Inclusion as Revolution? Examining Representations at the Intersection of Gender and Disability in Pop Music

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1. Introduction

Stuart Hall argued that representation "enters into the constitution of the object that we are talking about. It is part of the object itself; it is constitutive of it" (S. Hall 1997, 8), which grants great importance to representations in pop culture. Penney (2022, 39) argues that this view has become more common in the entertainment industry from the 2010s and onwards, and that there therefore has been an increased focus on inclusive and diverse representations in pop culture. However, with the increasing calls for inclusion, it is important to examine what people are being included into and if the mechanisms that led to exclusion are still in place. This is an important consideration, not only for pop culture but also for cultural and philosophical movements. Some movements, such as transhumanism and postfeminism, have been criticized for uncritically accepting ideals of self-sufficiency and desiring inclusion into existing structures. However, proponents of the ethics of care as well as scholars from disability studies would argue that inclusion without deconstructing what led to exclusion in the first place furthers marginalization rather than combats it.

In this article, I will investigate the tension between movements that settle for inclusion and ones that demand more radical changes through my analyses of *Run the World (Girls)* (Beyoncé 2011), *Prototype* (Channel 4 Entertainment 2014b) and *Running Underwater* (Hull 2023). I will examine how this affects their representation of disabled women or lack thereof and on the basis of this, I will argue that representation of disabled women in postfeminist media is possible, though any such representation will continue to further ableist ideas and differ on important points from ethics of care approaches. Therefore, while non-normatively abled women can be included in postfeminist media, non-ableist representations of disabled women require a more radical challenge to the ideal of independence than what postfeminism can pose.

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2. Literature review

In this section, I first give brief definitions of the ethics of care, postfeminism and transhumanism with a focus on the ideas which are relevant to this article, and then I give insight into the linguistic features, pitch, breathy voice and embodiment, which I will focus on in my analysis.

2.1 Transhumanism

Transhumanism is a cultural movement which argues that humans should seek to "transcend the limits imposed by our biological heritage" (Ross 2020, 1). The way to overcome these so-called limitations of the body is by exercising morphological freedom – i.e. the freedom to change your body according to your wishes (Dolezal 2016, 312) – to undergo technological enhancement that eliminates the vulnerabilities or fragilities of the body. Due to this fixation on the so-called limitations of the body, they tend to accept the medical model of disability and see things such as disability as located only within an individual's body and as something that can and should be fixed through technology so that the individual can be independent and self-sufficient (Ross 2020, 3). Humans who have been technologically enhanced are often referred to as cyborgs or bionic humans and can be considered the ideal subject in transhumanism (DeCook 2021). Transhumanists consider themselves to be revolutionary futurists who are part of a utopian movement where the end goal is the elimination of "human limitations" (Pilsch 2017, 1–3).

While transhumanists might consider themselves spokespeople for radical change, they have been widely criticized in disability studies for simply rebranding ableist narratives (Pilsch 2017, 3). Firstly, if one follows Campbell's (2009, 5) definition of ableism, ableism consists of constructing a normative body, which is considered "perfect," "essential and fully human" and considers anyone who does not have that body as occupying "a diminished state of being human." Transhumanists, in their insistence on "enhancing" the body, end up constructing a new normative body, and render any non-enhanced bodies as deficient in comparison (Mitchell and Snyder 2015, 39–40). Secondly, Mitchell and Snyder (2014) argue most mainstream media either completely ignores the existence of disabled people or perpetuates ableist ideas by portraying disability as something that must be either fixed or eliminated, a process Mitchell and Snyder call narrative prosthesis. Arguably, transhumanists through their insistence on "overcoming the limitations of the body" accept this idea that disability is a deficiency that must be fixed, rather than seeing these "limitations" as mainly social and economic, as proponents of the social model of disability would (Campbell 2009, 17). Thirdly, Mitchell and Snyder (2015, 57) have later criticized transhumanists for engaging in "cyborgian overcompensation," when they use technological accommodations that are only available to people with incredible wealth, which is inaccessible to most disabled people, as

disabilities often hinder access to work and therefore monetary wealth, and that e.g. prosthetics can become "mere vehicles for an ornate display […] of technological consumption." Thus, transhumanism can be criticized for being a philosophy that repackages ableist ideas into a fancy futuristic-looking package available for consumption for those with extraordinary wealth.

2.2 Postfeminism

Having defined what is meant by transhumanism in this article, I now move on to postfeminism. Postfeminism is a cultural movement which perceives gender equality to have been achieved, as women have been included in spaces they were previously excluded from, such as waged labor markets and voting booths, and that it is time to move beyond feminism (Gill 2007; McRobbie 2009). One of the defining features of postfeminism is thus "a depoliticization of feminism" (McDermott 2022, 4), where a neoliberal "there is no such thing as society" (Thatcher 1987) view is adopted and any disadvantages experienced by women are due to individual choices made by individual men and women and not i.e. cultural habits or systemic inequality (Gill 2007, 153). In fact, Gill (2007, 164) has argued that neoliberalism is so compatible with postfeminism because it is "at least partly constituted through the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideas." This also has the consequence that in the postfeminist view any woman can become a strong, independent woman with success, often meaning material wealth in postfeminism, if she simply works hard enough and makes the right choices (McRobbie 2009, 7). Postfeminism's idealized strong independent woman becomes empowered by eliminating vulnerability (Mintz 2020) and rejecting interdependence (Kittay and Feder 2002, 1).

