MELANCHOLY AND RESISTANCE: A POSTFEMINIST READING OF LANA DEL REY'S *NORMAN FUCKING ROCKWELL!* ALBUM

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Abstract

This article explores *Norman Fucking Rockwell!*, the 2019 studio album by American singer-songwriter Lana Del Rey, as a postfeminist cultural text that navigates the intersections of femininity, melancholy, and resistance in contemporary popular culture. The research addresses how Del Rey's lyrical persona performs and problematizes postfeminist sensibility through affective narratives of vulnerability, aesthetic detachment, romantic fatalism, and ironic self-awareness. Employing a postfeminist critical framework—drawing on theories by Rosalind Gill, Angela McRobbie, Judith Butler, Sara Ahmed, and Lauren Berlant—this study also incorporates insights from popular culture theorists such as John Fiske, Dominic Strinati, and John G. Cawelti to situate the album within broader traditions of formulaic storytelling and cultural semiotics. The analysis is conducted through close reading and intertextual interpretation of all fourteen tracks, examining lyrics, performance style, and affective cues. Each track is treated as a discrete narrative unit that contributes to a larger postfeminist discourse: from the ironic empowerment in Norman Fucking Rockwell to the quiet withdrawal in Bartender, and the melancholic resistance in hope is a dangerous thing for a woman like me to have – but I have it. The study reveals that Del Rey's work simultaneously reflects and subverts postfeminist norms by embracing emotional opacity, stylized despair, and self-reflexive critique. Rather than offering straightforward narratives of empowerment, the album presents femininity as fractured, polysemic, and politically potent in its refusal to conform to coherent neoliberal scripts. Through its interplay of confession and critique, visibility and erasure, *Norman Fucking Rockwell!* constructs a melancholic femininity that challenges the commodified affect of the "empowered woman" archetype. This article concludes that Del Rey's body of work does not merely reproduce postfeminist themes, but consciously manipulates them—transforming the album into a literary and cultural text where sadness becomes strategy, and vulnerability, a form of resistance.

Keywords: Postfeminism, Melancholy, Popular music, Lana Del Rey, Gender performativity

INTRODUCTION

In the evolving terrain of 21st century popular culture, pop music has become a potent vehicle for negotiating gender, affect, and power. Female pop artists are not only

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entertainers but agents of cultural discourse who embody ideological contradictions and contestations. Among them, Lana Del Rey stands as a unique figure, both adored and critiqued for her melancholic aesthetic and provocative portrayal of femininity. Her 2019 album *Norman Fucking Rockwell!* offers a rich textual site for critical interpretation, as it performs stylized sadness, longing, irony, and ambivalence that resonate within the structures of postfeminist and neoliberal affect.

The objective of this article is to analyze the lyrics of each song in Del Rey's *Norman Fucking Rockwell!* album through a postfeminist framework, treating them as cultural texts embedded in contemporary discourses of gender, romantic ideology, affective labor, and commodified femininity. Rather than judging Del Rey's aesthetics as retrograde or progressive, this study highlights how her strategic invocation of sadness and irony performs a resistance to postfeminist optimism and romantic resolution. Each song is treated as an interpretive node that reveals both complicity with and critique of cultural narratives around love, femininity, and affective vulnerability.

The theoretical foundation of this study integrates multiple perspectives from popular culture and gender studies. Strinati (2004) explains that popular culture cannot be separated from mass cultural production, but also possesses the potential to encode ideology and subvert hegemonic narratives. In this context, Lana Del Rey functions as a "producer of contradiction" — her lyrics are mass commodities that simultaneously contain ideological ambivalence .

Cawelti's theory of formula fiction situates cultural texts within recognizable genre conventions, but also emphasizes the ideological work done by deviations from those formulas. Del Rey's disruption of romantic tropes fits Cawelti's model of innovation within familiarity, signaling shifts in gendered cultural expectations (Cawelti, 1977: 12) .

Gill's postfeminist sensibility underscores how contemporary media constructs femininity through tropes of choice, autonomy, and aesthetic labor—paradoxically wrapped in emotional exhaustion. Del Rey's melancholic posturing subverts this by exposing the emotional cost behind postfeminist ideals (Gill, 2007: 149). Butler's (1990) notion of gender performativity is employed to read Del Rey's lyrical persona as an iteration of culturally intelligible femininity, formed and reformed through repetition and stylization. Meanwhile, Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism enriches this framework by foregrounding affective attachments to ideals that hinder flourishing—

especially the romantic ideal that continues to animate Del Rey's lyrics despite its known toxicity (Berlant, 2011: 1).

John Fiske's theory of polysemic texts and active audiences further supports this interpretive approach. According to Fiske, cultural texts are not passively consumed but actively negotiated by audiences who extract resistant or alternative meanings based on their social positions . In Del Rey's case, her fanbase's embrace of the "sad girl" persona—spliced with irony, romantic decay, and aesthetic intensity—attests to the multiplicity of meanings her work generates. Sara Ahmed's affect theory adds another layer by framing sadness not as an internal state but as a social orientation: a way of inhabiting the world differently, against the grain of happiness scripts and neoliberal cheerfulness (Ahmed, 2014: 14).

The method employed is close reading and textual analysis of each track in *Norman Fucking Rockwell!*, with interpretive framing provided by postfeminist theory and affect studies. The lyrics are examined in relation to broader cultural discourses, while intertextuality and performance are treated as key to meaning-making. The analysis draws on the lyrical content published via Genius.com and interprets the songs as performative narratives that blend cultural convention with personal affective articulation.

Previous studies have explored Lana Del Rey's ambiguous position in feminist discourse, often noting the retro-aesthetic and tragic femininity that undergirds her public persona (Bayton, 2023; Knight, 2010). However, few have provided a systematic reading of *Norman Fucking Rockwell!* as a holistic postfeminist narrative. Ahmed (2014) stresses how emotions such as melancholy circulate socially, disorienting the listener from normative happiness and thus offering a critical vantage point. In this context, Del Rey's aesthetics become a form of cultural resistance embedded within commodified pop. This article will therefore present a track-by-track analysis of all 14 songs in *Norman Fucking Rockwell!* to show how Del Rey aestheticizes melancholy as a site of resistance, critique, and survival within postfeminist culture. The discussion is organized thematically per song, focusing on affective tropes, lyrical structure, and postfeminist contradictions.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Track 1: Norman Fucking Rockwell

Melancholy as Postfeminist Resistance in the Collapse of Romantic Formulas

The opening track of Lana Del Rey's *Norman Fucking Rockwell!* immediately immerses the listener in a caustic monologue directed at an archetypal emotionally detached male artist. The narrator, exhausted yet still entangled, articulates a postfeminist sensibility where melancholia, irony, and intimate detachment converge. As Rosalind Gill (2007: 149) outlines, postfeminist culture often involves a "contradictory mix of independence and regulation, agency and discipline." Del Rey's speaker embodies this contradiction through her self-aware lament:

> Goddamn, man-child / You fucked me so good that I almost said 'I love you' / You're fun and you're wild / But you don't know the half of the shit that you put me through (Del Rey, 2019)

Rather than seeking romantic resolution, Del Rey's narrator performs a melancholic detachment that subverts normative closure. Cawelti (1977: 41) argues that popular genre narratives typically rely on formulaic resolutions to reaffirm cultural stability. Here, Del Rey mimics the formula of romantic disappointment but refuses to deliver redemptive payoff—thus enacting a disruption rather than closure.

This mode of affective resistance aligns with what Lauren Berlant (2011: 23) calls cruel optimism—the persistent attachment to fantasies that ultimately obstruct one's thriving. The protagonist's ironic entrapment within a toxic relationship signals not victimhood but a stylized awareness of suffering. Rather than "moving on," she dwells:

> You talk to the walls when the party gets bored / I don't get bored, I just see it through (Del Rey, 2019)

Del Rey flips the gaze away from the tortured male artist and renders him banal, even pathetic. As Knight (2010: 88) notes, traditional media often aestheticizes male dysfunction while women are cast as muses or victims. Here, Del Rey denies such

positioning. The "man-child" is not tragic but tiresome—a reversal of gendered cultural capital.

