

***Gaga x Richardson* as ghosted photo-memoir:
exposure, consent, and uncomfortably creeping boundaries**
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Lady Gaga's star image has been read by scholars as a 'hypermodern gospel of liberation' (Corona, 2010) and 'a symbol for a new kind of feminism' (Halberstam, 2012). Her reputation for progressiveness has been reinforced by LGBT rights, body acceptance and anti-bullying campaigns and a star persona which deliberately play with the tropes of avant gardism, artifice, self-invention, monstrosity and non-normative femininity. This would appear to suggest that Gaga sits apart from wider understandings of gendered celebrity culture, which identify celebrity as a site for policing 'acceptable' femininity (Holmes and Negra, 2011), a femininity that is inextricable from middle class values of respectability and propriety (Tyler and Bennett, 2010; Allen and Mendick, 2013). In her scholarly reception, Gaga has been interpreted through this progressive disruptive lens: understood as an activist and philanthropist (Bennett, 2013), lauded as a resistant new form of femininity (Gray, 2012), and attributed with disrupting celebrity culture and even the very norms of social position (Davisson, 2013).

One might, therefore, hope that Gaga's autobiographical self-representation would similarly celebrate what Halberstam (2012) has described as her contribution to "the withering away of old social models of desire, gender, and sexuality" or at least pay tribute to her existing body of work which does so. However, *Gaga x Richardson*, her photodiary of life on tour between 2010 and 2011, cannot be read in these terms. Instead, it is Gaga's confrontational stance that withers and a social order based upon gendered emotional and physical exposure is reaffirmed.

As the ghostwriter mediates the celebrity subject of written celebrity memoir, the photographer mediates the subject of a visual memoir such as Gaga's. In both cases there is a subject's life unfolding and an interlocutor required to aid the process of documentation. In

both cases this process of documentation requires interpretation. Thus, like a ghost writer, the photographer of photo-memoir witnesses and documents Gaga's story in a process which inevitably shapes and contributes to the story. Here, that ghost is celebrity and fashion photographer/pornographer/alleged sexual predator Terry Richardson. In these overlapping roles and associations, Richardson demonstrates a modus operandi of uncomfortably creeping boundaries, which I will argue reveals something at the heart of celebrity representation; this model of uncomfortably creeping boundaries perfectly suits him to the job of constructing the image of authentic celebrity exposure for an economy which defines 'realness' according to the logic of forced exposure.

The dustjacket claims to have 'captured the intimate, random, behind-the-scenes moments' (*Gaga x Richardson*, 2011) while the Amazon promotional text promises 'Lady Gaga as you've never seen her before,' 'all access, nothing off limits' (amazon.com). This access-all-areas logic presupposes that authenticity lies in being perceived to be as thoroughly revealed as possible.

In the introduction, Gaga claims that working with Richardson means there are 'no limitations' (*Gaga x Richardson*, 2011). However, rather than expanding the possibilities for female celebrity self-representation, this memoir exemplifies the predetermined paradigms of physical and emotional access that limit women's existence in public.

Richardson is presented as Gaga's intimate, as she writes that 'with Terry the relationship extends beyond the photograph' and observes that 'it is unique to Terry and his subjects that there are *no* limitations. At all.' The implication that images are the product of sexual intimacies between photographer and subject beyond what is in the frame is an entrenched (and gendered) trope within wider cultureⁱ and within Richardson's career specifically. The sense of possibility of intimacies just out of shot only serve to add to the appearance of something private being shared with the audience when these images, whatever their intimate context, were shot as part of a project intended for public display. This being an official, endorsed book, one must assume that Gaga had some role in an approval process. The appearance, therefore, of Gaga as unexpectedly 'caught' in an intimate, messy or out of control state, or moment that might otherwise cause shame, is a deliberate play with the familiar celebrity tropes of access, intimacy and consent. Whether staged or not, the representation of Gaga as 'caught' 'in bed' by Richardson is problematic in the context of Richardson's wider reputation.

Gaga borrows certain values, capital, and associations from Richardson's existing reputation. These include edginess, fashion, irony, hipsterism, and sexual controversy. Richardson's career has been accompanied by allegations of sexual coercion of young models

(Sauers, 2010), and many of his works graphically depict his penetration of his female subjects (Wallenberg, 2013). Jamie Peck described the process of modelling for Richardson when aged 19 thus:

He decided to just get naked. Before I could say “whoa, whoa, whoa!” [...] “Why don’t you take some pictures of me?” he asked. Um, sure. So his assistants took pictures of me taking pictures of him. [...] I’m not sure how he maneuvered me over to the couch, but at some point he strongly suggested I touch his terrifying penis (Peck, 2010).

Unlike Richardson’s non-famous subjects, Gaga is never depicted performing a sex act upon or with him. However, Richardson’s more exploitative work is so influential in popular culture that, these images are consumed against a backdrop of his wider, deliberately exploitative practice.

Gaga praises Richardson for precisely this non-observance of boundaries: ‘I’m always, “Oh Terry, get out of here,” and he’s like, “Oh, it’s so beautiful, let me just shoot it”’ (*Gaga x Richardson*, 2011). Gaga can argue that “shame” is an obsolete notion’ (*Gaga x Richardson*, 2011) when regardless of their private, spontaneous, or unflattering appearance, these images were shot with the intention of producing a book for public consumption. Richardson’s reputation lends to this performance of extremity, of embracing a ‘bad girl’ subject position.

Gaga outs herself as imperfect through the kinds of photographs associated with forced over-exposure, but which here form Gaga’s official narrative. Traces of his mode of operation can be seen in images of Gaga exhausted, collapsed, drunk, unable to participate as active posing subject, and mirror allegations against him. However, it is precisely these attributes that make it a successful text when judged against the criteria of the fan’s appetite for access. Whether or not Gaga is a covert participant in staging these scenarios, crucially, it is the image of her violability, not her agency, that her photo-memoir sells.

To conclude, it is true that, as many academics have observed, Gaga has constructed a star persona which has the capacity to trouble acceptable femininity, however these non-normative aspects are not what are being captured and canonised in her photographic memoir, rather the hand (and gaze) of the ‘ghost’ that mediates her is visible with his own agenda regarding the role and representation of women.

Gaga’s photo-memoir depicts a rock and roll lifestyle on and off stage, and borrows associations with fashion, ironic hipster cool and controversy from its ghost. Despite Gaga’s frequent engagement in deliberate performances of self-fabrication, *Gaga x Richardson* proves subject to the logic of conventional gendered celebrity in casting exposure as the locus of authenticity and thus seeking to present the star as as thoroughly revealed as possible.

Whilst, as an official memoir, Gaga’s permissions have been given for the publication of these images, images of her loss of control, regardless of whether they are staged or not,

deploy the paparazzi model of unconsenting photographs to hint at a truer image, in a voyeuristic marketplace where violation is held to be ideal dynamic of celebrity exposure. The fact that allegations of sexual force circulate within Richardson's star image, and can be seen in his images, along with his own admissions that a non-observance of his models' boundaries informs his working practice, therefore all suit him perfectly to the job of constructing the image of authentic celebrity revelation for an economy which defines 'realness' according to the logic of forced exposure.

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Notes

ⁱ See for example, "It Wasn't Rape or Anything' Says David Bailey of his Sexual Conquests' *The Telegraph*, 22 December 2012, retrieved on 7 August 2015, from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/9762530/It-wasnt-rape-or-anything-says-David-Bailey-of-his-sexual-conquests.html>; or *Blow Up*, the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer film inspired by Bailey's life (1966).