerned with sexual desire and linked to gender, but pure treatment of the voice as an object in this way runs risks of reducing the voices of women to objects of desire and drive.¹³

Alternative approaches to psychoanalytical methods have, following Barthes, focused on vocalizations *of* identity. In this regard, Adriana Cavarero’s *For More than One Voice* is perhaps the current most influential study of voice and gender, as it demonstrates the historical and philosophical impetuses that have caused female vocality (as something associated more with *eros* and the body than with *logos* and the mind) to be feared and

¹¹ Roland Barthes, “Le grain de le voix,” *Musique en jeu* 9 (1972): 57-63; the English translation used is Stephen Heath, “The Grain of the Voice,” in *Image, Music, Text*, tr. and ed. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977); this famous quotation was highlighted in Laura Tunbridge, “Scarlett Johansson’s Body and the Materialization of Voice,” *Twentieth-Century Music* 13, no.1 (2016): 140.

¹² See Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006); for Lacanian analyses of the voice in popular music, see Richard Middleton, *Voicing the Popular: On the Subjects of Popular Music* (London: Routledge, 2006).

¹³ For research on feminism and Lacanian psychoanalysis, see Jacques Lacan, *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*, trans. and eds. Jacqueline Rose and Juliet Mitchell (London: Macmillan, 1982).

subverted.¹⁴ Though a pioneering study of gender and vocality, Cavarero's text only latently considers how these matters map onto issues of authenticity. Scholarship that has considered voice and authenticity has come to understand this relationship as relational, with authenticity often as something ascribed to the voice.¹⁵ However, where authenticity and voice have been examined, gender has often been overlooked. Focusing more on gender, Alison Stone's work combines feminist theory with studies of women in popular music, illustrating gendered criticisms of perceived inauthenticity.¹⁶ Stone, though she powerfully draws out the dialectics of gender and authenticity, makes no mention of the voices that are so integral to singers' identities. In these alternative and salutary approaches, ideas of voice, gender, and authenticity seem to intersect rather fluidly, but there remains an opportunity to discuss the tripartite

¹⁴ See Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones, eds. *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Freya Jarman-Ivens, *Queer Voices: Technologies, Vocalities, and the Musical Flaw* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

¹⁵ Voice and authenticity is touched upon in many discussions of voice: see Norie Neumark, "Doing Things with Voices: Performativity and Voice," in *Voice: Vocal Aesthetics in Digital Arts and Media*, eds. Norie Neumark, Ross Gibson, and Theo van Leeuwen (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), Scholarship Online DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/9780262013901.001.0001; and, Nicola Dibben, "The Intimate Singing Voice: Auditory Spatial Perception and Emotion in Pop Recordings," in *Electrified Voices: Medial, Socio-Historical and Cultural Aspects of Voice Transfer*, eds. Dmitri Zakharine & Nils Meise (Göttingen: V&R University Press, 2013).

¹⁶ Alison Stone, "Feminism, Gender and Popular Music," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Popular Music*, eds. Christopher Partridge & Marcus Moberg (London: Bloomsbury Academic Publishing, 2017).

coherence and co-functionality of these fraught concepts. By bringing these three foci to bear on one another, scholarship can move from examining vocalizations *of* identities to vocalizations *as* identities.

In discourse surrounding female pop stars, “authentic” is an omnipresent term used to critique artists on the basis of their person-personae relationship, their lyrical content, and their voices. Indeed, as is the case for Del Rey, and many other contemporary female pop stars, journalists and fans dislike the idea that singer-songwriters are not singing about their own lives, or are in some way (e.g., through vocal editing or electronic mediation) not being “real.”¹⁷ When pop artists are exposed for not writing their own lyrics, for example, fans and music critics often treat them poorly.¹⁸ As Stone discusses in her work on feminism in pop music, the nature versus technology and sexual agency versus sexual objectification binaries have made their way into discourses surrounding song genres: pop is seen as the inauthentic feminine, whilst rock is the authentic masculine.¹⁹ Women trying to operate creatively in the world of pop, then, are convenient targets for various critics. So much so, in fact, that representations of female artists from mainstream left-wing ideologues such as Charlie Brooker, who purport to defend

¹⁷ Katherine Williams and Justin A. Williams, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to the Singer-Songwriter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹⁸ K. Williams and J.A. Williams, eds.