The use of irony, as emphasized by Kotliuk (2022: 75), becomes a key tool in postfeminist femininity: a knowing, reflexive strategy to negotiate the tensions between autonomy and emotional entanglement. The narrator is not naive; she chooses to remain, not out of helplessness, but because staying is part of the performance of melancholic femininity—a gendered aesthetic practice shaped by culture (Bartky, 1990: 73).

Judith Butler's (1990: 190) performative theory of gender provides further insight: the speaker is not simply expressing identity, but performing it through repetition. Del Rey deliberately plays into the romantic martyr figure—only to deconstruct it through ironic distance and exaggerated stylization. This echoes Whiteley et al.'s (2000: 112) reading of female artists as agents of genre manipulation, using popular forms to resist gender norms.

John Fiske's (1989: 95) theory of polysemic texts supports this interpretation. The lyrics serve as open texts that are reappropriated by audiences into the "sad girl" aesthetic—an online cultural shorthand that simultaneously critiques and romanticizes feminine sorrow. As Strinati (2004: 217) explains, postmodern pop texts often merge sincerity and irony, subverting the very tropes they employ.

Berlant (2011: 33) argues that cultural narratives of romantic promise structure much of our affective investments. Del Rey distorts this promise. The narrator is both aware of the illusion and unable—or unwilling—to leave it. This is not weakness, but the very definition of postfeminist complexity: "freedom" that includes the freedom to feel bad (Gill & Elias, 2014: 358).

Del Rey's lyrics:

> Why wait for the best when I could have you?
> (Del Rey, 2019)

…evoke the neoliberal logic of settling—of choosing accessibility over fulfillment. This line functions as a postfeminist parody of romantic self-sacrifice, echoing McRobbie's (2009: 56) critique of "the illusion of choice" under neoliberal femininity.

Ahmed (2014: 14) positions emotion as an orientation rather than an interior state. In this sense, the song stages melancholia as a feminist direction—one that refuses the optimism demanded by patriarchal scripts. Rather than "getting over it," the narrator lingers in emotional fatigue as a form of quiet rebellion.

Del Rey's vocals themselves are languid, slowed-down, and emotionally distant. Her sonic choices enact what Gill (2009: 149) calls "aestheticization of affect," where emotion becomes performative labor—rendered beautiful, consumable, but hollow. This is further supported by Negra and Tasker's (2007: 95) critique of postfeminist culture's fixation on surface over structure.

The figure of the "man-child" represents not only a failed romantic ideal, but a broader disillusionment with masculine authority. As Kotliuk (2022: 80) notes, the postfeminist subject often emerges in response to the failed paternal promise. Del Rey's narrator no longer seeks protection or partnership; she observes, mocks, and endures.

Gill's (2016: 226) concept of postfeminist affective ambiguity applies aptly here. The speaker's emotions are both authentic and curated, sincere and performative. In "Norman Fucking Rockwell," affect is not merely expressed—it is stylized, commodified, and deployed for critique.

This tension is captured in lines such as:

> 'Cause you're just a man / It's just what you do
> (Del Rey, 2019)

This resignation reflects what McRobbie (2009: 65) terms "gendered fatalism"—an affective posture where women acknowledge sexism but no longer expect change. Such lines reinforce the cultural fatigue of postfeminism: agency without structural transformation.

Gill and Scharff (2011: 10) emphasize that postfeminism is not simply about individual empowerment but about the regulation of femininity through emotional labor and aesthetic discipline. Del Rey's narrator appears autonomous, but this autonomy is bounded by the aestheticization of her sorrow.

Finally, the cultural reception of this track underscores the power of affective circulation. As Banet-Weiser (2018: 144) notes, even commodified texts can carry feminist critique when audiences use them to articulate resistance. Norman Fucking Rockwell has become a symbol of sad-girl postfeminism—not because it offers solutions, but because it names the exhaustion.

Track 2: Mariners Apartment Complex

Feminine Self-Reclamation through Melancholy and Myth

In Mariners Apartment Complex, Lana Del Rey positions herself not as a victim of a broken romance, but as a mythic figure—"the storm, not the shore." The song transitions from emotional vulnerability to quiet self-deification, performing a postfeminist femininity that is both fractured and sovereign. Del Rey narrates a relationship where she is misunderstood, othered, yet ultimately self-defining:

> You took my sadness out of context / At the Mariners Apartment Complex / I ain't no candle in the wind
> (Del Rey, 2019)

The opening lines instantly signal the postfeminist affective landscape Gill (2007: 149) identifies: female emotion is not simply expressed but regulated, aestheticized, and politicized. Here, Del Rey defies emotional misinterpretation—her sadness is deliberate, not helpless. As Kotliuk (2022: 78) notes, postfeminist femininity often performs a paradox: emotional expressivity that is tightly controlled and self-aware.

Del Rey references Elton John's "Candle in the Wind", but negates it. She is not a fading figure destroyed by fame or sorrow, but a generative force—stormy, dangerous, divine. This shift illustrates what Butler (1990: 179) calls gender performativity: a reiteration of norms that destabilizes them through exaggeration or refusal. Del Rey

rejects the passive femininity traditionally associated with love ballads, enacting instead a mythopoetic selfhood that both conforms to and disrupts romantic tropes.

Cawelti's (1977: 49) theory of formula fiction helps explain how Del Rey employs and subverts established narrative structures. The trope of the wounded woman seeking love is flipped: she is wounded, yes, but also omniscient. She observes her partner's brokenness with compassion but remains emotionally autonomous:

> They mistook my kindness for weakness / I fucked up, I know that, but Jesus / Can't a girl just do the best she can?
> (Del Rey, 2019)

This moment dramatizes what McRobbie (2009: 56) describes as the "double entanglement" of postfeminism: agency and vulnerability, self-discipline and self-expression. The narrator acknowledges past mistakes, but refuses moral judgment. The invocation of "Jesus" suggests not repentance but self-frustration in a culture that scrutinizes women's emotional responses.

Berlant's (2011: 52) concept of cruel optimism—the idea that attachments can become obstacles to flourishing—shapes the emotional core of the song. The narrator knows the relationship is damaged, yet continues to find meaning in it. Rather than resolve this tension, she lingers in it, refusing tidy conclusions. This aligns with Ahmed's (2014: 38) theory of "affective orientation," where emotion is not interiority but direction. The speaker's melancholia is not weakness—it is a critical stance.

Fiske (1989: 96) emphasizes how popular culture texts are polysemic and open to varied readings by active audiences. Del Rey's layered vocal delivery, slow tempo, and sparse instrumentation invite listeners to reimagine sadness as sovereignty. Her aesthetic is not one of collapse, but of control over collapse—what Gill and Scharff (2011: 10) call aesthetic discipline under freedom.

Del Rey's lyrical persona fuses religious, romantic, and natural imagery to construct a contradictory feminine subject. As she sings:

You lose your way, just take my hand / You're lost at sea, then I'll command your boat to me again
(Del Rey, 2019)

The speaker positions herself as savior and siren—both nurturing and dangerous. This ambiguity mirrors Gill's (2009: 153) observation that postfeminist culture "fetishizes femininity while appearing to empower it." The narrator offers emotional guidance, yet maintains an erotic mystique. She does not demand commitment; she commands gravity.

Strinati (2004: 222) notes that postmodern popular culture blends sincerity and irony, disrupting traditional binaries. Del Rey's lyrical structure leans into this: the chorus is both tender and self-exalting. There is emotional proximity but also spiritual distance. The romantic subject is not the male partner, but the narrator's own mythic reconstruction of herself.

This myth-making is gendered. As Whiteley et al. (2000: 131) argue, female artists often navigate cultural scripts that cast them as emotional beings in need of rescue. Del Rey retools that script: she offers rescue, yet from a place of divine detachment. The line "I'm your man" flips gender altogether—asserting protectiveness and strength typically coded masculine.

I'm your man / They don't understand
(Del Rey, 2019)

This short line destabilizes gendered expectation. Knight (2010: 92) suggests that archetypes of female strength are often masculinized in media narratives. Del Rey leans into this by embodying "the man" in emotional authority, without abandoning her femininity. It is not drag, but drag-adjacent—a performative disruption of gender norms.

