Beyoncé: A Feminist Icon or Predigested Pop Music?

A quick cross-section of the top 100 popular songs on iTunes reveals a disheartening pattern; the songs that dominate American music libraries and radio airwaves seem to boil down to two choices: the objectifying or the objectified. If it is not Adam Levine’s dulcet tones vilifying the post-feminist tendencies of using the female body as a source of power in the song “One More Night”, then it is Taylor Swift whining about her hetero-normative relationships that failed to yield a fairytale happy ending (thank you “We Are Never, Ever Getting Back Together”). Some talented artists, such as Beyoncé, break through this onslaught of problematic tunes by producing songs that are as aesthetically appealing as they are full of meaningful content. Unfortunately, even the best and most well-intentioned artists are caught within the ideological balancing act in which their work is neither wholly dominant nor wholly oppositional, leaving it to teeter precariously between providing a forum to debate current issues and a sanitized economic endeavor. In the song “Run the World (Girls)”, Beyoncé struggles with this ideological balancing act by packaging an empowering post-feminist message in a standardized pop song casing. Both post-feminism and pop music wield a double-edged sword by concurrently manifesting contradictory concepts, making a dissection of the song a prickly subject. “Girls” is a battleground for the ideological balancing act; while the song is a powerful, post-feminist anthem that provides a collective identity for women, it is simultaneously tainted by the fact that it is a predigested, standardized economic tool.
Through a sturdy foundation deeply entrenched in post-feminism, Beyoncé has built a successful musical empire challenging gender norms with legendary hits such as “Irreplaceable”, “If I Were A Boy”, and especially “Single Ladies (Put A Ring On It)”. As the reigning queen and poster-girl for post-feminism, it is unsurprising that, with her musical history of empowering hits and reputation for touring with an all female band, she has produced yet another post-feminist hit with “Run the World (Girls)”. Her consistent success invokes the idea of the ideological balancing act; is she a post-feminist because she truly believes in those principles and is challenging hegemony or because it is a lucrative part of her self-brand? Regardless, the post-feminist qualities in the song “Girls” remain and can easily be analyzed through the lyrics and music. Scholar Rosalind Gill provides a definition of post-feminism which consists of a sensibility that focuses on femininity as a bodily property, the shift to women as desiring sexual subjects, and the empowerment of women making autonomous and unconstrained decisions (Gill). The first indication is through the repetitive, gritty chant “Who run the world? Girls!” that weaves in and out of the song which establishes female dominance and empowerment and “present women as autonomous agents no longer constrained by any inequalities or power imbalances” (153). In singing, “Boy I’m just playing/Come here baby/Hope you still like me/Fuck you/Pay me”, the lyrics assert the female subject with bodily power through sexual manipulation. As Beyoncé coyly teases the male listener, she metaphorically cracks the whip by saying her behavior cannot go without payment. Perhaps most prominently the lyric “My persuasion can build a nation/Endless power/With love we can devour/You’ll do anything for me” establishes the notion that feminine sexual power is calculating and manipulative; the post-feminists “choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do so” and get what they desire—in this case, endless power (151). The
song also embodies the post-feminist idea of the choice of being and pleasing oneself in the lyrics “You can’t hold me/I work my 9 to 5/Better cut my check” by demonstrating that there is an equality in the business world, with an emphasis on female empowerment (153). However, what remains problematic in this post-feminist presentation is that it can easily be misinterpreted and falls victim to the ideological balancing act; if aspects such as empowerment through the body are not recognized as such, then they are merely reduced to objectification and an “entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist discourses” (163). However, “Girls” still provides a strong, post-feminist identity.