¹⁹ Stone, “Feminism, Gender and Popular Music,” para. 22.

women, re-package the rock-pop dualism and suggest that pop is an inauthentic genre.²⁰

“Divorced from Experience”

After the internet success of “Video Games,” Lana Del Rey was invited to perform her track on *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) in January 2012.²¹ After this performance, Del Rey faced scathing critiques for her “emotionless... warbl-y” singing.²² What is more, whilst questions of her artistic sincerity – as with any artist – had expectedly been raised during her emergence, this performance prompted renewed mass interest in her career

²⁰ See *Black Mirror*, “Rachel, Jack and Ashley Too,” season 3 episode 5. Directed by Anne Sewitsky, written by Charlie Brooker. Netflix. June 5, 2019. The part of Ashley, a young pop star, is played by Miley Cyrus. Brooker’s representation of the pop industry continues a long believed, and sometimes true, narrative of women being manipulated and abused by their managerial teams. The outcome of the episode is that Ashley is able to sing the music that ostensibly reflects how she feels; this music happens to be within the rock idiom. Though in real life, Miley Cyrus hasn’t overtly “escaped” pop, the character she plays in this episode continues the dominant associations of the dualities of pop and rock.

²¹ Lana Del Rey, “Video Games (Official Music Video),” YouTube, October 11, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cE6wxDqdOV0>.

²² See Aly Semigran, “Lana Del Rey: Worst ‘SNL’ musical guest of all time?” *Entertainment Weekly*, January 17, 2012, <https://ew.com/article/2012/01/17/lana-del-rey-was-she-really-the-worst-snl-musical-guest-of-all-time-vote/>.

history and authenticity.²³ Journalists and fans supposedly unmasked Del Rey, revealing that her birth name is Elizabeth Woolridge Grant.²⁴ However, despite the drama of her apparent efforts to hide her “real” identity, her *SNL* performance was only “controversial” for a few weeks in mainstream media. Del Rey’s track “Video Games” was recently awarded “Song of the Decade” at the 2019 *Q Awards*. This live debut has perhaps been forgotten by newer fans, as her recent accolades illustrate. However, the critiques based on vocal performance that Del Rey faced in 2012 – and the reasons behind them – are of interest as a reflection of more widespread perceptions of female pop artists. Why did some listeners hear her as emotionless?²⁵ Why would it matter if she were?

The journalist Paul Harris, writing for *The Guardian*, has noted that the interest in an artist’s “rewriting” of their past signals the nature of modern fame; there is, currently, a “cultural

²³ Jones, “Real or Fake?”; Del Rey was also criticized prior to the *SNL* performance by *The New York Times* music critic Jon Caramanica. Caramanica’s article is somewhat prophetic of the kinds of criticisms Del Rey’s performance technique was to face, and is laced with skepticism on the basis of her rise to fame being via YouTube: Jon Caramanica, “Finally Taking the Stage, Direct from the Internet” *The New York Times*, December 7, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/08/arts/music/lena-del-rey-at-bowery-ballroom-review.html>.

²⁴ See Paul Harris, “Lana Del Rey: The strange story of the star who rewrote her past,” *The Guardian*, January 21, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2012/jan/21/lana-del-rey-pop>.

²⁵ Chris Richards, “Lana del Rey lacks the emotion to offset a thin voice,” *The Washington Post*, January 30, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/music/lana-del-rey-lacks-the-emotion-to-offset-a-thin-voice/2012/01/30/gIQA2eLddQ_story.html.

obsession with authenticity.”²⁶ The fascination with Del Rey’s backstory, which neatly brings the relationship between voice and the construction of identity and authenticity into the equation, is most highlighted by Chris Richards’ article “Lana Del Rey lacks the emotion to offset a thin voice,” penned shortly after the *SNL* performance. Richards writes:

But the central failure of ‘Born to Die’ isn’t Del Rey’s lack of vocal agility — it’s that her music doesn’t communicate actual feeling. Seemingly divorced from experience, or even imagination, her moody, melancholic music carries only the aura of emotion. It delivers glamour without mystery, desperation without consequence, escapism without destination.²⁷

The negative claim that Del Rey’s music is “divorced from experience” is clearly rooted in the expectation that artists ought to represent their “authentic” selves in their art (art imitates life). Such a claim illustrates that Richards not only believes that Del Rey’s artistic self does not mirror her “real” self, but that he also believes these two identities neither interact with nor inform each other. Del Rey’s art is being evaluated in terms of her ability to cultivate it from within herself, to produce what she “really” feels

²⁶ Harris, “Lana Del Rey: The strange story.”