Gill's (2016: 226) expanded work on postfeminist affect further clarifies how Del Rey mobilizes emotion as currency. Her melancholy is not presented for empathy, but as narrative infrastructure. The sadness is orchestrated, directed, and stylized—an "emotional regime," as Berlant (2011: 94) terms it, where feeling is labor.

The song's spiritual overtones—"I'm the board, the lightning, the thunder" (Del Rey, 2019)—cast the narrator as a nature-deity. This speaks to a return to essentialist femininity, yet framed within postmodern self-awareness. Kotliuk (2022: 81) argues that this aestheticization of natural force reclaims femininity not as passive nature, but as disruptive energy.

In line with Gill & Elias (2014: 358), who write that postfeminism is "a sensibility, not an ideology," Del Rey's narrator does not preach empowerment—she performs it ambiguously. Her strength lies in style, in sonic minimalism, in the restraint of not saying more than necessary.

Track 3: "Venice Bitch"

Nostalgic Excess, Melancholic Performance, and Feminine Resistance

Lana Del Rey's "Venice Bitch" defies conventional pop song structures through its nearly ten-minute runtime, embracing a sprawling soundscape and reflective lyricism that engages deeply with postfeminist melancholia, nostalgia, and affective resistance. The track's duration itself becomes a form of narrative and emotional excess, challenging the listener's expectations of brevity and formulaic clarity. As Cawelti (1977: 12) explains, genres typically depend on structured predictability, but Del Rey pushes against these conventions to foreground ambiguity and emotional intricacy.

From its opening lines, Del Rey sets a nostalgic yet self-conscious tone:

> "Fear fun, fear love / Fresh out of fucks, forever / Trying to be stronger for you" (Del Rey, 2019)

Immediately, the lyrics signal an ambivalence toward emotional intimacy. Gill (2007: 163) emphasizes that postfeminist culture often showcases a deliberate self-consciousness, where emotional expression is both earnest and knowingly performed. Here, Del Rey performs vulnerability as a form of resistance, signaling emotional fatigue rather than romantic idealism. As Ahmed (2014: 14) suggests, affective states like melancholia orient individuals socially; Del Rey's melancholia directs listeners toward questioning romantic conventions rather than reinforcing them.

The chorus crystallizes the track's central themes of idealization, nostalgia, and emotional stasis:

> Oh God, miss you on my lips / It's me, your little Venice bitch"
> (Del Rey, 2019)

The narrator simultaneously adopts a playful and diminutive persona, embodying femininity as both provocative and self-aware. Butler's (1990: 190) concept of gender performativity elucidates this ambiguity; femininity here is neither essential nor stable, but rather continuously reiterated through stylized acts and deliberate performance. The phrase "your little Venice bitch" is self-objectifying, ironically highlighting the speaker's awareness of her positionality within romantic narratives while simultaneously destabilizing them through irony.

Kotliuk (2022: 75) expands this concept, arguing that postfeminist femininity often exploits irony to navigate the contradictions inherent in neoliberal subjectivity. The deliberate trivialization ("little Venice bitch") resists passive femininity by reclaiming language typically used to marginalize or infantilize women. Del Rey's affective playfulness becomes both self-critique and cultural commentary, indicative of Gill and Scharff's (2011: 10) assertion that contemporary femininities negotiate autonomy within deeply restrictive gendered norms.

The musical structure itself—extended instrumental sections, repeated motifs, and atmospheric layering—mirrors Berlant's (2011: 23) theory of "cruel optimism," where emotional attachments become obstacles to flourishing. The repetition and length of Venice Bitch sonically replicate this sense of emotional entrapment. The listener is held within the melancholic atmosphere, forced to inhabit the narrator's emotional stagnation rather than experience narrative progression. Here, Del Rey deploys duration as affective strategy, challenging normative expectations of pop song brevity and emotional resolution.

Moreover, Strinati's (2004: 217) characterization of postmodern texts as inherently contradictory further clarifies the song's form. Venice Bitch draws on nostalgic aesthetics—1960s Californian rock influences, surf culture imagery—to critique

nostalgia itself. Del Rey summons an idealized past only to expose its emptiness and unattainability:

> "Nothing gold can stay / You write, I tour, we make it work / You're beautiful and I'm insane"
> (Del Rey, 2019)

The explicit reference to Robert Frost's poem ("Nothing Gold Can Stay") layers the song with intertextual melancholy, reinforcing the impossibility of preserving perfect moments or idealized relationships. Whiteley, Bayton, and Cloonan (2000: 112) emphasize that female artists frequently use intertextual references to critically interrogate gendered narratives of romance and femininity. In this context, Del Rey's lyrical invocation of classic literature underscores an awareness of cultural scripts that dictate romantic outcomes—scripts she deliberately undermines through irony and melancholy.

The nostalgic longing in Venice Bitch aligns with McRobbie's (2009: 56) concept of "double entanglement," where women are simultaneously positioned within and resistant to normative cultural narratives. Del Rey does not reject romantic attachment outright; instead, she remains ambivalently within it, using extended duration and lyrical ambiguity to complicate simplistic interpretations of romantic fulfillment.

Fiske's (1989: 95) notion of polysemy also highlights how Del Rey's music is appropriated and recontextualized by listeners, particularly within the online "sad girl" aesthetic communities. Fans frequently circulate and interpret fragments of the song, making its extended duration a resource rather than an obstacle—each segment a site for emotional resonance, critique, or identity formation. This further demonstrates how Del Rey's deliberate melancholic excess operates as an affective strategy, challenging traditional pop consumption patterns.

The song's climax merges emotional vulnerability with lyrical irony:

> "If you weren't mine, I'd be / Jealous of your love"
> (Del Rey, 2019)

Here, the speaker acknowledges possessiveness and emotional dependency while subtly critiquing these emotions as culturally conditioned expectations of femininity. Gill (2016: 226) emphasizes that contemporary femininity often demands emotional performance as labor; thus, Del Rey's performative jealousy simultaneously reveals and critiques the affective work required of women within romantic relationships.

In sum, Venice Bitch enacts postfeminist melancholy as a sustained form of resistance. Del Rey does not seek resolution or redemption but instead dwells within emotional complexity, aestheticizing nostalgia, and refusing simple emotional or narrative closure. Through the track's sprawling structure and ambivalent lyrical persona, Del Rey critiques romantic ideals and neoliberal femininity, positioning melancholy not as weakness but as critical agency.

Track 4: "Fuck it I Love You"

Ambivalent Desire, Affective Labor, and Postfeminist Fatalism

In "Fuck it I Love You," Lana Del Rey dramatizes the complexities and contradictions inherent in postfeminist romantic attachment. The song embodies ambivalent emotional investment—at once detached and deeply involved—emphasizing the affective labor required in negotiating contemporary femininity. This emotional paradox directly aligns with Rosalind Gill's (2007: 149) analysis of postfeminist sensibility, where emotional expressiveness is at once a display of authenticity and an ironic, self-conscious performance.

The opening lines immediately encapsulate this emotional tension:

> "I like to see everything in neon / Drink lime green, stay up 'til dawn / Maybe the way that I'm living is killing me"
> (Del Rey, 2019)

Here, the vivid imagery of "neon" and excessive behavior signals a performative indulgence in destructive pleasures. Ahmed (2014: 38) conceptualizes affect as

orientation, highlighting how emotions direct individuals socially and culturally. Del Rey's narrator purposefully inhabits destructive desires not merely as personal failings, but as culturally patterned behaviors. She knowingly engages in "killing" lifestyles, turning self-destructive affect into a mode of ironic critique.

The refrain further exemplifies the deliberate ambivalence of contemporary postfeminist femininity:

> "Fuck it, I love you / I moved to California, but it's just a state of mind / It turns out everywhere you go, you take yourself, that's not a lie"
> (Del Rey, 2019)

This ironic resignation demonstrates Berlant's (2011: 23) concept of "cruel optimism," an attachment to fantasies that ultimately prevent flourishing. The narrator moves physically but remains emotionally stagnant. Del Rey critiques neoliberal narratives of reinvention and optimism, emphasizing that geographical change does not equate to emotional transformation. Instead, the subject carries her melancholia as an internal landscape, suggesting the limits of postfeminist self-invention.

