

SPRING
BREAKERS:
THE FANTASY
OF FEMININE
FREEDOM

According to Netflix, *Spring Breakers* is a film about “four college girls [who] rob a restaurant to fund their spring break in Florida, [and] get entangled with a weird dude with his own criminal agenda.”¹ Whatever the viewer expects about the genre of the film – chick flick or crime film – it can be assumed that most do not expect their experience to mimic a drug trip.² Harmony Korine, the film’s creator, stresses that he does not intend this film to make the viewer comfortable for too long.³ Its narrative is unreliable and non-chronological, asserting truths about the characters only to de-stabilize them. It follows that for a framework to be useful in analyzing such a film, it should be equally unstable and rejecting of dogma. Gaga feminism, as described by J. Jack Halberstam, encourages the “letting go of many of [the] most basic assumptions about people, bodies, and desires.”⁴ Its composition of “stutter steps and hiccups”⁵ mirrors the aesthetic intentionality of the film: visually, *Spring Breakers* imitates the catchy, fleeting temporality of a pop song.⁶ Gaga feminism allows for an analysis that simultaneously considers how the film represents gender, race, class, and sexual orientation within the boundaries of socially accepted binaries, as well as the possibilities it envisions beyond them. Most importantly, the use of Gaga feminism permits an examination of the effectiveness and limits of the reversal and exaggeration of identity categories. This approach poses the following questions: does *Spring Breakers* align with Gaga feminism in imagining revolutionary “what if” worlds awash with possibility?⁷ Or with the conservative feminism, which Gaga critiques, in which the goals of “white middle-class women” reflect nothing “beyond their race and class interests”?⁸ This paper will argue that *Spring Breakers* does not simply reproduce the existing stereotypes of the aforementioned identity categories, although it certainly does that; it reverses and exaggerates the viewers’ expectations for the performance of those identities in order to call into question their stability and desirability as categories.

Given the four main characters’ participation in their own objectification, and their wardrobe of bikinis and short shorts, it is easy to read the film as anti-feminist. According to the historical anti-pornography feminist position that classifies all female sexual objectification as violent exploitation,⁹ *Spring Breakers* indulges the patriarchal male gaze. Not only are the characters marked as girls by their clothing or lack thereof, they are stylized as post-feminist and self-indulgent in the pursuit of their own happiness.¹⁰ They contort their bodies into sexual positions in the hallway of their dormitory, giggling and singing Nelly’s *Hot in Here*. They grind upon one another, crawling between each other’s legs and slapping one another’s barely-concealed buttocks, as the camera hovers

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voyeuristically. This distortion of female body parts as ornamental and interchangeable is not new, nor is this form of its visual presentation.¹¹

However, if one is to understand gender not only as performative but as a strategy of cultural survival, one has to question how the characters' self-representation achieves more than sexual objectification.¹² The casting of Vanessa Hudgens and Selena Gomez, Disney stars, and other actors of similar reputation is the first act of de-stabilizing the viewer's acceptance of Faith, Cotti, Brit, and Candy as party girls. The viewer is challenged to simultaneously hold in their imagination the actors' wholesome branding, as well as the sexual behaviour and violence enacted onscreen. If the viewer expects the girls to be punished for failing to perform nurturing, gentle femininity, as is the conventional consequence for opposing the 'humanizing' force of conformity, they are disappointed.¹³ Unlike the heroines of "fallen women" films, these girls are not punished for their transgressions.¹⁴ Although Faith and Cotti grow disillusioned with the trip and return home, Brit and Candy remain in their fantasy and commit murder in the final scenes, armed with machine guns and protected only by string-bikinis and unicorn-embroidered ski masks. Herein lies the strategy of the girls' performance of hypersexual femininity: their scanty clothing leads others to assume that they are non-threatening.