²⁷ Richards, “Lana del Rey lacks the emotion.”

– which is as difficult for the artist to prove as it is for the critic.²⁸ Importantly for our purposes, Richards seems to link this artist’s authenticity (and her sincerity) not only to her biographical information, but to her music. He presents her music as something non-technical (like her “vocal agility”); as a singer, meanwhile, Del Rey’s voice forms an integral part of her musical expression and overall soundscape. For Richards, then, her vocality, rather than her technique, signals her lack of authenticity. Journalist Jessica Hopper challenged Richards’s criticisms and questioned “why it seems impossible to believe that she could be [real]?”²⁹ I bring Hopper’s inquiry to a musicological dimension: how and why does her music, and her voice, seem impossible to believe?

Performative Authenticity

Authenticity is traditionally understood in the sense of being “of undisputed origin or authorship,” which has been

²⁸ The notion of “organicism,” being organic, comes from Kantian ideals of aesthetics, and particularly music, being “good” when it takes inspiration from nature. Schopenhauer expanded on this to heighten the status of the philosopher and composer to “genius,” thus influencing historical and present ideals of creative production. There is no room for a historiographical overview here, but readers are reminded of this problem in the world of classical music in order to highlight a potential aesthetic-judgemental link within the world of pop and pop authorship; See Eitan Wilf, “Semiotic Dimensions of Creativity,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43, no. 1 (2014): 397-412.

²⁹ Jessica Hopper, “Deconstructing Lana Del Rey,” *SPIN Magazine*, 2012, in *The First Collection of Criticism by a Living Female Rock Critic*, ed. Jessica Hopper (Chicago: Featherproof Books, 2015), 48.

examined in existential philosophy wherein “authenticity” has a complex relationship with the Self.³⁰ In popular music studies, more specifically in popular song, authenticity can be understood as a relationship between the “person” and the “persona.” In his book *Song Means*, Allan F. Moore discusses at length the three agents in the creation of a song: the persona, the protagonist, and the person.³¹ The persona (Lana Del Rey) is the character of the performer; the protagonist (the desperate, heart-broken lovers on the tracks of *Born to Die*) is the subject of the particular song(s); finally, the person (Elizabeth Grant) is seen to be the “real” human behind the two former constructions. Moore himself, a leading academic on popular music, seems to think that all personae are “artificial construction[s] that may, or may not, be identical with the persona(ality) of the singer.”³² Fans and critics seem to cope with a varying protagonist, or even an “evolving” person, but when knowledge of a performer’s “real” life surfaces, as it did for Elizabeth Grant – specifically when it is assumed that the artist wants to hide that part of their life in order to conceal the artifice of their persona – critics begin to tear the singer’s sincerity apart. This tension is especially complicated for female singers. However, when a persona becomes a lucid character that is adopted in all public interactions and is embodied by a human being, such as Lana Del Rey, it becomes difficult, undesirable even, to distinguish between the person and the persona. Is the

³⁰ There is not space in the present study to outline these complexities. See Somogy Varga and Charles Guignon, "Authenticity", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/authenticity/>>.

³¹ Allan F. Moore, “Persona” in *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded and Popular Song*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

³² Moore, 179.

construction of the self, in many ways, not just as much a performance as the construction of a stage persona? Moore and other theorists may agree with this obfuscation, but perhaps blurring the distinction between person and persona is precisely what troubles journalists.

Moore's revelations of person-persona tensions in popular song reception clearly represent a view of authenticity that values a strong link between the "real" and the "artistic" self. Such notions seem to view the subject as internally constituted, and the artistic self as an artificial construction produced by the subject. This stance places the voice in an arbitrary position of passivity in the process of subjectification. Judith Butler's concept of "performativity," wherein our realities are constructed through repetitive acts, somewhat allows us to consider the voice as formative in the construction of Self, and consequently disturbs notions of an essential authentic Self. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler offers a more robust feminism than what is mainstream,³³ dispelling essentialist and normative conceptions of gender. For Butler, the subject is formed through repetition, through "practices of signification."³⁴ Performativity, however, is misunderstood – often by trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) who perpetuate biological determinism³⁵ – as being "pretense" and therefore not as real or as powerful as "some

³³ See Alison M. Phipps, *Me, Not You: The Trouble with Mainstream Feminism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

³⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1999 [1990]), 144.