Postfeminism is also characterized by an "obsessive preoccupation with the body" (Gill 2007, 149). The body is viewed as a source of economic power as it can "increase their human capital" (Oksala 2011, 115). However, to harness this power one must fit into a very narrow normatively feminine body which is hyper-feminine, sexualized, hair-less below the neck, thin, free of wrinkles, with perfect make-up (Gill 2007, 152) and usually a white skin tone (Springer 2020; Chatman 2015). This power is therefore inaccessible to e.g. older women, fat women (Gill 2007, 152), and I would add non-normatively abled women, because their bodies often do not fit the narrow body ideal constructed and perpetuated by postfeminist media. Arguably, since postfeminism engages in the construction of a normative body, according to Campbell's (2009, 5) definition, postfeminism is inherently ableist. Furthermore, postfeminism's relationship to the body has been criticized for rebranding the hypersexualization and objectification of women as women's own desire and uncritically internalizing the male gaze (Gill 2007, 154).

While many scholars have examined postfeminism's pop cultural domination in the 1990s and 2000s (McRobbie 2009, 16; Gill 2007), postfeminism continues to be relevant to understand pop culture, though the resonance and form of it has arguably changed after the economic downturn in 2008 (McDermott 2022). In *Feel-Bad Postfeminism* McDermott (2022) argues that after the financial crisis in 2008, the entrepreneurial promises and spirit of postfeminism began sounding hollow and out of touch. This led to an increase in criticisms of postfeminism within pop culture in the early 2010s (McDermott 2022, 33). This context is important when considering postfeminist media from the early 2010s, as I will in my analysis.

2.3 The ethics of care

Finally, the ethics of care is important to introduce due to its different views on independence and care as well as its criticisms of postfeminism and transhumanism. The ethics of care is a moral theory which posits that all humans are interdependent and have a moral imperative to care for one another (Held 2006) and its proponents reject the idea that humans should strive to be independent but rather that one will reach full autonomy only through mutual care (Segal 2023, chap. 4). This view asks one to center rather than hide the "universality of our vulnerability" (Segal 2023, introduction). Proponents of this view define "care" as both "hands-on care" such as working to fulfil the physical and/or emotional needs of others, but also as "a social capacity and activity involving the nurturing of all that is necessary for the welfare and flourishing of life" (The Care Collective 2020, introduction). Thus, in this definition of care, it is not just something that individuals do for each other such as a parent caring for their child, but it is also the glue that holds bigger communities together (Held 2006) and is considered essential to have a well-functioning society (Segal 2023, chap. 4).

The ethics of care has deep roots in feminist thought (Segal 2023, introduction), and Kittay and Feder (2002, 1) even argued that it is in stark contrast to the kind of feminism which prioritizes independence, such as postfeminism, as this is an ideal that proponents of the ethics of care do not strive for. In fact, Segal (2023) has even argued, echoing Cavarero, Minervini, and Sitze (2020), that the ideal of self-sufficiency and independence originates in the misogyny of male Western philosophers such as Kant and Locke. Their eagerness to disregard their need of others often involved erasing the non-commodified reproductive, domestic and care labor, usually, at this time, carried out by women such as their mothers or wives. Furthermore, Segal (2023) argues, that in this line of thought mothers and their care work for their male children represented "the original or primal threat to mature manhood and independence" (Segal 2023, introduction). Thus, the Western ideal of independence originates in erasing or rejecting the worth of care labor done by

women and is therefore deeply entangled with misogyny. Instead of aiming for women to be included into the category of independent subjects, proponents of the ethics of care, in their calls for all humans to recognize their interdependencies and engage in mutual care (The Care Collective 2020), call for a radical de-gendering of care work and a destigmatization of dependency.

In a similar vein to this critique of postfeminism, some proponents of the ethics of care have criticized parts of the disability rights movement for accepting the premise that independence and self-sufficiency are what the movement should strive for. As Lynne Segal (2023, chap. 4). argues, many disability rights activists have downplayed the vulnerabilities of disabled people to insist on inclusion and "Independent Living" solutions. Segal (2023, chap. 4) admits that while this has resulted in considerable improvements in rights for disabled people, she worries that it rests upon the acceptance of the stigmatization of dependency as it embraces the neoliberal glorification of self-reliance. This critique has also been made in the area of disability studies by Shildrick (2009) as well as Mitchell and Snyder (2015) who argue that only advocating for inclusion into existing structures rather than dismantling the ideas that lead to exclusionary structures will not eliminate ableism but simply rebrand it. Proponents of the ethics of care on the other hand argue that "[o]ur goal should not be to surmount dependency to achieve self-sufficiency, but rather to recognize our interdependence as the basis of democracy" (Segal 2023, chap. 4) and seek to subvert neoliberal ideas about care and subjectivity.

By now, it is clear that there is a tension between postfeminism and transhumanism on the one hand and the ethics of care, especially when it comes to ideas around independence, vulnerability, and body ideals. Mintz (2020) noticed this tension as well and argued that in postfeminist pop music "disability will endure as the suppressed metaphor for the vulnerability that empowerment teaches us to deny." This seems to suggest that Mintz's (2020) thesis is that disabled women cannot appear as the strong independent woman figure that dominates postfeminist media. While Mintz (2020) is right that disability is often erased from postfeminist pop music, as I will show in my analysis of Beyoncé's *Run the World (Girls)* (2011), it is not always the case. As I will show in my analysis of Modesta's *Prototype* (Channel 4 Entertainment, 2014b), non-normatively abled women can also platform postfeminism but this will not mean that the ableism inherent in postfeminism will be challenged. That does not, however, mean that all representations of disabled women in pop music will accept ableist narratives, as I will show in my analysis of Hull's *Running Underwater* (2023).