The subversion of the assumption that femininity is no more than sexual objectification is best captured when the girls first visit the home of the 'weird dude,' a gangster called Alien. In his bedroom, he flaunts his ill-gotten wealth and the weapons he used to claim it. Candy asks to smell his money, rubbing it sensually on her face and enticing him to kiss her. She picks up a gun with the same sensual curiosity and playfulness. Alien tells her to be careful, a warning she teasingly ignores as Brit also picks up a loaded gun. Suddenly, the tone changes and the girls point the guns at Alien and tell him to "get on [his] motherfucking knees" and open his mouth. They slide the tips of the guns into his mouth, and ask: "You think you can just fuck and own us? Do you know who you're motherfucking talking to?" They implicitly ask him – and the viewer – whether it is possible that they just used him for his money and guns. They wonder aloud if they need him anymore, or if they should kill him, prompting him to fellate the guns and grab their buttocks as though to take their symbolic penises deeper into his mouth. This explicit reversal of sexual power dynamics undermines the expectation that a woman cannot be a sexualized object and powerful subject at the same time. Does this forceful reversal of power constitute a feminist act? The girls show that they can be as violent as men without dropping the guise of femininity: they demand respect *for* and *from* a position of hyper-fem-

inity and expand femininity to include masculine traits. While this may be only the double-bind of contemporary femininity, what follows deviates further from conventions of sexuality.¹⁵ The girls giggle as Alien finishes felling the guns, and let him embrace and profess his love to them. In no framework other than that of Gaga does the emasculation of a hypermasculine character precede romance. Moreover, the ensuing romance blossoms between not one dominant man and one submissive woman, but three dominant people, indicating a disregard for conservative relationship structures. This highlights the unanswered question of the girls' sexual identity. Though some may assume they are heterosexual due to their participation in the hetero-normative ritual of spring break, they do not answer Alien's question about whether they like seeing other girls "all up on each other," and whether they have sexually experimented together. Brit and Candy blur the lines of friendship and engage in three-way sex with Alien in a pool. What is never made clear is whether this performance only caters to the male gaze, or Brit and Candy feel romantic love for one another (and/or Alien). It is possible that Brit and Candy's relationship falls on Adrienne Rich's lesbian continuum, and that whether or not it is sexual in nature, their bond allows them to rebel against male tyranny.¹⁶ Their subsequent sexual involvement with Alien, however, calls this into question: if they do not need him, or if they are not attracted to men, then why engage in a sexual relationship with him?

Perhaps this relates to what Jane Gaines calls the politically incorrect pleasures of feminist heterosexuality.¹⁷ Unlike self-identified feminists, Brit and Candy may not view sex with men as inherently inegalitarian.¹⁸ The pool sex scene mentioned above may constitute egalitarian sex, not through an erasure of power structures but the fluidity of who inhabits them.¹⁹ Some shots are reminiscent of the pimp-ho dynamic, with both girls catering to Alien's needs, such as when he reclines against the couch and both girls kiss his chest, or when he holds the back of their heads as they kiss each other. In other shots, one or both of the girls dominate Alien. One shot finds him pressed against Candy's chest, his head physically subjugated to the girls as Brit caresses his face. Meanwhile, Candy smokes marijuana, an act repeated throughout the film following assertions of dominance. Sometimes Alien's presence seems irrelevant, as when Brit and Candy grind against one another, ignoring him. Throughout the pool scene, when the camera moves underwater, it is often impossible to tell exactly whose body is doing what to whom. This continuous repudiation of expectations prevents the viewer from determining whether the girls are heterosexual or homosexual.

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Brit and Candy's embrace of Alien contrasts with Faith's rejection of him. When he gets them out of jail – which, he notes, he did not get them into – Faith refuses to trust him. He takes them to a party and she begs the other girls to go home, saying that she does not feel comfortable with these people they do not know. The distinction she makes between *these* people – black people, with gangster attitudes and lifestyles – and the white people they were partying with before they got arrested, represents the film's engagement with race. Black crime is portrayed as dangerous, whereas white crime is playful and innocent. Faith knows that her friends committed a violent crime to finance their trip, yet says: "I know you did a bad thing, but I'm glad you did it." The racial dichotomy is also reflected in Brit, Candy, and Cotti's crime after Faith's departure. With guns, they tear through a wedding, straddling party-goers' heads and smashing the groom's head into his wedding cake, to Britney Spears' ballad *Everytime*. Afterwards they smoke marijuana, grinning down upon three boys tied to a hotel bed. In contrast, the viewer never sees Big Arch or his acolytes smile; they remain menacing harbingers of doom.