As one empowered female speaking to another, Beyonce uses the song “Girls” to unite all self-identifying females under a collective post-feminist identity. Sociologist Simon Frith argues that pop music is a “key to identity because it offers, so intensely, a sense of both self and others” by constructing and producing “both a subjective and a collective identity” (Frith 109-10). In this sense, when Beyonce calls out “Girls!” and then asks, “Who run the world?” she is creating “an experience of identity” by encouraging an “emotional alliance with the performers and with the performers’ other fans” (121). This alliance bonds female listeners through an empowered post-feminist identity that is always fantastic, always real, and entrenched in a social movement (123). “Girls” has a fantastic musical identity since it transports listeners to another world in time and space that is post-feminist, and where women are in charge and are truly dominant over men. It is a world full of female college graduates (“Let me raise my glass for the college grads”), women with full-time jobs (“I work my 9 to 5/Better cut my check”), and economically independent ladies (“Boy you know you love it/How we’re smart enough to make these millions”). This element of fantasy also allows listeners to try on and discover different identities by imaging themselves in this fantastical world created through the language and music
“Girls” also creates a musical identity that is real in that the song is rooted in the here and now, immediately connecting us to 2012 culture. By inquiring “Who runs this motha?/Girls!”, Beyonce’s words are relatable to a modern day context such that women do run the world in 2012; as witnessed in the recent November election, an unprecedented number of diverse women ran for Congress. The next time Beyonce asks “Who run the world?”, we now have some congressional names to give her. The post-feminist identity that “Girls” creates also involves a social movement, or, in other words, “a real experience of what the ideal could be”—in this case, post-feminism (123). This social movement is not only recognized through the lyrics as mentioned earlier, but also through the music. The unapologetically aggressive beat presents femininity in an unusual way that challenges expected gender norms of the female as delicate. The mixture of the traditional African beat with the electronic fusion creates a futuristic sound that aids the lyrics in challenging the status quo. Also, the raw, repetitive chanting of “Girls” is reminiscent of a call to arms, or a military chant, which assists the aggressive theme of the song. Combined, these musical elements contribute to the notion of female dominance and bodily power found in post-feminism and further supports the empowered female collective identity.

As a female empowerment anthem sung by one of the most Grammy winning post-feminist artists in the entertainment industry today, “Girls” by Beyonce carries an inordinate amount of cultural recognition and economic return. However, the inspiring post-feminist message that so wonderfully creates a musical identity suffers from the cultural balancing act of every great pop song: “Girls” is not only a predigested, standardized pop tune, but also part of an economic empire that serves to exploit the listener’s connection for a profit. “Girls” is unoriginal in that it falls prey to many of the standardizations of pop music. For instance, the title “Who run the world? Girls!” is short, repetitive and incessant so it will be memorable; the aggressive beat
remains danceable so that the song can be manufactured into dance remixes and sold for a profit; the chorus is succinct, hard-hitting, and catchy; and the predictable lyric and music structure are reminiscent of a cheer team beat. Philosopher and critic Theodor Adorno writes that “standardization of song hits keeps the customers in line by doing their listening for them” and further “making them forget that what they listen to is already listened to for them, or ‘predigested’” (Adorno 7). These beats, girl-power lyrics, repetitive standardized pop song structure have all been done before, even by Beyoncé herself with many of her other hit songs. The titles may change, but the packaging remains the same. The predigested quality of “Girls” is also detrimental in that the listener is not required to make any post-feminist effort other than clicking download and passively agreeing with the content. The song, in fact, does not actually call the listener to action, but rather states that girls “run” the world, implying with the present verb tense that women currently control the world, meaning there is nothing to change. This predigested and passive nature of “Girls” appeals to an audience who is distracted and emotional, which Adorno worries about. The emotional type of listener uses pop music as an emotional crutch; the song is “catharsis for the masses, but catharsis which keeps them all the more firmly in line” (12). “Girls” feels and does the work for the wannabe post-feminist. In four minutes the listener has been exposed to a dose of activism and believes as if they have contributed through the act of listening. This emotional type person enjoys the idea of supporting post-feminism, but does not actually act upon it—all activism is relegated in the most passive way possible. “Girls” is also flawed in that it is stylistically created with economic branding in mind rather than social activism. With radio play and over 158 million views on YouTube, the financial success of this female power anthem demonstrates that the recycled standardized pop structure continues to be a lucrative business. This economic machine has churned out a downloadable single, complete
album, and even a Glee Cast version of the song, strengthening the consumer’s purchasing power and enhancing Beyonce’s monetary success. The predigested standardized nature and lucrative economic model of “Girls” clearly is problematic, but at the end of the day, the business boils down to Beyonce’s enlightening lyrics: “Fuck you/Pay me”.

There is very little in popular culture that can avoid entanglement with the ideologically balancing act, which forces the artifact in question to be neither a complete reflection of hegemony nor an oppositional force. “Run the World (Girls)” by Beyonce also falls victim to this balancing act, tilting in favor of the predigested, standardized pop tune, which nearly nullifies the post-feminist message and identity construction. The dissonance between the dual meanings that this song projects makes well-intentioned social activist songs few and far between on the top 100 chart. Perhaps if we recognize that this balancing act exists and is constantly in motion, we could reconcile the hegemonic and oppositional forces to find small victories where we can. Progress can only be made if we can let go of Adorno’s deepest concerns and accept it as such.
Works Cited