2.4 Pitch

In my analysis I will investigate pitch and how it can be used to perform e.g. vulnerability or to assert dominance. Pitch or fundamental frequency refers to the frequency with which the vocal folds vibrate (Fraccaro et al. 2013). Pitch is connected to perceptions and performances of gender. It has been shown that it is important to listeners' perception of a speaker's gender (Gelfer and Mikos 2005, 553; Hillenbrand and Clark 2009; Hardy et al. 2016, 125–126) and that a higher pitch is associated with being normatively female and a lower with being normatively male. This is partly due to average differences in the sizes of cisgender men and women's vocal organs (Cartei, Cowles, and Reby 2012, 1), but it cannot be explained by biology alone. A study on the cultural variance in the average pitch difference between men and women, found that the difference in average pitch was not biological but rather correlated to how differently they described the ideal man and woman, suggesting that pitch forms part of their gender performance (van Bezooijen 1995). Gender differences in fundamental frequencies have also been found for 4-year-old children, whose vocal organs do not differ significantly in size (Cartei, Cowles, and Reby 2012). Therefore, pitch is one of the linguistic features individuals utilize to negotiate their gender performance.

A woman's fundamental frequency can also affect how a woman is perceived with respect to character traits. A female voice with a higher pitch is consistently rated by men as more attractive than someone with a lower pitch (Fraccaro et al. 2013; Borkowska and Pawlowski 2011; Rosenberg and Hirschberg 2021). A lower pitched female voice is on the other hand is perceived as more dominant and more fit for leadership (Klofstad, Anderson, and Peters 2012; Borkowska and Pawlowski 2011). Klofstad, Anderson and Peters (2012, 2698) argue that their finding can be explained by "biological influences." However, as shown above, pitch is entangled with both perceptions and performances of gender and I would therefore argue that it is not necessarily purely biological, but rather that approximating maleness in a patriarchal society can be a way of approximating power.

Pitch can vary depending on emotional state (Puts, Gaulin, and Verdolini 2006). Scherer (1995) found that intense emotions can be associated with fundamental frequency, as pitch was found to be highest for desperation, panic, elation, anger and the lowest for contempt and boredom. F0's correlation with expressions of emotions has been replicated several times (Belin, Fecteau, and Bédard 2004; Banse and Scherer 1996; Rao and Koolagudi 2013, 3). However, Russell, Bachorowski, and Fernández-Dols (2003) argue that determining the exact emotion from pitch alone is not yet possible, so one must rely on the context to interpret that. In short, pitch can be perceived as an expression of a variety of identities and stances, including gender, dominance, attractiveness and emotionality.

2.5 Breathy voice

Let us now turn to breathy voice, which is a phonation type or voice quality where the vocal folds spread apart during speech production (Esling et al. 2019, 42). This results in "a turbulent noise that is excessively high in frequency during phonation" (Barsties v. Latoszek et al. 2021) or what one more simply could call a breathy sound.

Breathy voice can carry a few different social meanings. Like pitch, breathy voice influences listeners' perceptions of someone's gender as breathy voice is associated with femininity (Podesva and Callier 2015). Several studies have shown that male heterosexual listeners rate women who use breathy voice as more attractive than female speakers who use modal voice (Levitt and Lucas 2018; Rosenberg and Hirschberg 2021). This is likely because breathy voice is associated with expressions of arousal (Guzman et al. 2013; Podesva and Callier 2015).

Arousal is not the only affective stance that breathy voice can index. It can also express tenderness and sadness (Guzman et al. 2013). Furthermore, use of breathy voice can also lead to the speaker being perceived as warm and authentic (Rosenberg and Hirschberg 2021), perhaps due to the display of emotional vulnerability that Guzman et al. (2013) showed it is associated with. In conclusion, breathy voice can index normative femininity and arousal which can contribute to the construction of a conventionally attractive feminine persona as well as indexing other emotions that can contribute to the construction of an emotionally open and warm persona.

2.6 Embodiment

The final linguistic term that is necessary to know for the analysis is embodiment. In sociolinguistics, studies of embodiment investigate how bodies function "as carriers of linguistics and semiotic messages" (Jones and Themistocleous 2022, 179). As Bucholtz and Hall (2016, 173) explain, the indexicalities of e.g. bodily adornments such as make-up, clothes as well as gesture, gaze and movement can all be a part of the semiotic practices involved in embodiment. Previous studies of embodiment have focused on how make-up has functioned as a way for members of Latina gangs to signify their affiliation with a group (Jones and Themistocleous 2022), the hand gestures and facial gestures of Donald Trump and how these convey meaning (K. Hall, Goldstein, and Ingram 2016) and CL's use of clothes and jewelry to construct a b-girl persona in her *Nappeun gijibae* music video (Garza 2021, 15). To my knowledge, there have not yet been any sociolinguistic studies that investigate how embodiment is enlisted in semiotic practices related to disability, but this is what I will aim to do in my analysis of the accommodations (i.e. crutches and prosthetics) used in two of my three chosen music videos. Due to the scarcity of research in this area, it is important to note that my observations about the indexicalities of accommodations do not

necessarily apply to all uses of crutches or prosthetics but are limited to the specific context of these videos.