³⁵ Biology is not fact, especially when it comes to sex and gender. See Judith Lorber, "Believing is Seeing: Biology as Ideology," *Gender & Society* 7, no.4 (1993): 568-581.

underlying gender truth.”³⁶ But as Butler later clarifies, “‘performance’ is not a singular ‘act’ or event, but a ritualised production.”³⁷ This posits that *all* acts are aggregational performances that constitute the subject. Performativity allows us, thus, to view Self as something that is in a state of becoming; the subject has not a fixed ontology, but an ontogenesis. Vocality, as *performative action*, can no longer be considered passive. Instead, the voice can be understood as part of the continual construction of identity and the self – vocal performativity. For these reasons, defining an “authentic” self, as some journalists may attempt to do in assessing artists, is an impossibility, and any ascriptions of such kind are rendered moot.

Alternatively, we might say that there are many authenticities at work in any given text-reader relationship. In “Authenticity as Authentication,” Moore shifts his focus from a discussion of authenticity as a property of a performance, to addressing authenticity as something that is ascribed to it. Building on the work of cultural theorist Johan Fornäs, Moore expands on three variants of authenticity: social authenticity (communal), subjective authenticity (individual), and meta-authenticity (cultural).³⁸ Speaking of cultural or meta-authenticity, Moore suggests that this third authenticity is a process of “validating ‘synthetic’ texts through the evidenced meta-reflexivity of their authors.”³⁹ Cultural authenticity, then, is a

³⁶ Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996), 88.

³⁷ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (London: Routledge, 1993), 95.

³⁸ See Johan Fornäs, *Cultural Theory and Late Modernity* (London: Sage, 1995).

³⁹ Moore, “Authenticity as Authentication,” 215.

process in which artistic products are validated through reference to the person of their authors. This process can also extend to validations made by perceivers of said products. Fornäs and Moore, importantly, highlight the construction and artificiality of authenticity; it is not, for academics, worthwhile trying to determine whether something truly is authentic. However, the methods by which the public and journalists come to authenticate people and performances are fascinating, and invite us to question the discursive mechanisms of such authentications.

Vocal Ontogenesis

The voice is our sonic medium for reimagining the self. Further, it allows us to perform and materialize aspects of the self. Brandon LaBelle proposes the notion of staging the self through voice, but “with added imagination.”⁴⁰ This idea is most striking for our consideration of authentic voices: we perform the ways in which we imagine ourselves. Our identities (emotional, physical, gender, sexuality, artistic, etc.) become intermingled, collapsing all at once into each other through the voice as medium and object. Expanding on LaBelle, I am developing a theoretical understanding of voice that sees vocality as a performative act of “becoming”; through our vocal expressions and performances, as repetitive acts, we powerfully mediate the self and its individualized facets. Sound and media artist Norie Neumark has already explored the performativity of voice, noting that it is useful to approach voice “as gesture and event – and to

⁴⁰ Brandon LaBelle, “Cry, Scream, Shout, Sing,” in *Lexicon of the Mouth: Poetics and Politics of Voice and the Oral Imaginary* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 50.

point to what voices *do*, how they *create and disturb* meaning and ‘identity’ rather than just conveying or expressing it.”⁴¹ LaBelle has elsewhere stated that the voice works “to embody through action rather than point to through representation.”⁴² Rather than viewing the voice as having solely representational qualities, it might be possible to see voice as part of an amalgam of processes: it creates identity and performs culturally coded identities. Importantly, voice needs to be understood as an active agent in the continuing ontogenesis of identity, rather than as an expression of a fixed ontological state.