Moreover, Butler's (1990: 179) gender performativity clarifies the complexity in Del Rey's lyrical persona. Femininity here is a repeated act, performed through contradictory emotional positions. The profanity ("Fuck it") functions as performative defiance, simultaneously asserting emotional vulnerability ("I love you") and distancing the speaker from conventional romantic sincerity. Del Rey's performance highlights what Gill and Scharff (2011: 10) describe as postfeminism's regulated yet contradictory expectations—women must exhibit autonomy but remain emotionally and aesthetically appealing.

Strinati (2004: 217) identifies contradiction as a central component of postmodern popular culture, with texts simultaneously reinforcing and undermining dominant cultural narratives. Del Rey's lyrical contradictions ("Fuck it, I love you") disrupt romantic idealism by foregrounding emotional conflict and ambiguity rather than clear romantic resolutions.

Kotliuk (2022: 75) specifically identifies postfeminist femininity as grounded in ironic emotional stylization. Del Rey's lyrics display precisely this form of femininity, turning emotional vulnerability into deliberate aesthetic expression. In doing so, she subverts romantic tropes, employing melancholic desire as resistance rather than submission. This echoes Whiteley, Bayton, and Cloonan's (2000: 112) observations that female artists frequently manipulate popular music conventions to critique gender norms from within familiar forms.

The bridge further underscores the self-awareness of affective labor involved in maintaining feminine desirability:

> "Dream a little dream of me / Make me into something sweet / Turn the radio on, dancing to a pop song"
> (Del Rey, 2019)

Here, the narrator recognizes her femininity as constructed through mediated images and gendered expectations. Gill's (2016: 226) conception of "postfeminist affective labor" emphasizes that emotional performance is a form of social capital. Del Rey explicitly calls attention to her construction as a "sweet" fantasy—self-consciously performing the emotional labor demanded by romantic and cultural scripts.

Fiske's (1989: 95) theory of polysemy highlights how the audience actively interprets popular culture texts. "Fuck it I Love You" resonates with listeners who recognize their own ambivalent attachments within neoliberal affective regimes. Fan interactions and online appropriations emphasize shared experiences of emotional fatigue, ironic detachment, and romantic compromise—validating Del Rey's emotional ambivalence as culturally meaningful.

Finally, the closing lines encapsulate Del Rey's affective paradox:

> "California dreamin', got my money on my mind / Drugs and alcohol and parties, what a beautiful life"
> (Del Rey, 2019)

This deliberately sarcastic romanticization critiques neoliberal fantasies of freedom, mobility, and self-realization. McRobbie's (2009: 56) concept of "double entanglement" illuminates how women are simultaneously liberated and regulated within postfeminist culture. Del Rey's narrator embraces indulgent lifestyles while acknowledging their emptiness. This deliberate ambivalence represents a critical posture—neither wholly complicit nor entirely resistant.

Track 5: "Doin' Time"

Irony, Appropriation, and Postfeminist Reinterpretation

Lana Del Rey's cover of Sublime's "Doin' Time" occupies a significant intertextual space, recasting a distinctly masculine narrative through a distinctly postfeminist lens. The original track—marked by its casual, reggae-influenced style and male-centric lyrics—undergoes substantial reinterpretation. This inversion allows Del Rey to performatively subvert traditional gender roles embedded within popular music genres.

The song begins with lines that immediately evoke relaxed, carefree masculinity typical of Sublime's original:

> "Summertime, and the livin's easy / Bradley's on the microphone with Ras MG" (Del Rey, 2019)

However, Del Rey's languid vocal style deliberately contrasts with the original's casual bravado. As Gill (2007: 163) observes, postfeminist femininity often involves ironic detachment and stylized emotional expression. Here, Del Rey adopts Sublime's masculine posturing only to undermine it through her deliberate vocal affect, creating an ironic distance between the lyrics and their original intention.

Butler's (1990: 179) theory of gender performativity provides crucial insights here: Del Rey re-performs masculinity through exaggerated feminine stylization. By embodying and subtly ridiculing the original track's male bravado, she highlights the performative nature of both femininity and masculinity. This interpretive move reveals gender itself as a performative repetition rather than a stable identity.

Strinati (2004: 217) explains how popular culture frequently employs intertextuality to disrupt and challenge cultural norms. Del Rey leverages this intertextuality explicitly—using Sublime's familiar melody and lyrics to critique the gender dynamics implicit within popular music. The line:

> "All the people in the dance will agree / That we're well-qualified to represent the L.B.C."
> (Del Rey, 2019)

takes on ironic meaning when sung in Del Rey's soft, melancholic tone, destabilizing traditional authority typically conveyed through masculine bravado. Kotliuk (2022: 80) argues that postfeminist texts frequently employ irony to critique cultural and gendered expectations. Here, Del Rey's performance embodies precisely this ironic critique, positioning femininity not as passive but as actively disruptive.

Del Rey's appropriation and reinterpretation of Sublime's original track highlight postfeminism's complex relationship with empowerment and consumer culture. Gill and Scharff (2011: 10) identify how postfeminist texts simultaneously critique and commodify femininity. "Doin' Time" becomes an act of both aesthetic appropriation and critical reinterpretation, commodifying nostalgia while simultaneously problematizing it.

Ahmed's (2014: 14) affect theory similarly highlights the significance of emotional orientation within texts. Del Rey's delivery is melancholic, almost lethargic—transforming the casual celebration of leisure into a nuanced critique of emotional emptiness. This subtle subversion aligns with Berlant's (2011: 23) idea of cruel optimism, suggesting that the track's carefree narrative ironically foregrounds the hollowness of pleasure under neoliberal conditions.

Fiske's (1989: 95) concept of polysemy further explains the track's audience reception. While some listeners may hear "Doin' Time" as nostalgic homage, others perceive it as a critique of gendered cultural scripts. Del Rey's vocal styling facilitates multiple interpretations, making the track simultaneously accessible and critically potent.

Track 6: "Love Song"

Romantic Nostalgia, Affective Commodification, and Intimate Spectacle

In "Love Song," Lana Del Rey foregrounds romantic intimacy within deeply personal yet universally recognizable imagery. Unlike previous tracks marked by irony and emotional distancing, "Love Song" explores romantic sincerity through hyper-romanticized visuals. Yet, despite apparent sincerity, Del Rey's approach remains deeply embedded in postfeminist critique, revealing romantic intimacy as both personal and performative, authentic yet commodified.

The song opens with emotionally charged, cinematic imagery:

> "In the car, in the car, in the backseat, I'm your baby / We go fast, we go so fast, we don't move"
> (Del Rey, 2019)

These lines evoke the private-yet-public space of the car—an intimate yet visible site of romantic encounter. Gill's (2007: 163) concept of postfeminist sensibility is evident here, as intimacy becomes both sincere affect and carefully stylized performance. Del Rey's romantic scenario in the backseat symbolizes intimacy rendered visible, performative, and commodifiable—femininity performed as private spectacle.

Ahmed's (2014: 38) affect theory elucidates how emotional landscapes like romantic nostalgia orient the individual within cultural narratives. The narrator is emotionally stationary despite physical speed, suggesting emotional stasis within romantic attachment. This aligns with Berlant's (2011: 23) concept of "cruel optimism," where intimate attachment simultaneously sustains and restricts personal flourishing. The narrator's emotional engagement is sincere yet confined, her intimacy paradoxically immobilizing.

The chorus further reinforces this tension between authentic affect and its commodification:

> "Oh, be my once in a lifetime / Lyin' on your chest in my party dress"

(Del Rey, 2019)

The image of lying "in my party dress" highlights performative femininity within intimate contexts. Butler (1990: 179) argues gender is performatively constituted, achieved through repeated, stylized acts. Here, Del Rey explicitly performs romantic femininity—feminine intimacy intertwined with aesthetic presentation. Gill and Scharff (2011: 10) emphasize this tension, noting postfeminist femininity demands simultaneous authenticity and performativity. Del Rey's romantic scenario encapsulates precisely this contradiction—intimacy rendered both authentic and self-consciously aestheticized.

