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AUTHOR	Riihimäki Hanna-Mari
TITLE	Miley Cyrus's 'Mother's Daughter' as Intersectional Feminist Activism?
YEAR	2023
VERSION	Final draft
CITATION	Riihimäki, H. (2023). Miley Cyrus's "Mother's Daughter" as Intersectional Feminist Activism?. In T. Jirsa & M.B. Korsgaard (Ed.). <i>Traveling Music Videos</i> (pp. 169–182). New York,: Bloomsbury Academic. Retrieved January 18, 2024, from http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781501398025.ch-10

Miley Cyrus's 'Mother's Daughter' as Intersectional Feminist Activism?

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Feminist political engagement in music videos takes many forms. Miley Cyrus's 'Mother's Daughter' (2019) and its accompanying music video have been interpreted as a feminist anthem—a view confirmed by the artist and the video's director Alexandre Moors (Lee 2019).ⁱ However, some consumers and critics have offered opposing views, questioning the music video's graphicness or the convenient harnessing of Cyrus's sexual fluidity (e.g., Nifras 2019; Riviuccio 2019). The different representations of femininity encountered in the video are closely intertwined with activism: its characters can all be thought of as activists either through their depiction in 'Mother's Daughter' or through their actions as artists and activists outside the music video. Most of the activist's causes underline the message constructed on the video, owning the rights to one's own body, either through body-positivity and fat acceptance, like in model/performer Angelina Duplisea's case, or gender fluidness, such as trans model Aaron Philip's or Casil McArthur's presence exemplify. Furthermore, the video was completed at the same time as the anti-abortion movement gained momentum in the United States. The music video responds to this circumstance in its subject matter. My goal is to reorient discussions of acceptable femininities and feminist activism in pop music while shedding new light on the substantial potential of music videos to influence political attitudes. Focusing in this chapter on the body, gender, voice(s), and the impact of social media, I will discuss the selection of alternative femininities in 'Mother's Daughter,' each of which addresses different aspects of feminist activism and intersectional thinking. However, these representations of femininity are somewhat contentious as Cyrus's calls for personal emancipation arise out of a fashionable popular feminist ethos that fails to offer a sufficiently nuanced or clearly articulated understanding of a wide range of intersectional issues.

I have chosen the artist and music video because of their provocativeness and because 'Mother's Daughter' has been interpreted as a feminist act and anthem. The video's chosen "NSFW" (not safe for work) style can be effective when wanting to comment on or draw attention to significant political matters and has been used before in successful ways (e.g., Childish Gambino's "This is America"). However, the "role of controversial content as a commercial attribute" nor the potential calculatedness of such endeavors should not be disregarded (Korsgaard 2019: 23). Given the influence videos like 'Mother's Daughter' have over the popular imagination, it is crucial to understand better how feminist ideas are transformed as they move from the critical margins of society to the mainstream. By leaning

on queer theory, especially following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (2003) theorization of paranoid and reparative reading, I will examine the tensions and meaning-making mechanisms entangled in the process. According to Sedgwick, a paranoid critical stance is anticipatory, reflexive, and mimetic: expecting the worst and needing "to be imitated in order to be understood; and...to understand only by imitation" (ibid. 10). She argues that paranoia is more or less taken as a synonym for conscious critical thinking, and offers an alternative, reparative reading, which focuses on the possibilities of a chosen text. Even though, for example, a music video does not reverberate on a personal level, it might be helpful, even encouraging or emancipatory, for others. As Sedgwick states, both approaches have essential qualities, and by using them alongside each other, I strive for a balanced interpretation of the issues at hand.