For all singers, voices are integral in their endeavours to perform meanings and identities; it is worth observing, moreover, that there is not just one voice per singer. The multiple identities that can be explored and presented through performance can also afford, and even demand, different voices. The voice, with the various identities it has the potential to convey, begets the potential for artists to perform and express identities that are not considered “theirs.”⁴³ The necessity of voice in this process has already been acknowledged by scholars such as Daphne Brooks in her article “This voice which is not one,” which quotes the feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray’s *This Sex Which Is Not One*, on women in psychoanalytic theory. Brooks illustrates how Amy Winehouse, as a white-Jewish singer-songwriter who has

⁴¹ Neumark, “Doing Things with Voices,” 96; emphasis in original.

⁴² Brandon LaBelle, *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 63.

⁴³ Jody Kreiman and Diana Sidtis empirically show that many aspects of identity and emotion can be identified by listeners in *Foundations of Voices Studies: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Voice Production and Perception* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011).

mimicked the vocal gestures of blues artists, is able to sound like she is part of this genre that was originally developed by and associated with a different marginalized group.⁴⁴ Aside from the political ramifications of aural “blue(s)face,” Brooks’ argument relies on the voice being a vehicle wherewith identities can be materialized. Moreover, Brooks shows that the voice is a tool that is crafted and honed even within popular genres, thus allowing us to interpret it as a commodity that is coded, practiced and marketed, and, most importantly, as something that can be modified according to what one is performing or is trying to present.

Lana Del Rey has famously had multiple incarnations, from her *MySpace* account “Sparkle Jump Rope Queen,” and the often forgotten “May Jailer,” to Lizzy Grant. Additionally, her various manifestations have been accompanied by different vocal timbres. Whilst both journalists and fans share an interest in Del Rey’s vocal aesthetics, her fans seem to be most aware of her different voices used throughout her career. “She sang ‘Million Dollar Man’ like Lizzy Grant,” comments YouTube user Melody loves Peaches; “Lizzy Grant was an era,” corroborates HoloItsMeLeah.⁴⁵ Through sonic-discursive exegesis, voices, then, appear to carry with them an essence of the person who emits them. But this capsule of identity is not carried by the voice, rather, it is ascribed to it. What initially appears to be

⁴⁴ Daphne A. Brooks, “‘This voice which is not one’: Amy Winehouse sings the ballad of sonic blue(s)face culture,” *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 20, no.1 (2010), 37-60.

⁴⁵ PopCrush, “Lana Del Rey’s Best Live Vocals,” YouTube, August 12, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OHp6dNRQxPc>.

“essence” is revealed to be an ascription, an observer’s obtrusion.⁴⁶

Arild Fetveit’s study comments on Del Rey’s varying, vocally-marked protagonists within her songs. Visually, Fetveit identifies the “Queen” and the “Renegade Teen” in Del Rey’s music video for “Born to Die.” She then relates Del Rey’s image to her vocality, identifying the voice of “the Queen,” which she says “is [a] dark, deep, serene...melancholic style lacking in affection.”⁴⁷ The Queen is contrasted with the “husky and flirtatious, girlish petulance of the Renegade Teen.”⁴⁸ Fetveit refers to this “girlish” voice as “breathy.” Though she is not suggesting that these voices point to aspects of “interior” identity (the authentic self), Fetveit’s remarks show the performative affordances of voice; it is interpreted as conveying distinct personae.

Fetveit’s analysis of Del Rey’s voices is an attempt to categorize Del Rey’s vocal identities in the track “Born to Die.” If one listens more closely to other tracks on the album *Born to Die*, one can hear that this “Queen” and “Teen” dialectic is a recurring trope. The track that most epitomizes these vocal shifts is the seldom discussed “Off to the Races.” The track begins with the text, “my old man is a bad man but I can’t deny the way he holds my hand and he grabs me; he has me by my heart.”⁴⁹ The voice Del Rey employs in this introduction is close to that of Fetveit’s

⁴⁶ See Georgina Born, “Music and the materialisation of identities,” *Journal of Material Culture* 16, no. 4 (2011): 376-388.

⁴⁷ Arild Fetveit, “Death, beauty, and iconoclastic nostalgia,” 196.

⁴⁸ Fetveit. 196.

⁴⁹ Lana Del Rey, “Off To The Races,” *Born to Die – The Paradise Edition*, Polydor Ltd. (UK), (2012).