Kotliuk (2022: 80) identifies postfeminist femininity as marked by nostalgia and aesthetic commodification. Del Rey's evocative lyrical imagery engages directly with nostalgic aesthetics of cinematic romance, simultaneously indulging and critiquing romantic tropes. The careful stylization of romantic imagery—car rides, dresses, intimate embraces—highlights the commodification inherent within contemporary femininity.

Strinati (2004: 217) describes postmodern popular culture as deeply engaged with nostalgia and pastiche. Del Rey evokes classic romantic imagery while maintaining a subtle critical distance. Romantic nostalgia is invoked not uncritically but as self-aware spectacle, emphasizing emotional experiences as both deeply felt and deliberately performed.

McRobbie's (2009: 56) notion of "double entanglement" underscores Del Rey's emotional ambiguity—her narrator is romantically committed yet emotionally detached. Del Rey's intimacy is performed as sincere affect yet remains paradoxically self-conscious and mediated by cultural scripts. This deliberate ambivalence aligns precisely with postfeminism's contradictory demands—emotional sincerity performed under cultural regulation.

Fiske's (1989: 95) polysemic analysis further explains audience reception of "Love Song." Del Rey's romantic scenario invites both sincere emotional identification and critical awareness of emotional commodification. Audiences recognize their experiences within these dual registers, affirming both the authenticity and cultural construction of romantic intimacy.

Del Rey's final verse encapsulates romantic intimacy as simultaneously fulfilling and isolating:

> "Dream a dream, here's a scene / Touch me anywhere 'cause I'm your baby"
> (Del Rey, 2019)

Here, intimacy becomes explicit spectacle—a "scene" deliberately scripted and performed. Whiteley, Bayton, and Cloonan (2000: 112) argue female artists frequently manipulate popular conventions to critique gender norms. Del Rey does precisely this, transforming romantic intimacy from passive emotional experience into active, critical performance.

Track 7: "Cinnamon Girl"

Melancholic Intimacy, Vulnerability, and Postfeminist Emotional Labor

In "Cinnamon Girl," Lana Del Rey explores deeply personal terrain, dramatizing vulnerability and emotional labor within romantic intimacy. The song's emotional landscape emphasizes feminine longing and emotional endurance, encapsulating key aspects of postfeminist femininity, including performative vulnerability, self-surveillance, and affective labor.

The opening lyrics introduce an emotionally charged dynamic:

> "Cinnamon in my teeth / From your kiss, you're touching me / All the pills that you take, violet, blue, green, red to keep me at arm's length"
> (Del Rey, 2019)

Here, Del Rey juxtaposes intimacy and emotional distance, highlighting the contradictory emotional expectations placed upon contemporary femininity. Gill's (2007: 163) concept of postfeminist sensibility identifies such emotional contradictions as characteristic of neoliberal femininity, demanding women simultaneously display emotional authenticity and emotional control. Del Rey's narrator engages intimately yet remains painfully aware of emotional detachment, highlighting femininity as continual emotional negotiation.

Ahmed (2014: 14) theorizes affect as emotional orientation, emphasizing how melancholy directs subjects toward particular cultural positions. Del Rey's melancholic intimacy orients her narrator within emotional suffering as critical resistance rather than passive victimhood. Berlant's (2011: 23) cruel optimism further elucidates this affective dynamic, suggesting Del Rey's narrator remains emotionally attached despite emotional neglect, actively choosing emotional suffering over emotional detachment.

The chorus underscores emotional vulnerability as performative labor:

> "If you hold me without hurting me, you'll be the first who ever did"
> (Del Rey, 2019)

This explicit declaration of vulnerability reveals emotional damage as ongoing affective reality. Butler's (1990: 179) gender performativity theory suggests vulnerability itself becomes performative, stylized, and culturally mediated. Del Rey's narrator performs emotional vulnerability deliberately, aware of vulnerability as both authentic affect and socially constructed feminine performance. Gill and Scharff (2011: 10) similarly emphasize postfeminist femininity's contradictory emotional demands—women must exhibit emotional openness and emotional autonomy simultaneously.

Kotliuk (2022: 75) argues postfeminist femininity frequently commodifies emotional pain as cultural capital. Del Rey's explicit acknowledgement of ongoing emotional hurt commodifies vulnerability as both authentic and performative, highlighting femininity's complex emotional labor under neoliberalism. As McRobbie (2009: 56) notes, postfeminist femininity involves double entanglement—simultaneous autonomy and emotional discipline. Del Rey embodies precisely this tension, emphasizing emotional pain as both personally felt and culturally regulated.

Fiske's (1989: 95) theory of polysemy helps explain audience interpretations of the track's emotional vulnerability. Fans appropriate Del Rey's melancholic femininity as cultural aesthetic, recognizing shared experiences of emotional struggle, vulnerability, and emotional negotiation. Del Rey's explicit vulnerability becomes emotionally resonant and culturally meaningful, affirming feminine vulnerability as both personal experience and collective resistance.

The bridge dramatizes emotional complexity further:

> "There's things I wanna say to you, but I'll just let you live / Like if you hold me without hurting me, you'll be the first who ever did"
> (Del Rey, 2019)

Here, Del Rey highlights emotional silence as deliberate affective labor—emotional withholding becomes active feminine performance rather than passive emotional submission. Gill (2016: 226) conceptualizes such affective withholding as central to postfeminist femininity, emphasizing emotional expression as carefully regulated and socially constructed. Del Rey's narrator performs emotional silence strategically, emphasizing emotional control as active emotional resistance rather than passive emotional defeat.

Strinati's (2004: 217) theory of postmodern contradiction underscores the emotional ambiguity Del Rey deliberately employs. Emotional intimacy is presented as both authentic and deliberately performative—neither entirely sincere nor wholly ironic. Del Rey performs feminine vulnerability deliberately, emphasizing emotional complexity as cultural critique, revealing emotional labor as both personal experience and cultural expectation.

Whiteley, Bayton, and Cloonan (2000: 112) further clarify how female artists frequently manipulate emotional tropes to critique gender norms. Del Rey does precisely this, performing emotional vulnerability explicitly to critique neoliberal emotional expectations placed upon femininity. Emotional suffering becomes deliberate feminine performance, revealing femininity as socially constructed through affective labor and emotional discipline.

Track 8: "How to disappear"

Disappearance as Feminine Strategy: Emotional Escape, Visibility, and Postfeminist Ambivalence

In "How to disappear," Lana Del Rey explicitly engages with the motif of disappearance as both literal and metaphorical strategy within romantic and cultural

contexts. The song explores disappearance not merely as passive withdrawal but as active emotional negotiation, performative femininity, and affective resistance within postfeminist frameworks.

The track's opening vividly sketches intimate narratives:

> "John met me down on the boulevard / Cry on his shoulder 'cause life is hard / The waves came in over my head"

Immediately, the song establishes emotional vulnerability within public spaces, emphasizing feminine emotional labor as both personal experience and cultural expectation. Gill's (2007: 163) theory highlights postfeminist femininity's emphasis on emotional expressivity alongside emotional regulation. Del Rey's narrator deliberately performs emotional vulnerability, embodying postfeminist sensibility's complex negotiation between authenticity and performativity.

Ahmed (2014: 14) theorizes affect as orientation, emphasizing emotional states like melancholia as socially oriented rather than purely individual. The metaphor of waves overwhelming the narrator vividly dramatizes emotional inundation, suggesting emotional overwhelm as both personal affect and culturally shared experience. Berlant's (2011: 23) cruel optimism elucidates this affective complexity—the narrator remains emotionally engaged despite continual emotional suffering, suggesting active emotional attachment to romantic and cultural fantasies.