Tuning into 'Mother's Daughter'

Musically, 'Mother's Daughter' is comprised of electronic sounds and Cyrus's sung melody. The song structure adheres to the basic conventions of pop songs, with choruses following verses and a bridge section towards the end. The sound world is echoey, but some sounds, such as the guitar at the very beginning or the deep electronic bass, also sizzle with electricity. Fluctuations in dynamics create a wavy texture, while the song's compelling beat occupies a prominent position at the front of the mix. A sparkling synthesizer riff at the beginning of the track (0:03) is based on an arpeggiated G# minor chord, the song's key center. It reoccurs in every pre-chorus and chorus section and is heard right up to the song's end. Most instruments are situated in the high and low frequencies, which leaves plenty of space in the middle range for Cyrus's voice, especially in the verses. At times the bass drops out, which dramatically reduces the song's intensity. An example of this is the bridge, where a central message of the song is located: a salute to Cyrus's mother (who is also her manager), which also serves as parental recognition of her career achievements. The melody is quite simple and easy to sing along with, particularly in the verses, but it includes some fast-paced wordplay in the chorus.ⁱⁱ Cyrus's lead vocal is doubled throughout the song, and vocal harmonies are sometimes added over and under the main melody.

'Mother's Daughter' features numerous other characters, mainly activists representing different causes and identities, but we see Cyrus in close up more than anyone else. There is a great deal of movement in the music video: the camera constantly zooms in and out, and especially Cyrus moves around within the frame. The first verse of 'Mother's Daughter' concentrates on Cyrus. Otherwise, different images fluctuate quite randomly in relation to the

song's structure, apart from the instrumental break and the bridge section. Almost all shots and sets are pink or red-hued. Reinforced with images of underwear and a menstrual pad shown early on (0:11; 2:50), the red hues point towards menstruation and the inequalities and taboos still surrounding this area of women's lives. For example, tampons and other hygiene products—basic necessities for women—are overpriced and difficult to afford for many lower-income women (Geng 2021). There are a couple of exceptions to this color scheme, for example, when Cyrus is portrayed with her mother against a black backdrop (2:26). The frame is visible in almost all scenes, except some of the darker ones. This framing helps to emphasize or diminish the music video space and its performativity.

Diverse Activist Femininities as a Vehicle for Intersectional Understanding

Many of the themes and flashing slogans in the video are bold and directly concern women's lives, portraying femininities with a specific activist and political agenda in mind. Cyrus's femininity in the music video is active, authoritative, and hard to ignore. In contrast to Cyrus, some characters are quite static and do not even seem to be breathing. Several of the other characters move around the frame quite freely, but they never breach its outer rims by their own choice. The activists and their respective agendas may come across as insignificant in the music video, as they appear only in fragments. However, their messages construct most of what may be considered as intersectional understanding in 'Mother's Daughter.'

In this section, my reading of Cyrus is leaning towards a reparative one, looking for possibilities to interpret her as an icon of queer femininity. Cyrus's vibrant and strong femininity is conveyed by her voice, looks, facial expressions, movements, and dancing to the strong beat. Furthermore, the song's lyrical content describes Cyrus as a Nile crocodile, a witch, and a 3-point shooter, among other things. Cyrus's voice is relatively low and, at times, raspy. Thus, anything but that of the little girl who rose to stardom in the public eye, thereby emphasizing her competence and resilience (vs. defenselessness, Whiteley 2005: 13). The voice is a tangible factor in conveying her authority and power; she is auditively in the center of the video, and implicitly in control of her audiovisual portrayal. Through her looks, attire, and movements, Cyrus's femininity appears at times as dangerous or monstrous, assertive and agentic, and at others more obviously raising questions about sexualization and power structures. The danger is most discernible in the vagina dentata embellishing her red latex armor, and her agency is best depicted in her direct communication and camera address (Burns 2010: 163–164; Burns & LaFrance 2002: 76, 78–79). The sexualization is evident in her movements, especially when linked to other imagery, such as two rubber breasts rubbing

together. As a man directed this video, questions of gaze are not unproblematic. However, Cyrus constantly claims most of the space she performs in, at times escaping the constraints of the frame, or the gaze, altogether. Furthermore, there is a queer angle to Cyrus's sexualization and even some hints of jest alluded to by her facial expressions.