3. Methodology

In the following section, I will analyze Beyoncé's *Run the World (Girls)* (2011), Eliza Hull's *Running Underwater* (2023) and Viktoria Modesta's *Prototype* (2014). In my analysis, I will focus on changes in pitch and the use of breathy voice in these three videos as well as embodiment in Hull's and Modesta's videos and some additional performances by Modesta and how each of these points relate to postfeminism, the ethics of care and transhumanism. I assume that when singing pitch and breathy voice can index the same things as when speaking, as Scherer (1995) has argued for. These videos have been chosen due to how differently they engage with the ideas about vulnerability, independence, and disability and because in these three cases these ideas affect how similar linguistic features are used and which meanings they carry. Therefore, these songs serve as good reference points for one another. It is important to note that I will in this article only investigate representations of visible, physical disabilities and the literature I have drawn on and the analyses I make are limited to the physically visible body, and not to e.g. the many existing invisible and/or non-physical disabilities.

I will conduct an auditory analysis of fundamental frequency as well as breathy voice because I only have access to the source material with the accompanying music. This music would influence any acoustic measurements too much for any measurements to be informative about fundamental frequency and voice quality. My analysis will therefore be qualitative rather than quantitative which also suits the short and repetitive nature of the source material. I will in some places provide illustrations with arrows of my analyses of whether the pitch changes in comparison to the preceding section, and if there are no arrows in part of an excerpt, it means that the pitch in that line has not changed significantly from the previous section.

4. Analysis

4.1 *Run the World (Girls)* by Beyoncé

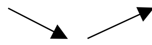
The first song that Mintz's (2020) thesis will be tested on is *Run the World (Girls)* by Beyoncé (2011). Beyoncé is a world famous singer and Grammy Award winner who has enormous cultural influence (Chatman 2015). In the late 2000s and early 2010s Beyoncé's brand and music were characterized by an emphasis on female empowerment, independence as well as "economic and sexual agency" (Chatman 2015, 931). This is also the case for *Run the World (Girls)* (Beyoncé 2011, 02:54–02:56) where Beyoncé imagines a matriarchy where women are "taking over the world." The music video

includes shots of Beyoncé and her female back-up dancers engaging in dance battles or other stand-offs with male dancers, in a setting that is inspired by protest movements with its references to the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street movement (Ward 2017) as well a linguistic landscape where "REVOLUTION" is spraypainted across a car (Beyoncé 2011, 00:18).

Beyoncé's pitch is markedly lower in the verses than in the pre-choruses and it seems that she specifically drops her pitch at times where she wants to assert dominance. In the chorus which consists of a call and response reminiscent of chants at protests, where Beyoncé first asks "Who run the world?" and gets the response "Girls! Girls!" (Beyoncé 2011, 02:28–02:30). In comparison to the pitch of the question, the pitch of the answers first drops and then rises as shown in excerpt 1.

Excerpt 1

Who run the world? Girls! Girls!



That the pitch drops significantly on the first "Girls!" could index dominance, which is achieved by approximating maleness as I argued in my literature review. On the second "Girls!" the pitch rises markedly to a quite high fundamental frequency, and this can be seen as an attempt to reassert her gender identity after having approximated a more normatively masculine feature in the previous word.

This is not the only place where we see Beyoncé rapidly switch between a higher and a lower pitch. As Muchitsch (2016, 8) points out this also happens with the lines "Strong enough to bear the children / Then get back to business" where she drops her pitch as she sings "back to business," as illustrated in excerpt 2.

Excerpt 2

Strong enough to bear the children

Then get back to business

I would argue that this illustrates how Beyoncé's feminism differs from the ethics of care, as the higher pitch is used for the line about reproductive and care labor which is often female-coded, while the labor done for a capitalist workplace is coded as masculine through the dropped pitch. This suggests and reinforces the binary gendering of different types of labor, rather than de-gendering them as the proponents of the ethics of care aim for.

Furthermore, it shows how Beyoncé's use of pitch is instrumental to her construction of a strong independent woman persona. As she lowers her pitch, she explicitly asserts her strength and

also implies that she has no need for financial support as she can simply "get back to business" to secure her financial security. While the lines mention having children, they do not imply any interdependence because there is no mention of the care work usually associated with having children. This illustrates how the lowered pitch contributes to asserting her strength and independence and constructs her strong independent woman persona, a figure dominant in postfeminist media.

The clear postfeminist sentimentality of the song is also apparent in how Beyoncé constructs femininity and engages with the body. In her song, Beyoncé uses breathy voice in combination with a higher pitch to construct a conventionally attractive feminine persona. As Muchitsch (2016, 8) points out the generally higher pitch "feminine-coded" vocals in the pre-chorus contrast with the "masculine coded" and "characteristically low-pitched rap vocals" in the verses. A linguistic feature that could have added to Muchitsch's (2016) point is that in the pre-chorus, Beyoncé also uses breathy voice when she is trying to seduce the male dancers. This is especially obvious in the lines "My persuasion can build a nation / Endless power" (Beyoncé 2011, 03:28–03:39). Her pitch reaches its peak in the final line of the pre-chorus where the breathy voice also persists as she sings "You'll do anything for me" (Beyoncé 2011, 03:43–03:48). This shift in F0 and voice quality is accompanied by a shift in dance moves as well, as this section is characterized by more fluid and slow movements in comparison to the quick and abruptly changing moves that Beyoncé employs in the verse sections of the songs. Thus, Beyoncé uses pitch, voice quality and embodiment to construct a conventionally attractive feminine persona. In this way Beyoncé caters to the male gaze by performing in a way that heterosexual men often find attractive but portrays this not as objectification but rather as her presenting herself in a sexualized way, because it suits her interests to do so. This is an expression of a postfeminist approach to sexualization of normatively feminine bodies and situates this clearly as a postfeminist piece of media.