The chorus explicitly foregrounds disappearance as emotional strategy:

> "This is how to disappear"
> (Del Rey, 2019)

Here, disappearance becomes not passive emotional withdrawal but active emotional labor. Butler's (1990: 179) gender performativity theory clarifies disappearance as performative femininity—femininity deliberately enacted through stylized emotional withdrawal. Gill and Scharff (2011: 10) emphasize femininity as

simultaneous emotional display and emotional control, highlighting disappearance as deliberate emotional strategy rather than passive victimhood.

Kotliuk (2022: 78) identifies postfeminist femininity as involving deliberate emotional stylization—disappearance becomes deliberate affective choice rather than involuntary emotional reaction. Del Rey deliberately performs emotional withdrawal as critical strategy, emphasizing emotional autonomy as postfeminist femininity's complex negotiation between visibility and invisibility.

Strinati (2004: 217) emphasizes postmodern cultural ambiguity, clarifying Del Rey's lyrical contradictions. The track deliberately blurs emotional authenticity and performative affect, highlighting disappearance as both authentic emotional experience and culturally mediated femininity. Emotional withdrawal is neither wholly authentic nor entirely ironic—rather, it deliberately performs femininity as emotional ambiguity and critical negotiation.

The bridge further dramatizes emotional complexity:

> "I watched the skies getting light as I write / As I think about those years"
> (Del Rey, 2019)

Here, nostalgia becomes integral emotional component of disappearance. McRobbie's (2009: 56) double entanglement concept highlights postfeminist femininity as simultaneously liberated and emotionally disciplined. Del Rey engages nostalgia explicitly, emphasizing emotional withdrawal as deliberate emotional negotiation within postfeminist femininity's contradictory emotional demands.

Fiske's (1989: 95) theory of polysemy further explains audience interpretations of disappearance as emotional strategy. Del Rey's disappearance resonates as culturally meaningful—fans recognize emotional withdrawal as deliberate feminine performance rather than passive emotional reaction. Emotional withdrawal becomes active emotional negotiation and culturally meaningful feminine strategy.

Whiteley, Bayton, and Cloonan (2000: 112) further emphasize female artists' deliberate manipulation of emotional conventions. Del Rey deliberately performs

emotional withdrawal explicitly, highlighting disappearance as critical feminist negotiation within neoliberal emotional expectations. Emotional withdrawal becomes deliberate feminine strategy, highlighting emotional autonomy as active resistance rather than passive emotional defeat.

Ultimately, disappearance in "How to disappear" explicitly becomes feminist strategy—emotional autonomy deliberately enacted through emotional withdrawal. Gill's (2016: 226) conception of affective labor clarifies disappearance as deliberate emotional labor—femininity actively negotiated through emotional withdrawal, emotional autonomy, and emotional visibility.

Track 9: "California"

Home, Affective Return, and Postfeminist Self-Authorization

Lana Del Rey's "California" conflates geographic place-making with emotional liminality, presenting the Golden State both as promised land and affective terrain in need of critical reclamation. The track stages "home" as a contested site of memory, identity, and postfeminist agency.

> "You don't ever have to be stronger than you really are / It's in your blood, it's in your bones, it's in the way you suffered"
> (Del Rey, 2019)

These opening lines evoke both compassion and imperative. As Gill (2007: 150) argues, postfeminist sensibility demands that women display self-surveillance and resilience as bodily virtues . Del Rey reframes this expectation: strength is not optional, nor is suffering merely private; it is a shared, embodied heritage.

Cawelti's formula fiction model (1977: 12) shows how popular narratives recycle "return to homeland" tropes to reaffirm cultural norms . Del Rey appropriates that structure only to complicate it. She promises solace—"come to California"—while acknowledging that place alone cannot heal emotional wounds.

"When the wind blows, you feel it next to me / Rest in my arms, rest in the Western wind"
(Del Rey, 2019)

Here, geography becomes affective: wind is both comfort and reminder of inevitability. Ahmed (2014: 14) teaches us that affect is orientation—"how we move toward or away from objects" . Del Rey's "Western wind" is a call to re-orient, to locate agency within movement rather than stasis.

Berlant's notion of cruel optimism (2011: 23) further unpacks this attachment to place: the fantasy of California as refuge can itself become an obstacle to genuine flourishing . Del Rey sings with devotion, yet the lyric "you don't ever have to be stronger" implies both permission and entrapment: strength is necessary to survive the promise.

Butler's (1990: 179) performativity framework shows "home" here as a repeated cultural performance of belonging . Del Rey enacts California not as essence but as ongoing set of gendered acts—sun-soaked melancholy, open-road sensuality—each lyric a stylized gesture that constructs and critiques the myth simultaneously.

Strinati (2004: 217) describes postmodern popular culture as rife with contradiction—nostalgia and irony intertwined . "California" trades in classic Californian clichés—sunlight, wind, open spaces—while injecting them with elegiac undertones: the land is both muse and mausoleum.

McRobbie's (2009: 56) "double entanglement" of empowerment and discipline appears in Del Rey's tender command—"rest in my arms"—which is caring yet possessive. That command is at once sanctuary and constraint, highlighting the ambivalent labor of self-care expected from women in postfeminist cultures .

Whiteley, Bayton, and Cloonan (2000: 112) observe that female pop artists frequently use pastoral imagery to negotiate agency: nature becomes a metaphor for self-sovereignty and vulnerability . Del Rey's invocation of wind and bones inscribes the personal and political onto the landscape.

Ahmed's later work on "emotional economies" (2014: 38) suggests that feelings circulate and produce collective orientations . "California" thus functions as more than personal confession: it invites communal investment in a shared affective geography.

Kotliuk (2022: 78) speaks of postfeminist femininity's reliance on aestheticized nostalgia . Del Rey deploys nostalgia for California—once a symbol of boundless promise—as a means of self-authorization: by claiming "you don't have to be stronger," the narrator authorizes permission to feel, to rest, to be un-strong.

Fiske's (1989: 95) polysemy principle confirms that this track's meaning is constructed in circulation . Fans hear California as personal refuge, social critique, or lyric of gentle rebellion, illustrating the text's openness.

Track 10: "The Next Best American Record"

Ambition, Performance, and the Collapse of Cultural Fantasy in Postfeminist Femininity

"The Next Best American Record" engages with themes of failed ambition, nostalgia for artistic success, and the commodification of both creativity and selfhood. Del Rey situates herself within the mythology of American popular culture while simultaneously unraveling its promises. The song functions as a critical narrative of a woman negotiating her artistic identity in a postfeminist media landscape—where self-expression, gender performance, and aesthetic labor are inextricably linked.

The track begins with a wistful invocation of failed dreams:

> "My baby used to dance underneath my architecture / He was too drunk to dance / So I painted our love across the sky"
> (Del Rey, 2019)

This passage frames femininity as both architectural (structured, performative) and artistic (creative, expansive). Butler (1990: 179) emphasizes gender as an "act" constituted through repeated stylizations—Del Rey's "architecture" is the stylized

structure of femininity, while "painting love across the sky" becomes an affective labor of meaning-making and survival.

Gill (2007: 163) outlines postfeminist sensibility as emphasizing women's self-fashioning through emotional labor, beauty work, and self-surveillance. In the line:

"Whatever's on tonight, I just wanna party with you"

Del Rey expresses a desire for freedom from productivity and creative pressure—positioning intimacy as resistance. Yet, the very act of saying this within a recorded product highlights how even rebellion becomes commodified. Berlant's (2011: 23) cruel optimism manifests here: the hope of escape from performance (partying, love) becomes a trap, perpetually reproduced through media consumption.

As the chorus proclaims:

"We were so obsessed with writing the next best American record / That we gave all we had 'til the time we got to bed"

Del Rey critiques the American obsession with cultural capital—success, fame, artistic legacy—as an exhausting pursuit. Cawelti (1977: 37) discusses formula fiction's dependence on repetition and cultural validation. This lyric reveals the tragic repetition in chasing "the next" benchmark. In Del Rey's case, postfeminist femininity is not just living the dream—it's burning out while curating it.

McRobbie (2009: 56) identifies the "double entanglement" of postfeminism, where women are encouraged to be both creative and disciplined, liberated and self-regulating. This song stages that entanglement: Del Rey is both free to "party" and burdened by cultural production. Kotliuk (2022: 77) reinforces this, noting how aesthetic work becomes emotional and bodily labor within neoliberal frameworks.