Only two characters are seen together with Cyrus. One of them is the Brazilian model Vendela. The two women pose and touch each other in sexualized ways, complemented at times with the lyrics alluding to orgasm, indicating possible lesbian relations (or at least titillation) and allowing a queer reading of these scenes. Cyrus has spoken openly about her pansexuality and gender fluidness since her teenage years in several interviews (e.g., Dockterman 2015) and, therefore, her rejection of straightforward gender binaries. Queer sensibilities have been a part of earlier performances (See McNicholas 2017), and her philanthropic work as the founder of the Happy Hippie Foundation gave her some credibility as an activist.ⁱⁱⁱ Cyrus's sexualized scenes with Vendela, and the provocative audiovisual performances as a whole (including other non-gender normative characters), indicate a broad scope of acceptable femininities, including some that directly suggest queer agency. Still, the sexualization of Cyrus's portrayal (be it her choice or not) is ambiguous, especially when linked to her proclamations of feminist activism, to which I will return.

Cyrus's femininity is portrayed differently in shots with her mother, Tish Cyrus. In these shots, she is calm and still, sitting with her legs crossed and her head on her mother's shoulder, dressed in a Chanel skirt-suit like her mother's. The black frame, which is quite clearly present in most scenes, is removed here. This naturalizes the setting of the two Cyrus women on the couch, who, in addition, greatly resemble each other. The change in the music is also noteworthy here, as the bass drops out, giving room for Cyrus's echoed voice. This also occurs earlier in images of a goddess-like mother breastfeeding her child. The bridge emphasizes Cyrus's mother's significance in the music video: mothers can be influential figures in industrial settings, role models, and icons. Furthermore, Moors has stated that he and Cyrus "wanted to make a tribute to the previous women who fought this battle" (Lee, A. 2019), indicating recognition of earlier generations: the "mothers" of feminist struggles. Indeed, just as the bridge begins, the slogan: "FEMINIST AF" (an abbreviation for "feminist as fuck") appears prominently. Thus, femininity is also construed as rudely combative, qualified and professional, supportive and motherly.

The body-positive activist Angelina Duplisea is portrayed in the music video in a "Rubensian" way as something to be admired. This is reminiscent of the anonymous

American feminist women artist/activist group Guerilla Girls' famous poster, which addressed gender inequality concerning artists and women's exposure in art museums.^{iv} Duplisea's portrayal is loaded with power. She can be seen as a depiction of feminist propaganda as well as representing a new strand of acceptable femininity, so-called fat femininity. Although it is often laden with negative associations, the use of the word "fat" has increased as its detrimental connotations have slowly begun to change in a more body-positive direction. How fatness is produced and portrayed in popular media is still indicative of how fatness is understood and managed in societies. (Pääkkölä 2019; Kyrölä 2014; Rothblum et al. 2009). Most often, fat women (and sometimes men) have been granted access to the mainstream media as an object of pity, disgust, and wonderment or as comical, clumsy characters.^v Furthermore, sexual desire in a fat body is usually encoded as deviant, marginal, or exceptional, even if it is heterosexual. (Kyrölä 2014; 2005: 106, 112–113). There are, as always, some exceptions to be found, but more nuanced portrayals of fat femininity in mainstream popular culture are scarce.^{vi}

The claim, reinforced by the lyrics, is that Duplisea has power. Still, the words 'Oh my God' and 'look at her' change the meaning to a more judgmental one and seem to imply that this is primarily a visual spectacle; and this quickly turns her into a passive object of scorn or voyeurism (Kyrölä 2005: 117, 126). Furthermore, the lights are initially dimmed, after which they begin to spotlight Duplisea in a show-like manner. The subsequent image of Cyrus inscribes power back onto the leading performer again. Duplisea does not return the gaze of the camera at all, which suggests a lack of authority, confidence, and power (Burns&Lafrance 2002: 76). Following Sedgwick (2003), the above interpretation exemplifies a paranoid reading, as it is densely packed with assumptions and previous knowledge. It is instructive to counter this with a reparative reading, where Cyrus and Duplisea are both "in on the joke" and reflect the so-called expected responses to seeing a fat person in a sexualized way. From this standpoint, Duplisea's portrayal could be described as brave and powerful, her indirect camera contact as nonchalance and her naked fat body as a timely presentation of body diversity; and her appearance can be seen as feminist propaganda reminiscent of Guerilla Girls, co-created with Cyrus and her voice.