Alien straddles the binary of white and black. He is present both at the 'innocent' parties before the girls are jailed, and afterwards at the 'dangerous' hangout. Seeing that Faith is uncomfortable, he strokes her face, and tells her that he does not want her to go. In a traditional narrative, this would be a romantic scene: a wealthy masculine figure liberates a woman and is sensitive to her emotions. Contrarily, it makes Faith feel more threatened, and Alien seems dangerous – or, in the context of the film, black. Although white, he is racialized through his gangster persona, and corresponding celebration of "spectacular consumerism."²⁰ He also enacts his race verbally, using black vernacular: he says the n-word once, which goes almost unnoticed by the viewer, though it would be jarring if his Disney co-stars did the same. Following their conversation, Faith tells her friends that she knows something bad is going to happen. She is not wrong, but misguided, for Alien is not dangerous but the one in danger.

This subversion of Alien's powerful persona highlights the class differences between him and the girls. Alien tells them how, coming from a poor background, he participated in illegal activities to acquire wealth and achieve the American Dream. "Look at all my shit!" he repeats as the viewer is shown drugs, baseball caps, and guns and knives. His lack of differentiation between items like Calvin Klein cologne and blue Kool-Aid shows that he places importance not on the end, but the means. His

references to *Scarface* (1985) illustrate that violent acquisition of goods is a performance of his identity and entitlement to power, in rejection of his marginalized origins. Similarly, the girls use violence to access the upper-class ritual of spring break. When Candy calls her mother, she says they met people “just like them,” people also looking to find themselves. This contrasts with Faith’s distinction between white and black people, and suggests that Candy sees across race and class to the underlying desire for identity and truth. However, this egalitarian view is de-stabilized, since the call is voiced over images of Brit and Candy shooting Big Arch and his companions – people “just like them” to death.

The girls’ adventure narrative of going into a foreign place of danger, establishing dominance over the bodies within, and returning to safety unscathed, shows that the American dream mirrors the narrative of colonization.²¹ Alien’s background is where he befriended Big Arch, but he is expected to grow out of poor blackness into white privilege.²² In the same vein, once Brit and Candy murder Big Arch, they tell their mothers that they are going back to school and commit to being good (middle-class) people. Just as bikinis mark the characters as female, violence legitimates their white middle-class privilege over the non-white and the poor. The juxtaposition of shots of Brit and Candy driving an expensive convertible and the brutalized black bodies strewn around Big Arch’s home illustrates how the material and physical costs of capitalism are distributed along class and racial lines.

The violence of the film poses the most direct obstacle to its classification as feminist. As discussed, violence allows the girls to challenge gender categories, but this challenge does not constitute a moral justification for murder. Unlike *Sugar & Spice* (2001), in which the cheerleader protagonist robs a bank to provide for her coming child,²³ or *Thelma and Louise* (1991) who respond to patriarchal sexual violence,²⁴ the girls of *Spring Breakers* react not to trauma but middle-class boredom. They appear to be, to borrow Korine’s words, “pure pop sociopaths.”²⁵ The closest the film comes to excusing the violence is by construing it as fantasy. Candy repeatedly says, “just pretend like it’s a fucking video game!” While from the girls’ perspective, the fantasy of violence diffuses it and makes it less immoral, this renders it more disturbing for the viewer. In this way, the film aligns with Gaga feminism, as it “recognizes the ways in which our ideas of the normal or the acceptable depend completely upon racial and class-based assumptions about the right and the true.”²⁶ *Spring Breakers* engages with the violence of colonialism, capitalism, and the American Dream the way that Halberstam engages with heterosexuality:

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they are portrayed as on-going processes of identity formation, and are exaggerated in order to de-naturalize them.²⁷ This exaggeration, however, must not be mistaken for endorsement.

Gaga feminism holds that "the excessive training that we give to boys and girls to transform them from anarchic, ungendered blobs into gender automatons, then is (a) dangerous, and (b) not necessary, and (c) not actually consistent with lived reality."²⁸ *Spring Breakers*, with its exaggerations and reversals of stereotypes, provides an example of how adherence to these scripts of gender, race, and class depends on causing harm to others. At the same time it portrays genuine affection, humanizing crime without de-criminalizing it. *Spring Breakers* challenges the viewer to accept both the redemptive and damaging elements of the characters' behaviour, and does not comfort them with the idea that it might be fantasy. Nor, in the vein of Gaga feminism, does it purport to provide "some kind of clear feminist program for social change."²⁹ Brit, Candy, Cotti, and Faith use their erotic power, following what feels right to them,³⁰ and prove that "women so empowered are dangerous."³¹ They are more than women, more than feminist, more than middle-class, more than white, and more than wrong or right: they are flawed, free humans. Moreover, Brit and Candy's unsmiling faces as they leave the scene of their final crime indicate that they know that such freedom comes at the high price of racial and class inequality.