It is worth noting here that while many women appear in Beyoncé's music video, they all adhere to a relatively narrow beauty standard. Beyoncé and her female back-up dancers are all thin, abled-bodied women, who wear make-up and styled hair, who are hairless below the neck. The only way in which the body ideal that is constructed through this very narrow representation of female corporeality diverges from the ideal postfeminist body is that the women are not only white as there are many women of color. While this could be seen as radical due to its expansion of the normative body, through her very narrow scope of representation she still accepts the premise that there is a normative body one must adhere to, to harness the kind of power that Beyoncé utilizes in her seductive sequence. Thus, Beyoncé's body politics are still intensely postfeminist which breeds ableism and the exclusion of disabled women.

While Beyoncé's video positions her as revolutionary, this revolution is hard to find when considering the content of the song. Her song imagines the world as ruled by one gender, rather than one of gender equality, the gendering of different types of labor and success, the existence of a normative body as well as the erasure of disabled people. In her video, Beyoncé often asserts her power and thus positions herself as empowered, while she never shows the vulnerability that the ethics of care asks us to show. Therefore, the representation in Beyoncé's music video thus seems to confirm Mintz's (2020) thesis that in postfeminist media the empowerment of able-bodied women will eclipse any representation of disability. One can then view Beyoncé's use of revolutionary aesthetics as an attempt to repackage an, at this time, increasingly unpopular postfeminist ideology to capitalize on the rising popularity of the protest movements that it references. However, if one looks at linguistic features such as pitch, breathy voice and embodiment it quickly becomes clear that this is a deeply postfeminist piece of media which perpetuates ableism.

4.2 *Prototype* by Viktoria Modesta

While Mintz (2020) might have been right if one looks at Beyoncé's video, it becomes more complicated if one examines postfeminist media that centers disabled women, which is the case for *Prototype* (Channel 4 Entertainment 2014b). Viktoria Modesta is a Latvian-British singer, dancer, model and more, who brands herself as a "bionic pop artist" (Modesta n.d.) who wears custom-made futuristic-looking prosthetics on her left leg, which was amputated below the knee. In *Prototype* (Channel 4 Entertainment 2014b), which was produced in collaboration with Channel 4, Modesta encourages the viewer to "forget what you know about disability," as she sings about overcoming her limitations, being "the model of the future" and that she is the new "prototype."

The chorus in Modesta's song only features once in the music video version of the song and consists of the line "I'm, the pro, I'm the pro, I'm the pro, I'm the pro, I'm the pro, I'm the prototype" repeated four times (Channel 4 Entertainment 2014b, 01:54–02:15). Modesta's fundamental frequency is remarkably lower in this section than in the preceding one. This is similar to how Beyoncé lowers her pitch on the initial "Girls" in *Run the World (Girls)* (Beyoncé 2011, 02:28–02:30), and arguably it serves the same function here, namely, to assert dominance. It is no coincidence that the words Modesta sings as she lowers her pitch are "I'm the prototype." With these lyrics coupled with the lowered pitch Modesta asserts her body as the new normative body. Her positioning of herself as the trailblazer of a new normative body is also constructed through the visual side of the music video, which includes a girl watching a cartoon character modelled on Modesta and the girl at one point rips one of the legs off one of her dolls and then proceeds to use

the doll's remaining leg to repeatedly kick her dolls with two legs in their faces (Channel 4 Entertainment 2014b, 01:22–01:37), a symbol consisting of her initials as the symbol of a rebellion (Channel 4 Entertainment 2014b, 04:28) as well as a picture of a man who appears to have amputated his leg to be part of Modesta's revolution (Channel 4 Entertainment 2014b, 04:06). Thus, it becomes very clear that Modesta does not reject the idea of a normative body, but rather embraces and redefines it so that her body is positioned as normative. This acceptance of the paradigm of a normative body distinguishes her from an ethics of care approach to disability and lives up to Campbell's definition of ableism. Therefore, while Modesta might encourage you to "forget what you know about disability," Modesta perpetuates ableism in her music video.

In Modesta's song breathy voice indexes sex and arousal, much like it does in *Run the World (Girls)* (Beyoncé 2011). That becomes clear in the second verse where Modesta uses breathy voice. While there has been added an effect over her voice in post-production, her voice quality is still audibly breathy, especially when singing the words "progressive," "provocatively" and "hot whip" though the breathy voice dominates the entire section (Channel 4 Entertainment 2014b, 02:15–02:37). The "hot whip" that Modesta mentions might be a reference to BDSM, as Modesta is a well-known figure in the London BDSM scene (Channel 4 Entertainment 2014a, 05:33–05:39).

Figure 1. Modesta and a woman undressed on a bed, while a man gets dressed in the background (Channel 4 Entertainment 2014b, 02:44).

In the visuals accompanying this section we see Modesta lying undressed on a bed either alone or with someone who she is kissing or being held by (figure 1). As both the visuals and lyrics reference sex, this indicates that breathy voice in Modesta's video is associated with sex. Coupled with the visuals where Modesta is desired by two people and can choose or reject them at her wish,

it constructs Modesta as a sexually desirable object as well as wielding sexual agency. This aligns with a postfeminist approach to sex.