In a manner that is similar to fat bodies, perhaps even more so, bodies with disabilities, also gender non-conforming bodies,^{vii} are still quite invisible in the popular media. For example, model Aaron Philip's appearance in the music video is quite progressive, as black trans people living with disabilities do not usually appear in music videos. Furthermore, Philip's portrayal seems quite agentic, and the words 'Mother's

Daughter' are linked to her visual representation, underlying the non-gendering nature of the phrase. Her direct eye contact, accentuated with a playful wink, her free movement within the frame, and the character's reappearance in the course of the music video all emphasize Philip's agency. Her portrayal underlines that femininity is not determined by (dis)abilities. Another trans model, Casil McArthur, is chosen as one of the characters who "sings" (lip-synchs) along with parts of the lyrics. Furthermore, the gestures and direct contact suggest dynamic status in the music video space, pointing to agency and participation also in his case. Professional skateboarder Lacey Baker has seemingly little authority in the music video, as (similarly to Duplisea) they do not make eye contact and do not speak. Baker's static portrayal is connected to Cyrus's voice, hovering and echoing over everything. However, drawing again from reparative reading, the scene could be construed as powerful in its stillness. Non-normative gender positions have, in a sense, been at a standstill in many societies: often hidden or even denied. Only in recent years have there been any fundamental changes in identification policies, for example.^{viii} 'Mother's Daughter' importantly acknowledges "the spectrum of gender identity" (Baker, quoted in Lee A.G. 2019), and drawing on these three examples of the activists, femininity in the music video is constructed as non-gender-specific as well as androgynous.

Social Media's Amplification: The Voices to Be Heard

The doubling of Cyrus's voice and the additional parts to the melody could also represent other voices in 'Mother's Daughter.' However, the imagery of these segments anchors the voice to only Cyrus by showing mere fractions of other characters. Through Cyrus's Instagram feed, social media was briefly harnessed as an amplifier for the different voices left unheard or muffled in the 'Mother's Daughter' video.^{ix} Slogans, such as "Music makes movements" or "We got the power," were posted, as well as statements from many of the video's characters, accompanied by their images from the music video. For example, Angelina Duplisea wrote about fat acceptance:

Fat acceptance is based on the notion that all fat people, regardless of health, deserve respect. And it's a battle that is fought every day by thousands, including myself ... Next time you see a fat person posting pictures of themselves living their life, stop and ask yourself why you wish to spoil their joy.

In this statement, Duplisea also strove to comment on today's aggressive social media behavior, which was sadly confirmed in some highly negative comments following the posting. Aaron Philip and Casil McArthur were similarly also calling for acceptance and the right to express oneself, regardless of one's body, features, or personal identifying:

As a black girl in a wheelchair who happens to be trans – I just want to have a good life and do good in whatever my endeavors consist of, regardless of what that might mean in the face of oppression. (Philip)

I try to live as authentically as I can – and I want to create a space where everyone else can do the same, I don't want people living in fear – because of how they choose to identify and express themselves ... We're coming into a generation where it's way more accepted to express ourselves and our identities. (McArthur)

Like Duplisea, Philip's and McArthur's postings received highly negative feedback. Hypervisibility means expanded publicity, which might help marginalized groups' voices be more widely heard, allowing them to participate in political and societal "democratic communication" (Meikle 2018: 5), especially when fighting for a political cause and striving for change. However, publicity also motivates opponents and might systematically stereotype or demonize the cause and its advocates (Ibid.; Banet-Weiser 2018; Gill 2016; Kyrölä 2005: 109). Still, the activists and their agendas were also responded to in positive and supportive comments. Cyrus's Instagram allowed the time, space, voice, and visibility to those who rarely have the opportunity to get their messages across to such a broad audience (see Kyrölä 2005: 119). Paradoxically, despite negative comments and slander, the challenging of dominant ideals regarding appearance has gained ground, especially on social media, fostering "acceptance and respect for all bodies regardless of shape, size and features" (Cohen et al. 2021: 2366). On the one hand, this body-positivity is largely celebrated, but it also draws attention to appearance over other attributes and keeps the focus on the body. Nevertheless, messages of "alternative body types as beautiful and worthy" are essential (Ibid.: 2369), and some studies have suggested that body-positive messages promoted through social media may advance broad-minded attitudes overall. The presence, then, of a more diverse array of femininities on and beyond the music video suggests activist momentum, whether by broadening or shattering ideals, enforcing acceptability and body acceptance, or influencing broader attitudes through the use of social media. In what follows,

I will delve deeper into what kinds of feminist activism are produced through ‘Mother’s Daughter’ and how they might advance or hinder intersectional understanding.