“Queen”: it is dark and low with relaxed diction. The text is unsettling, implying a romantic relationship between father and daughter. Then, at 00:35, a new voice emerges through the soundscape. Singing “light of my life, fire of my loins; be a good baby, do what I want,” Del Rey appears to vocally become the “Renegade Teen” once more.⁵⁰

“Light of my life, fire of my loins” is the opening line of Vladimir Nabokov’s controversial novel *Lolita* (1955), which follows the story of the paedophile and first-person narrator Humbert Humbert, who has an inappropriate relationship with his early-teenage step-daughter Lolita. On the second release of the album, *The Paradise Edition*, Del Rey has a track entitled “Lolita,” and another entitled “Carmen,” a song mentioned frequently in Nabokov’s book. *Lolita*’s influence on Del Rey is not news to those who are familiar with her work,⁵¹ but it informs the way we understand her use of voices and their implications for identity construction. The lyric “I” of “light of my life” is that of Humbert Humbert, yet Del Rey chooses to apply what has been coded as her most “girlish” voice for this “I.” Regardless of Del Rey’s intentions, this choice shows the power of vocality to destabilize notions of fixed identities. It begs the questions, is this “Lolita” voice as weak and frail as Fetveit’s “Renegade Teen” interpretation suggests? Is Del Rey employing homeovestism to perpetuate the male fantasy of a crude adolescent who is “up for it,” or is her parody of this a reclamation of Lolita’s agency, a

⁵⁰ Lana Del Rey, “Off To The Races.”

⁵¹ Marc Hogan, “Lana Del Rey Plays a ‘Hood’ Lolita in ‘Off to the Races,’” *SPIN Magazine*, December 20, 2011, <https://www.spin.com/2011/12/lana-del-rey-plays-hood-lolita-races/>.

disclosure of her poignant trauma?⁵² With this “girlish” vocality attached to the lyrical voice of a male predator, the answers are equivocal. In any case, scholars, journalists, and fans have all seemed to notice her vocalities, as seen in “Off to the Races,” and their ability to decenter notions of identity.

Conclusions: Performing and Ascribing the Authentic Voice

Aside from the bifurcation between academic theory and popular reasoning, we might also consider the calculated manipulations of vocal codes undertaken by the artist herself. After the 2011 YouTube success of “Video Games,” Lana Del Rey was asked about her vocal style. She said:

People weren't taking me very seriously, so I lowered my voice, believing that it would help me stand out.⁵³

Because of the way I look...I needed something to ground the entire project. Otherwise I think people would assume I was some airhead singer. Well, I don't

⁵² See George Zavitzianos, “The Object in Fetishism, Homeovestism, and Transvestism,” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 58, no. 4 (1977): 487-495; Louise J. Kaplan, *Female Perversions: The Temptations of Madame Bovary* (London: Pandora Press, 1991).

⁵³ Lewis Corner, “Lana Del Rey: ‘People didn't take me seriously with a high voice,’” *Digital Spy*, November 23, 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20111226200445/http://www.digitalspy.co.uk/music/news/a352467/lana-del-rey-people-didnt-take-me-seriously-with-a-high-voice.html>.

think... I know. I've sung one way, and sung another,
and I've seen what people are drawn to.⁵⁴

Del Rey is clearly well aware of how her voice is received by her audiences – that is, the fact that it was not “standing out” or being taken “seriously.” What is most striking about her observations is the judgement that is attached to the pitch of singers’ voices: the higher, “girly” voice is not taken seriously. Moreover, the belief that the artist’s image – in this case, Del Rey’s preference for flower crowns and demure outfits in 2011, both of which are seen on the covers of *Born to Die* and the “Video Games” single – somehow needs to be rectified by the voice illustrates a sexist opposition of different forms of femininity. She felt she had to offset a girly visual image with a more “serious” vocal sound. Finally, the idea that the pitch of the voice, especially for women, in some way reflects intelligence

⁵⁴ Andy Welch, “Lana Del Rey Interview,” *Clash*, November 29, 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130927010125/http://www.clashmusic.com/feature/lana-del-rey-interview>.

(high voice coded as “airhead”) is also a troubling assessment.⁵⁵ While voices are seen to present an essential identity, aspects of persona such as intelligence, agency, and authenticity are not necessarily confirmed or undermined by voices – rather, they are ascribed to voices. A woman’s singing voice does not inform a listener of her authenticity (or whether she can be taken seriously); instead, certain vocal features have values and expectations attached to them, with some (such as sounding “girly”) being subverted.