Fiske's (1989: 94) polysemic reading allows us to see how audiences interpret Del Rey's track as either a tragic romantic ballad or a subtle critique of capitalist burnout. This multiplicity is a feature, not a flaw—fitting Del Rey's place in the postfeminist canon. Her aesthetic is always dual: sincere and ironic, empowering and enervated.

You make me feel like I could be a teenager / Startin' out, it's a beautiful world"

This closing lyric restages nostalgia as a survival mechanism. Ahmed (2014: 38) interprets emotion as orientation; here, nostalgia orients the narrator away from burnout and toward an imagined beginning. But as Berlant (2011: 23) reminds us, such optimism can be cruel—hope becomes habit, rather than transformation.

Strinati (2004: 217) argues postmodern culture collapses the line between art and commerce, sincerity and simulation. Del Rey embodies this collapse, turning even her weariness into aesthetic product. Whiteley et al. (2000: 112) emphasize that women in music often perform emotional contradiction—Del Rey performs it with full consciousness of its commodification.

Track 11: "The Greatest"

Cultural Exhaustion, Media Saturation, and the Postfeminist Performance of Decline

In "The Greatest," Lana Del Rey stages a lament for a lost cultural moment, blending personal disillusionment with political commentary and aesthetic resignation. The song critiques the commodification of greatness, the erosion of counterculture, and the impossibility of maintaining authenticity in a postfeminist, late-capitalist media landscape.

The track opens with an overt allusion to romantic detachment:

"I miss Long Beach and I miss you, babe / I miss dancin' with you the most of all" (Del Rey, 2019)

This invocation of personal nostalgia sets the tone for a broader cultural lament. Ahmed (2014: 38) reminds us that affect—particularly melancholy—acts as orientation; here, longing for Long Beach becomes a longing for emotional and cultural authenticity. This is reinforced by Berlant's (2011: 23) cruel optimism—Del Rey mourns not just a lost lover, but the affective promise of a more vibrant, less commodified America.

Later, she sings:

"L.A. is in flames, it's getting hot / Kanye West is blond and gone"

This lyric shifts from the personal to the public, referencing celebrity culture and ecological catastrophe in one breath. Fiske (1989: 95) argues that popular texts operate within multiple levels of meaning. For some listeners, this may be satire; for others, sincere dread. The track's strength lies in its ambivalence—its refusal to clarify whether Del Rey is mourning, mocking, or marketing decline.

Strinati (2004: 215) points out that postmodern popular culture thrives on irony and cultural recycling. Del Rey indulges this tendency with winks to classic rock ("The culture is lit, and if this is it, I had a ball") while simultaneously presenting herself as weary witness to the spectacle. Gill (2007: 163) calls this "postfeminist irony," where emotional distance becomes the strategy for managing emotional saturation.

"The greatest loss of them all / The culture is lit, and I had a ball / I guess I'm signing off after all"

This self-conscious "signing off" functions both as farewell and refusal. Kotliuk (2022: 81) describes postfeminist femininity as rooted in performative contradiction—empowered but exhausted, expressive yet disengaged. Del Rey's act of "signing off" is performative fatigue: a deliberate withdrawal from the overwhelming demands of culture-making.

Butler (1990: 179) insists that identity is constituted through repetition and citation. In "The Greatest," Del Rey cites herself—her aesthetic, her themes, her persona—only to suggest the impossibility of continuing the performance. Gill and Scharff (2011: 10) discuss the paradox of postfeminist visibility: the more one appears, the more one must disappear to maintain affective impact.

McRobbie (2009: 56) articulates this "double entanglement"—female artists must be culturally engaged and critically distant at the same time. Del Rey's ambivalent stance in "The Greatest" embodies this perfectly. Her exhaustion is both real and stylized, both sincere and a performance of sincerity.

Whiteley et al. (2000: 112) observe that women in popular music often construct personas that mediate between vulnerability and resistance. Del Rey's persona here is not a victim of culture, but its exhausted historian—archiving decline while remaining its most articulate voice.

Cawelti's (1977: 42) theory of formula fiction helps frame the song as a subversion of the "end of an era" trope. In traditional American narratives, endings are either tragic or redemptive. Del Rey offers neither—only resignation, filtered through soft vocals and haunting synths.

Track 12: "Bartender"

Surveillance, Escape, and the Performance of Emotional Refusal

In "Bartender," Lana Del Rey stages a quiet act of emotional refusal in a world saturated with spectacle, consumption, and surveillance. The song engages themes of privacy, detachment, and anti-spectacle femininity, offering a subtle postfeminist critique of visibility culture and affective labor under neoliberal conditions.

The opening lines introduce this contrast:

> "All the cameras in the parking lot / They could never find us / In the spot we used to hide in"
> (Del Rey, 2019)

Surveillance here functions both literally (cameras) and metaphorically (societal expectations of performance). Foucault's panopticism (as discussed by Strinati, 2004: 89) is invoked to describe how visibility disciplines the body. But Del Rey rejects this logic—choosing hidden spaces as sites of subversion and intimacy. Butler (1990: 179) reminds us that gender is performative, constructed through repetition in visible spaces. Del Rey's withdrawal from surveillance is thus a withdrawal from enforced femininity.

Gill (2007: 163) identifies a key contradiction of postfeminist sensibility: visibility is expected, but not too much; expression is encouraged, but only within norms. Del Rey's

narrator refuses both—she hides, avoids the camera, skips the "party," and engages in affective disobedience.

"And I know what you do with me / I'm not one for drinking / But I'll take a shot"

This lyric foregrounds contradiction—Del Rey resists cultural habits (drinking, partying) yet participates selectively. Kotliuk (2022: 78) calls this "emotional calibration," where postfeminist women must modulate how much they feel, share, and desire. Del Rey's narrator chooses not to fully engage, which becomes a radical gesture in a hyper-performative world.

Whiteley et al. (2000: 112) note that female pop artists often perform anti-spectacle femininity by downplaying visibility and emphasizing emotional ambiguity. "Bartender" exemplifies this: its sound is muted, lyrics are sparse, and tone is intentionally subdued. In refusing narrative climax or dramatic confession, Del Rey critiques the expectation that women's emotions must be digestible content.

Berlant's (2011: 23) cruel optimism also appears here. The desire for escape—freedom from cameras, scripts, or social engagement—is itself structured by systems that commodify such longings. Even hiding becomes a performance. The song asks: can refusal ever be unmediated?

Fiske's (1989: 95) concept of polysemy clarifies how listeners may interpret this withdrawal as romantic rebellion or depressive detachment. Either way, the ambiguity becomes the point. McRobbie's (2009: 56) "double entanglement" plays out in the tension between disconnection and autonomy: Del Rey distances herself, but not out of passivity—rather, as a deliberate aesthetic and emotional tactic.

"Bartender, you're all that I want / I'm not that hard to please"

This refrain functions as irony. On the surface, it's simplicity. But beneath, it critiques emotional legibility. Kotliuk (2022: 80) reminds us that postfeminist femininity is often reduced to affective service: to be agreeable, available, yet mysterious. Del Rey performs this role while mocking its reductionism.

Ahmed (2014: 14) writes about how orientation involves emotional motion. In "Bartender," Del Rey disorients—she avoids spectacle, avoids affective excess, avoids being "seen" in the traditional sense. Her movement away from public scripts becomes affectively charged.

Finally, Butler (1993: 105) proposes that gender and desire are enacted within constrained fields of intelligibility. "Bartender" plays with unintelligibility—it doesn't offer satisfying emotional resolution. This is its strength: femininity, here, is uncooperative, opaque, and resistant.

Track 13: "Happiness is a Butterfly"

Fragile Joy, Melancholy Agency, and the Feminine Sublime in Postfeminist Affect

In "Happiness is a Butterfly," Lana Del Rey juxtaposes fleeting joy with chronic vulnerability. The track embodies what Lauren Berlant (2011: 1) terms a "structure of feeling" tied to cruel optimism—the hope for happiness that remains perpetually out of reach. Del Rey uses the butterfly metaphor not merely to symbolize beauty and fragility, but also the unstable promise of emotional fulfillment under postfeminist pressures.