As a public figure, Cyrus seems to aspire to make a difference in society and often confronts taboos surrounding gender and sexuality in her performances, evident also in ‘Mother’s Daughter.’ The loudest voice on the video is that of Cyrus, and not only in a musical way. Cyrus has proclaimed herself as being “the biggest feminist” (Izundu & Butterly 2013) and has shared her views on the subject publicly in different media. This proclamation may easily be contested; nevertheless, some views rather coincide. Kate McNicholas Smith (2017) employs a queer reading when considering Miley Cyrus as more than a sexualized “bad” role model, something she is often considered to be. She argues that by understanding Cyrus as conducting a form of performative provocation, the artist can be seen as an icon for queer feminism. McNicholas Smith ponders tensions in perceptions of sexualization and expressions of sexual freedom in Cyrus’s performances. Still, she argues that her provocative performances carry considerable agentic power and therefore function as a manifestation of feminist struggles. Cyrus, too, speaks of her own sexualized images and performances as expressing feminist empowerment (Brady 2016), stating that: “As long as you’re not hurting anyone... your choices are your choices.”^x However, sexualized performances always carry with them the long history of women’s oppression, and can be interpreted as inviting a sexual response, no matter how ironically produced (Whiteley 2000: 16, 149; Pääkkölä 2019).

Cyrus’s actions and how images of her and others are mediated in ‘Mother’s Daughter’ correspond with feminist activity in popular culture more generally, for example, choice feminism (Thwaites 2017; Brady 2016). Choice feminism encourages “women to embrace the opportunities they have in life and to see the choices they make as justified and always politically acceptable” (Thwaites 2017: 55). It also underlines “individualism and consumerism, while downplaying the need for political and collective action against systematic inequalities” (ibid.). This and other post-, popular, and/or neoliberal strands of current feminism advocate for women’s rights to self-expression, regarding, for example, their chosen style and articulations of sexuality.^{xi} Cyrus’s feminist proclamations have been understood in similar terms as overly individualistic and self-absorbed (e.g., Apolloni 2014). This extent to which such perceptions are justified in the case of ‘Mother’s Daughter’ is likely to undermine other feminist political messages. Feminism has become quite “fashionable” in recent years as a facet of young women’s identities, and this tendency is fueled by the actions of celebrities, who have harnessed social media to put across

“fashionable” feminist content (Charles & Wadia 2018; Brady 2016; Gill 2016). It is unlikely that this positioning will have harmed Cyrus’s career, and it is indeed possible to see her public feminist proclamations as a form of marketing or branding. However, a more nuanced view might emerge by drawing on different overlapping and distinct strands of feminism when constructing a reading. Indeed, the most convincing and somewhat reparative reading might be to view Cyrus’s performances as rooted in individualistic and neoliberal feminist ideology, where the freedom to express femininities and sexuality more liberally (in Cyrus’s case, provocatively) is paramount. Moreover, the more individualistic messages of the music video, encapsulated in the expression “don’t fuck with my freedom,” were transformed in transmedia contexts, as the tone of Cyrus’s Instagram feed was attuned to the principles of collective freedom and empowerment, with messages such as “Don’t mess with OUR freedom” (original emphasis).