Endnotes

- ¹ "Spring Breakers," accessed November 23, 2013, Netflix.
- ² "Interview with Harmony Korine (Part 1/2)." Youtube video, 1:30-1:35, posted by "VICE", accessed November 25, 2013.
- ³ "Interview with Harmony Korine (Part 2/2)." Youtube video, 0:32-0:35, posted by "VICE", accessed November 25, 2013.
- ⁴ J. Jack Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal (Queer Action / Queer Ideas)* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2012), 59.
- ⁵ Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism*, 30.
- ⁶ Interview with Harmony Korine (Part 2/2)." Youtube video, 0:47-1:00.
- ⁷ Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism*, 48.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.
- ⁹ Catharine MacKinnon, "Only Words." in *Feminism and Pornography*, ed. Drucilla Cornell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 104.
- ¹⁰ Shelley Budgeon, "The Contradictions of Successful Femininity: Third-Wave Feminism, Postfeminism and 'New' Femininities", in *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, ed. Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 281; "Kе\$ha - Tik Tok" Youtube video, 3:35, posted by "keshaveVO", accessed November 29, 2013.
- ¹¹ Siegfried Kracauer, Barbara Correll, and Jack Zipes, "The Mass Ornament," *New German Critique* 5 (1975), 67; *Ibid.*, 69.
- ¹² Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988), 522. Butler's concept of gender as strategy alludes the potential punitive consequences of gender performance, which can act as motivation for certain performances.
- ¹³ Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 522.
- ¹⁴ Lea Jacobs, "The Studio Relations Committee's Policies and Procedures," in *The wages of Sin: Censorship and the Fallen Woman Film, 1928-1942* (University of California Press: 1991), 41.
- ¹⁵ Susan Bordo, "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity: A Feminist Reappropriation of Foucault." in *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, ed. Susan R. Bordo and Alison M. Jaggar, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 174. Where femininity and masculinity have historically been defined in mutual exclusion, the 'double-bind' refers to the new pressures placed upon women to simultaneously embody feminine and masculine characteristics.
- ¹⁶ Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979-1985* (New York: Norton, 1986), 51, 63, 74.
- ¹⁷ Jane Gaines, "Feminist Heterosexuality and its Politically Incorrect Pleasures" in *Critical Inquiry* 21, no.2 (1995), 386-387. Gaines is referring to the line of thinking, a legacy of second-wave feminism, which posited that heterosexuality is tainted with the inequality and violence of the patriarchy. As such, for a feminist to desire men would be an incorrect practice of the politics of feminism.
- ¹⁸ Gaines, "Feminist Heterosexuality and its Politically Incorrect Pleasures," 395.
- ¹⁹ Gaines, "Feminist Heterosexuality and its Politically Incorrect Pleasures," 392.
- ²⁰ Murali Balaji. "Owning Black Masculinity: The Intersection of Cultural Commodification and Self-Construction in Rap Music Videos." *Communication, Culture & Critique* 2, no. 1 (March 2009), 21-38; "RIFF RAFF - DOLCE & GABBANA (Official Video)", YouTube video, 3:24, posted by "JodyHighRoller" November 28, 2013
- ²¹ Sherene Razack, "Gendered Racial Violence and Spatialized Justice: The Murder of Pamela George." in *Race, Space and the Law: Unmapping a White Settler Society*, ed. Sherene Razack (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2002), 128-129, 136.
- ²² *Spring Breakers*, dir. Harmony Korine, Muse Productions: 2012.
- ²³ *Sugar & Spice*, dir. by Francine McDougall. New Line Cinema: 2001.
- ²⁴ Elizabeth V. Spelman and Martha Minow. "Outlaw Women: An Essay on Thelma & (and) Louise." *New England Law Review* 26 (1991) 1287.
- ²⁵ "Interview with Harmony Korine (Part 1/2)." 3:15-3:17
- ²⁶ Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism*, 58-59.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 38-39.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.
- ³⁰ Audre Lorde. "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power." in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Random House Digital, Inc., 2012), 56.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 55.

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