One thing to note here is that, as we saw in Beyoncé's video, in postfeminist media sexual attractiveness is usually reserved for those who are able-bodied, thin, often white, free of body hair with trendy clothes and well-done make-up, but Modesta portrays herself as sexual as well as sexually desirable. As Shildrick (2009, 81) argues people with non-normative bodies are often disqualified from "discourses of pleasure associated with sexuality […] to the point of denial of any sexuality at all." If we see Modesta's sexual self-portrayal through this lens, one might argue that Modesta radically challenges discourses around sexuality and disability. While one could quite convincingly argue that Modesta expands the conception of the conventionally attractive normative body to include disabled women, much as Beyoncé expands it to include women of color, she still accepts the premise that there must be a normative body, she is only challenging which body gets to be the "prototype." Therefore, this is less a radical challenge to the normative feminine body as the one we will see in Hull's video, but rather a superficial challenge to what the category of the normative body includes.

Modesta's video does not only construct a new normative body, but also manages to unify transhumanism and postfeminism as is evident through her use of prosthetics. Throughout the video Modesta uses three different prosthetics made by the Alternative Limb Project (2023), including a see-through leg with "bones" inside that light up, a leg covered in Swarovski diamonds as well as a very pointy black prosthetic called the Spike (The Alternative Limb Project 2023). In this section I will examine what these prosthetics as well as what the framing of them says about Modesta, transhumanism and postfeminism, focusing especially on the use of the Spike in this video and other performances.

The Spike first appears after Modesta's initial encouragement "to forget what you know about disability" where only Modesta's lower leg and the Spike are visible as she thrusts the Spike down toward a glass floor (Channel 4 Entertainment 2014b, 00:12–00:14). It reappears after the song has ended in a dance sequence which involves Modesta breaking the top part of the glass floor with her prosthetic (Channel 4 Entertainment 2014b, 04:58–06:06). This clearly evokes the idea of the glass ceiling, a common metaphor for barriers that women face in professional settings, which Modesta breaks, signifying her strength and ability to overcome barriers. Modesta has also stated that the Spike is her version of the ultimate stiletto (Channel 4 Entertainment 2014a, 08:43–09:10). The Spike then comes to signify an enhanced femininity and contributes to the construction of Modesta's persona as a strong, independent and technologically enhanced woman and thus a transhumanist postfeminist.

The "Light Leg" consists of LED-lights in fiberglass and silicone shaped and colored as a human bone cased in see-through plastic (The Alternative Limb Project 2023). Therefore, it bears a resemblance to normative human anatomy with the bone but with technological enhancements such as the LED-lights. This prosthesis is also what Modesta wears as she asserts her body as the new normative body, but with the approximation of normative anatomy with the realistic looking bone, Modesta is paradoxically at once rejecting and approximating the hegemonic normative body.

In the scenes where Modesta is taken away to a questioning by men who wear uniforms reminiscent of SS-officers from Nazi-Germany, Modesta wears a custom-made Swarovski-encrusted prosthetic (Channel 4 Entertaiment 2014b, 02:56–04:56; The Alternative Limb Project). When Modesta uses it to deflect a laser pointed at her head and points it back at her fascist-coded questioners, the leg is portrayed as an embodied form of resistance. Thus, in Modesta's video her prosthetics serve a vital role in crafting her revolutionary persona. However, when seen in a wider social context outside her video it is arguably an example of the "cyborgian overcompensation" Mitchell and Snyder (2015) criticized, where a prosthetic becomes a way to signal wealth that is inaccessible to most people with disabilities. Thus, Modesta's prosthetics contribute to the construction of her revolutionary transhumanist postfeminist persona, though one might argue that with her approximation of normative anatomy, her display of wealth as "cyborgian overcompensation" and her acceptance of the existence of a normative body, Modesta's portrayal of disability is hardly as revolutionary as she brands it.

Let us now turn to how Modesta frames her accommodations and what this communicates about her views on independence and disability. In some of the scenes where Modesta wears the Spike she is holding her balance and jumping with the help of two thin wires as shown in figure 2 (Channel 4 Entertainment 2014b, 05:31–06:06).

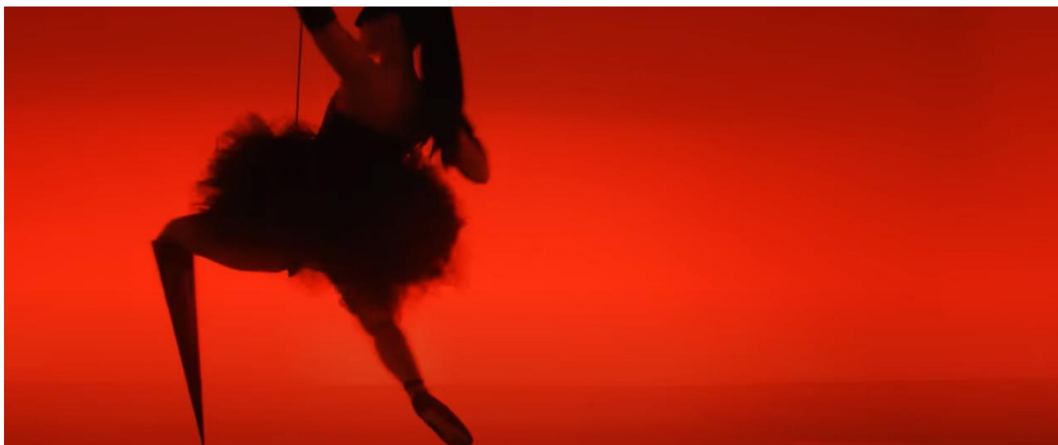


Figure 2. Modesta using wires (Channel 4 Entertainment 2014b, 05:44).