The song opens with a gentle warning:

> "Happiness is a butterfly / Try to catch it like every night / It escapes from my hands into moonlight"
> (Del Rey, 2019)

This line immediately signals the central affective motif: joy is elusive, and chasing it yields disappointment. Berlant's (2011: 23) theory articulates how attachments to optimistic fantasies often generate suffering rather than flourishing. Del Rey's narrator clings to the butterfly not just as metaphor, but as ritualized disappointment—an aestheticization of loss.

Ahmed (2014: 14) identifies emotions as orientations; here, melancholy becomes the mode of feminine orientation. Rather than resisting sadness, Del Rey leans into it, crafting a gendered poetic of fragility that critiques the culture of forced positivity. This

aligns with Gill's (2007: 163) understanding of postfeminist sensibility—where women are expected to be emotionally expressive but also self-regulating and contained. Del Rey's narrator fails this demand by luxuriating in emotional disarray.

Midway through the song, she sings:

> "If he's a serial killer, then what's the worst / That can happen to a girl who's already hurt?"

This lyric highlights a recurrent Del Rey motif: romantic self-endangerment. Yet unlike older fatalist ballads, this line is delivered with bitter self-awareness. Butler (1990: 180) suggests gender identity emerges through citational repetition; Del Rey repeats—and subverts—the trope of the doomed woman in love, reclaiming it as deliberate feminine performance.

Kotliuk (2022: 78) observes that postfeminist femininity frequently commodifies female suffering. Here, Del Rey both indulges and critiques that tendency. The lyric offers no solution—only raw, stylized pain. McRobbie (2009: 56) calls this the "double entanglement" of postfeminist discourse: female subjects express emotional trauma while reinforcing the very aesthetic conventions that sell it.

> "I just wanna dance with you / Don't leave me on the pavement"

This refrain ties pleasure to abandonment. Dancing—typically a metaphor for joy—is paired with desperation. As Whiteley, Bayton, and Cloonan (2000: 112) explain, female musicians often rework pop's gendered scripts through irony and emotional contradiction. Del Rey's desire to dance is both literal and metaphorical: a craving for closeness in a world of emotional coldness.

Strinati's (2004: 217) postmodern lens clarifies the song's aesthetic: highly referential, melancholic, fragmented. The butterfly becomes a floating signifier—neither entirely metaphorical nor literal. Fiske (1989: 95) would call this polysemy: listeners can read the song as lament, defiance, or both.

Del Rey's subtle vocal delivery, sparse production, and poetic ambiguity resist the pop industry's demand for emotional clarity. This resistance is political. As Gill and Scharff (2011: 10) note, neoliberal feminism favors empowered, coherent subjects. Del Rey offers instead the incoherent, affectively unstable subject as critique—a woman shaped by longing, not resolution.

Track 14: "hope is a dangerous thing for a woman like me to have – but I have it"

Hope as Subversive Melancholia: Confession, Surveillance, and Postfeminist Refusal

In the closing track of *Norman Fucking Rockwell!*, Del Rey delivers a slow-burning monologue of disaffection, alienation, and constrained desire. The song's raw, stripped-back style functions as a final affective pronouncement on the contradictions of postfeminist femininity: autonomy and despair, visibility and erasure, critique and confession.

> "I was reading Slim Aarons and I got to thinking that I thought / Maybe I'd get less stressed if I was tested less like / All of these debutantes"
> (Del Rey, 2019)

Here, Del Rey establishes a clear tension between the gaze and the self. Gill (2007: 149) outlines how postfeminist culture cultivates a "self-surveilling" female subject—disciplined by aesthetic ideals and emotional composure. Del Rey expresses the weariness of this labor, contrasting herself with "debutantes"—a class-coded, media-sculpted femininity from which she seeks distance.

Berlant's (2011: 23) cruel optimism permeates the song. The hope for rest, privacy, and unmediated identity becomes the very fantasy that sustains burnout. The narrator's insistence that "hope is a dangerous thing" captures Berlant's paradox: what sustains you also breaks you.

Later in the track, she sings:

> "Don't ask if I'm happy, you know that I'm not / But at best, I can say I'm not sad"

This lyric perfectly dramatizes what Ahmed (2014: 14) would call an affective "non-alignment." The narrator is suspended—not well, not ill, not whole. Such refusal to resolve emotion into binaries challenges the postfeminist imperative to "bounce back" or "heal." It is a melancholic defiance, not weakness.

Butler's (1993: 105) theory of performative subjectivity becomes essential here. The singer constructs her "I" not through stability but through fragile repetition: confession, hesitation, lyric stammer. Femininity is not declared but whispered, haltingly shaped by cultural pressures and refusals.

The song's repeated refrain:

"I have it"

—functions as resistance. To have hope, despite cultural exhaustion and emotional constraint, is to claim subversive agency. McRobbie (2009: 56) calls this "the after-effect of feminism," wherein subjects both inherit feminist history and operate under neoliberal individualism. Del Rey's narrator bears both: the expectation to self-manage, and the fatigue of doing so.

Kotliuk (2022: 81) emphasizes that modern femininity relies on stylized vulnerability. Del Rey inhabits this space but also refuses to be neutralized by it. Her vulnerability is not aestheticized triumph—it is unresolved, raw, and complex.

"I've been tearing around in my fucking nightgown / 24/7 Sylvia Plath"

Del Rey evokes literary madness and domestic chaos not as aesthetic fantasy but as a conscious invocation of gendered suffering. Whiteley et al. (2000: 112) discuss how female musicians often use references to madness to critique societal pressures; here, Del Rey aligns herself with Plath, not to romanticize suffering, but to locate herself in a lineage of artistic and emotional resistance.

Fiske (1989: 95) helps explain how this line, and the track more broadly, operates across interpretive registers. For some, it is melodrama; for others, radical confession. The song's ambiguity is its power—hope is dangerous because it opens emotional space that society seeks to regulate.

CONCLUSION

The album *Norman Fucking Rockwell!* by Lana Del Rey offers more than a melancholic aesthetic or personal confession—it functions as a cultural artifact that exposes and interrogates the entanglements of postfeminist femininity, emotional labor, and popular media's demands for performance and visibility. Through her carefully stylized lyrical persona, Del Rey navigates between vulnerability and resistance, irony and sincerity, critique and commodification.

The findings throughout the fourteen tracks demonstrate that Del Rey does not simply reflect postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007), but actively disrupts it. Each song constructs a form of affective storytelling that resists the neoliberal imperative of self-containment. Rather than offering the empowered, healed, and coherent woman that dominates postfeminist media landscapes, Del Rey repeatedly presents the melancholic, unstable, and ambivalently resistant subject—what Berlant (2011) would call a figure of cruel optimism.

Themes of surveillance (Bartender), commodified creativity (The Next Best American Record), nostalgic disorientation (The Greatest), and emotional ambivalence (Happiness is a Butterfly) reflect broader cultural anxieties regarding the status of femininity and subjectivity in late capitalism. Del Rey's refusal to resolve these tensions aligns with what Ahmed (2014) describes as affective disorientation, and echoes Butler's (1990, 1993) understanding of gender as performative yet unstable.

Importantly, the analysis reveals that Del Rey reclaims tropes often used to marginalize women—madness, dependence, fragility—and reworks them into tools of subversive self-articulation. Whether through irony, stylized confession, or lyrical detachment, she constructs a femininity that is aware of its own commodification and yet capable of undermining it from within.

In sum, Del Rey's *Norman Fucking Rockwell!* embodies the contradictions of postfeminist popular culture. Her lyrics stage a melancholic resistance—an insistence on feeling deeply and ambiguously in a world that demands polished strength. Rather than seeking empowerment through mastery or closure, Del Rey claims space through fragmentation, contradiction, and aesthetic ambiguity. This project shows that in the realm of popular literature and culture, postfeminist critique can emerge not only

through direct opposition but through slow, aching refusal—through having hope, even when it's dangerous.

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