The current feminist theory advocates intersectional understanding, meaning it takes into account the differences and convergences resulting from categories like age, ability/disability, class, gender, economic status, ethnicity, race, and sexuality when examining power structures and society at large (Hill Collins & Bilge 2016; Apolloni 2014). Many of the actions within and surrounding ‘Mother’s Daughter’ contradict the definition of popular feminism as excluding anger. They also contradict the assumption of popular feminism as an ideology that “frequently refuses intersectionality, and often erases and devalues women of color, working-class women, trans women, and non-heteronormative women, even when it claims to include all women” (Banet-Weiser 2018:15; Gill 2016). Furthermore, the video’s numerous articulations of queerness are not easily dismissed and infuse the actions of all of its actors, including Cyrus herself. Therefore, ‘Mother’s Daughter’ can be interpreted as striving for intersectional understanding. In some ways, the video can be understood as Cyrus’s response to criticism of her (earlier) attempts at feminist activism. In fact, it is remarkable to note how ‘Mother’s Daughter’ seems almost like a direct response to Alexandra Apolloni’s (2014) challenge to Cyrus to be the kind of feminist who is not just about individual freedom and self-empowerment but instead shares her podium with others, and takes intersectionality into account.

Mothers’ Daughters: Non-binary and to Be Noticed

By portraying various femininities and highlighting aspects of bodily and sexual queerness, among other things, the ‘Mother’s Daughter’ music video advocates gender and sexual fluidness, confronts fat-shaming, critically highlights ableism, and underlines the rights to

one's own body. However, the dominant message seems to revolve around Cyrus's calls for personal freedom. As such, this fortifies interpretations of the music video as a manifestation of popular feminism and Cyrus's provocativeness as a marketing tool. Even though a larger political agenda of diversity is being advanced in the video, the vast array of differences is refracted into a series of disconnected fragments. 'Mother's Daughter' seems to lack a deeper perspective and offers only glimpses of everyone but Cyrus. This is where Cyrus's Instagram feed stepped in, filling in the gaps in the video's narrative. In this transmedial context, activist characters from the music video were recognized and given sufficient space to express themselves verbally. However, the rapidly changing content of social media and its constant overflow of information, which seems to be a distinguishing feature of current social media practices, may prevent these more nuanced messages from reaching their desired potential or audiences.

'Mother's Daughter' presents us with a selection of unconventional and non-binary femininities. An aesthetic spectacle does little in itself to encourage the acceptance of marginalized identities. Still, if 'Mother's Daughter' was not so obtrusive and deliberately provocative, it probably would not have reached such a broad audience. If, for example, Duplisea had been portrayed clothed and dancing, how much would the context and the message have changed? It is still relatively rare to see a naked fat body portrayed as a sight of potential admiration in mainstream popular media, or a black trans model living with disabilities and a wheelchair, for that matter. Perhaps Duplisea or Philip can thus be interpreted as agents who sculpt and broaden the expectations of media genres (Kyrölä 2005: 107–109)—in this case, concerning pop music videos.

Even though the music video 'Mother's Daughter,' the related Instagram postings, and Cyrus herself do little to encourage completely new ways of looking and hearing, or similar performances designed to shock, for that matter, they do demand our attention. Furthermore, if these more open and inclusive ideas of femininity, gender, and sexuality are not pushed into the mainstream where they can be seen and heard, the chances of bringing about change will diminish.

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ⁱ Link to the ‘Mother’s Daughter’ music video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7T2RonyJ_Ts.

ⁱⁱ The melody moves between g# and d#2, the verses and (beginnings of) choruses are lower, the pre-choruses climbing up to d#2.

ⁱⁱⁱ E.g., in the 2015 MTV Video awards Cyrus performed with 30 drag artists. For more on Cyrus’s organization see happyhippies.org.

^{iv} See guerillagirls.com.

^v E.g., *My 600-lb Life*.

^{vi} E.g., portrayals of the pop artist Alma, singer-rapper Lizzo, or in some current films and television series, such as the characters of Becky Williams in *Shrill* or Annie Easton in *Empire*.

^{vii} I have chosen to use the word “bodies” here, while being aware of its contentious nature. My intention is only to bring clarity to the text.

^{viii} E.g., the U.S. has promised to add gender-neutral options to passports only in 2021 (Laviertes 2021).

^{ix} Link Cyrus’s Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/mileycyrus/>.

^x E.g., <https://quotefancy.com/quote/947138>.

^{xi} The broader discussion of how different strands of feminist thought (e.g., Banet-Weiser et al. 2020) might have influenced Cyrus’s feminism is beyond the scope of this article.