The scenes where the wires are visible are characterized by low lighting and these accommodations do not get the same close-ups or attention as Modesta's extravagant prostheses. If one is familiar with Modesta's other work, it becomes very clear that it is another expression of Modesta's paradoxical relationship with accommodations. In 2019, Modesta performed a dance routine at Crazy Horse in Paris and wore the Spike during the performance (Modesta 2019). As illustrated by figure 3, taken from Modesta's Instagram page, Modesta had handles over her head which she could hold onto to hold her balance.

Figure 3. Modesta performing at Crazy Horse (Modesta 2019).

These accommodations are also hard to spot in the dark light of the night club. In a dance routine performed at an event for the luxury designer brand Christian Louboutin, Modesta used a similar prosthetic. In the routine, shown in figure 4 and 5, she enters holding hands with a male dancer and executes a few dance moves where she is supported by him before she casts his hands aside and thrusts up her chin as she walks forward on the stage alone (Louboutin 2023, 01:35–02:06).

Figures 4 & 5. Modesta performing at the Loubi Show IV (Christian Louboutin 2023, 01:35–02:06).

These moves seem to signify her triumphantly casting any dependency aside and this embodied mode contributes to the construction of her strong independent woman persona. Once it becomes clear that Modesta participates in the abjection of dependency in this way, it casts a new light on the barely visible handles in the Crazy Horse performance and the barely visible strings in *Prototype*. One might argue that they are given as little attention as possible because they threaten this independent woman persona that Modesta has carefully constructed and that because Modesta embraces the glorification of independence, she also embraces the stigmatization of dependency. Thus, when Modesta can only portray accommodations as either spectacles that serve as signs of her wealth and power that still approximate the current normative body or as shameful secrets that must be hidden away from the light or outright rejected, it becomes clear that Modesta reinforces and perpetuates ableist ideas about dependency.

The rejection of the need for interdependence and thus vulnerability, is also apparent in how Modesta depicts her stump when she is not wearing a prosthetic. In *Prototype,* it is visible for a total of 5 seconds in a 6-minute video (Channel 4 Entertainment 2014b, 02:43–02:48) and in the shot where it is visible, there is low lighting, it is not placed in the center of the frame and her lower right leg is also obscured from view (figure 1), which all serves to make it less visually obvious. In the show for Louboutin, there is one shot where Modesta is not wearing a prosthetic and her stump is visible for almost ten seconds in a 20-minute video (Louboutin 2023, 09:40–09:50), but is often obscured from view by moving screens. While Modesta often centers and makes her prosthetics the center of attention, she refuses to do the same for the stump of her amputated leg. That Modesta seems to hide not only accommodations that do not signal wealth but also seeks to hide her stump suggests a shame about her deviance from the dominant normative body and an internalized ableism.

Therefore, while Modesta implores the viewer to "forget what you know about disability," it seems she has not. What is happening is not a subversion of ideas about disability or femininity

but simply a rebranding of hegemonic ideas as "progressive," to use Modesta's own word. This repackaging allows luxury brands like Louboutin or broadcasting companies like Channel 4 to brand themselves as inclusive in a time with increased calls for diversity, without deeply challenging the ableism that caused previous exclusion. Modesta accepts the ideal of the strong, independent woman, the existence of a normative body and the rejection of care and in doing so perpetuates ableism. This seems in conflict with Mintz's (2020) argument that disability and empowerment cannot coexist, however, it does seem that she is right that any vulnerability associated with disability will be repressed in postfeminist media.

4.3 *Running Underwater* by Eliza Hull

Mintz's (2020) thesis does not, however, apply to all pop music, as I will show in the following analysis of *Running Underwater* by Eliza Hull (2023). Eliza Hull is an Australian singer who has Charcot Marie Tooth disease which causes nerve damage in arms and legs and is a disability rights advocate ("Eliza Hull" 2023). In Hull's newly released song *Running Underwater* (2023), Hull for the first time sings about her experience with disability. The video's visuals are minimalist, as it is set in an almost empty storage room, where Hull plays the piano and sings while the camera focuses on roya the destroya, a dancer with one leg, executing her choreography.

Figure 6. roya the destroya and her crutches (Hull 2023, 1:07).

In *Running Underwater* (Hull 2023), Hull's pitch varies greatly. This happens in every chorus as well as several times in each verse. An example of this can be found as she confronts her dissimilarity with a normatively abled body and sings "maybe I don't fit in" her pitch rises and then drops as she continues into "with what you want me to be / oh this cookie cutter version" and then rises again with " is not doing me any favors (Hull 2023, 01:09–01:27) as illustrated below in excerpt 3.

Excerpt 3

Maybe I don't fit in with what you want me to be

Oh this cookie cutter version is not doing me any favors

Interpreting the pitch with the help of the context that the lyrics give us, one could argue that the low pitch signifies sadness while the higher pitched section could signify anxiety about not fitting into hegemonic body ideals or elation about letting go of these ideas. The pitch also changes in the chorus, as illustrated in excerpt 4 below (Hull 2023, 01:40–02:02).

Excerpt 4

Take this weight off me

Show my bones for you to see

'Cause I'm not getting far running underwater

'Cause I'm not getting far running from you

As Hull makes an emotional appeal to another person to ease her burden and let her be vulnerable with them because she cannot outrun her interdependency her pitch fluctuates even within words, as is the case for the final "you." Unlike in Beyoncé's song, it seems the shifts here are not deliberate shifts between personas but rather it seems that these shifts between quite high and low fundamental frequencies are used to express the intense emotions which are also expressed through the lyrics of the song. Therefore, Hull's use of pitch in this song indexes emotions and contributes to the construction of an emotionally vulnerable persona.