Guardian journalist Peter Robinson has recently commented on “breathiness” as a vocal trend in pop, labelling its 21st-century incarnation as “whisperpop.”⁵⁶ Locating the ostensible genesis of this vocal phenomenon with Lana Del Rey (overlooking earlier “whisper” singers, such as Nancy Sinatra, Julie London, Janis Joplin, etc.), Robinson’s tone seems to be

⁵⁵ There are many examples of men singing in high-pitched voices (falsetto/head voice) and being considered talented vocalists in pop; famous examples include Robin Gibb’s voice on the later tracks by the Bee Gees, and Brendon Urie, lead-singer of Panic! At The Disco. That is not to say there are not gender/sexuality-based criticisms aimed at male singers who adopt a high voice (often assumed to be “gay”). However, the criticisms addressed to women are based on their agency and autonomy rather than their sexuality, which is slightly different (but not better/worse) to being assumed gay or queer. A nuanced discussion of falsetto is made in Anne-Lise François, “Fakin’ It/Makin’ It: Falsettos’s Bid for Transcendence in 1970s Disco Highs,” *Perspectives of New Music* 33 no. 1/2 (1995): 442-457. There is, however, need for an examination of gendered criticisms aimed at male pop singers in more recent history.

⁵⁶ Peter Robinson, “Whisperpop’: why stars are choosing breathy intensity over vocal paint-stripping,” *The Guardian*, November 11, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/nov/11/whisperpop-why-stars-choosing-breathy-intensity-over-vocal-paint-stripping>.

quite critical of this vocal style, not least by assuming that it is lazy.⁵⁷ He makes a pointed comment about Del Rey, saying that her voice generally combines the delivery of “dark, expressive storytelling with a sense that she might be wondering whether she’d remembered to lock the bathroom window.”⁵⁸ Robinson’s intentions are unclear, but this comment suggests that despite her ostensibly new, modified vocal delivery, Del Rey is still heard as nonchalant and thus insincere. By saying her “whisperpop” voice makes her sound uninterested or distracted, moreover, Robinson is presenting a judgement that ultimately implies that Del Rey is too disinterested to care, and that her songs are not to be taken seriously.

Though some may hear her tone as sultry and sexy, Robinson connected this breathiness to inauthenticity in 2017. Whilst he does cite male vocalists, such as Justin Bieber, another artist who has rarely been taken seriously due to his high voice in his early career, for applying this technique in tracks, Robinson’s negativity – complete with a tellingly domestic and potentially voyeuristic image about the bathroom window – is targeted at Del Rey and other women. Robinson does not admit that he applies such criticisms because these artists are women, but the conclusions he draws from female vocality are problematic. He attributes a motivation that undermines Del Rey’s professionalism by associating her style with a sudden loss of focus on her craft. Instead, he turns to the mundane and

⁵⁷ Robinson makes a connection to the use of AutoTune, a tool used to electronically modify a voice, which is often viewed as a lazy way to sound “in-tune.”

⁵⁸ Peter Robinson, “Whisperpop.”

domestic, which in itself is sexist. One wonders whether he would suggest a male singer was suddenly wondering about whether he had locked the bathroom window. The voices of female performers, evidently, remain policed and suffer imbalanced critiques – such as the assertion that they are “divorced from experience.”

Lana Del Rey is pertinent to discussions of nostalgia, melodrama, and indie aesthetics, but I have limited my discussion to how her voice is received and subsequently (de)valued and (in)authenticated by fans and journalists. My analysis has revealed gendered criticisms and gendered questionings of agency, which stem from genre and vocal associations. Moreover, I have asserted that the concept of an authentic performer is complicated by vocal ontogenesis, with the voice as a material medium in the process of subjectification. The dialectics between authenticity, voice, and gender have been illustrated in this paper, but further work is required to explore how voices are continually authenticated within pop; whether it is Nicki Minaj and her multiple vocal personalities that transcend genre boundaries, or even the complications posed by queer male artists whose vocal “effeminacy” de/mis/re-genders them, the exploration of voices’ material processes in identity construction needs to continue.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ In this regard, the recent, edited volume by Martha Feldman and Judith T. Zeitlin is salutary for its re-examination of the voice and its materiality: *The Voice as Something More: Essays toward Materiality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019).

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