Throughout the song, Hull uses breathy voice quite frequently. The perhaps most breathy sections in Hull's (2023) video are the opening line "'Cause I'm not getting far running from you" (00:08–00:17) and the closing lines "Take the weight off me / Show my bones for you to see" (04:08–04:25) which are exclusively sung with breathy voice, except for the initial syllable in "running." As I argued earlier, these lines are an emotional appeal to another person, that combined with pitch contribute to a sense of emotional vulnerability. The use of breathy voice adds to this, as it can convey tenderness, sadness, and authenticity, which are arguably all things that Hull is aiming for with her performance of emotional vulnerability. As these opening and closing lines are sung with breathy voice, this emotional openness is centered as well as the plea for interdependency.

Figure 7. The final shot in *Running Underwater* (Hull 2023, 04:22).

This is also emphasized by the final shot in the video which consists of roya the destroya sitting down next to Hull and placing her head on Hull's shoulder, breaking their isolation from each other and instead leaning on each other, as seen in figure 7, and thus becoming more interdependent as the speaker in the song pleads for. That is to say, Hull's use of breathy voice is not just a way to construct an emotionally open and authentic persona, but it also contributes to the centering of care and vulnerability in combination with the lyrics and the visuals. This aligns Hull's song with the principles of the ethics of care.

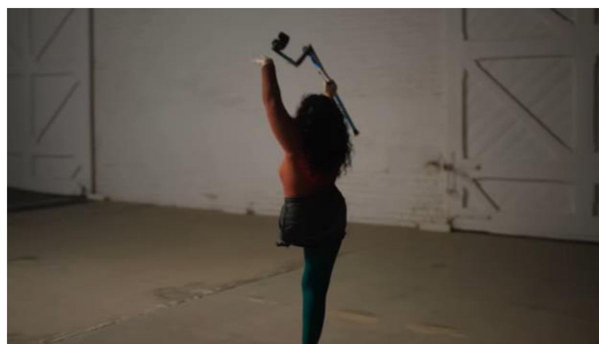


Figure 8. roya the destroya and her crutches (Hull 2023, 1:44).

In Hull's music video, roya the destroya uses a pair of grey and blue crutches as an accommodation while she dances as seen in figure 6 and 8. Unlike the accommodations we saw in Modesta's video, these crutches are not very eye-catching and look like a standard pair of crutches. Therefore, it is clear that it is not a case of "cyborgian overcompensation." As Hull sings the lines "Take the weight off me / Show my bones for you to see" (Hull 2023, 01:40–01:54), roya the destroya spins in a circle while balancing one crutch atop of the other (figure 8). As Hull appeals

to having the weight of pressures of the normative body removed and engaging in interdependency with someone else, roya the destroya highlights her crutches through the dance and thus centers the accommodations that she is dependent on to execute almost all of her other dance moves in the video. Therefore, in this music video accommodations and care are highlighted and celebrated through both visual and lyrical means, not for their extravagance, but rather for how they aid the autonomy of individuals. Furthermore, deviances from the normative body such as roya's stump are not hidden away in an attempt to avoid vulnerability, as they are in Modesta's video. Thus, it is clear that this video aims to deconstruct ableism and normalize non-normative bodies.

In Hull's video, vulnerability takes center stage as she both linguistically and lyrically constructs an emotionally open and vulnerable persona. The variation in her fundamental frequency and her use of breathy voice is an important way in which this vulnerability is expressed. The video also displays two differently abled bodies, neither of whom are positioned as normative while she in her lyrics rejects the idea of a normative body. Additionally, accommodations are in this video normalized and celebrated. In her lyrics, Hull highlights the need for care and mutual dependency. Based on this, it seems clear that Hull's song aligns with the ideas of the ethics of care, as it subverts ideas of a normative body and embraces vulnerability and care.

5. Conclusion

As Mintz (2020) argued disabled women are often excluded from postfeminist media due to its focus on empowerment and their rejection of interdependence. As I have demonstrated in this article, the two postfeminist videos from Beyoncé and Modesta have more in common than not, even though one is very explicitly about disability and the other does not mention it at all. They both convey similar ideas about idealizing strong, independent women, use similar linguistic features to similar ends as is the case with pitch and breathy voice and they both perpetuate ableism in the construction of a normative body. Thus, Mintz's (2020) thesis that there is no place for non-normatively abled women within postfeminism does not hold true, though it seems that due to the undercurrent of ableism inherent in postfeminism, representations of disabled women in postfeminist media will continue to perpetuate ableist ideas. While they both narrowly expand the normative body and portray themselves as revolutionary, one could argue that this is simply an attempt to capitalize on the calls for inclusion and diversity that Penney (2022) mentioned and through this route keep postfeminism relevant in a decade with increasing criticism of postfeminism in pop culture.

That does not, however, mean that all representation of disabled women in pop music will carry the same undercurrent of ableism. As I showed in my analysis of Hull's song, one can center

care and vulnerability and represent disabled women as a heterogenous group and reject the paradigm of a normative body. Thus, non-normatively abled women can be represented in a non-ableist way, but this requires a radical challenge to the beliefs and practices that led to their exclusion in the first place. Therefore, not all inclusion is revolutionary, but if it involves deconstructing what caused exclusion, it can be.

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