



MS. AMERICA



A SUPPLEMENT FROM 
THE NEW INQUIRY

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THE NEW INQUIRY

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Ms. America

By AYESHA A. SIDDIQI

How Lana Del Rey facilitates a postauthentic patriotism



FOR those who came of age during the war on terror, for whom adolescence was announced by 9/11 and for whom failed wars, a massive recession, and a total surveillance apparatus were the paranoid gifts of our adulthood, Lana Del Rey gives us a patriotism we can act out. Hers isn't a love song to America; it's a how-to manual.

As in: how to avoid facing the country's ongoing crimes, against its own and its others, which are only made more severe by its many declarations of

goodness. How to cleave to a history whose most famous actors at best resemble bloated props. How to reconcile the decades

spent trying to convince us a looming threat is targeting something more fundamental to us than the policies dispatched from Washington—something shot in Super 8, not by a drone. Something that threatened Friday night football games and would renew the xenophobia of those that pronounced it *'Merica*. That was the America that existed on TV and in movies, one seemingly only populated by white Christians. For those of us that had never been included in such a vision the story was a hard sell.

Many artists have spent careers trying to prove that America doesn't exist. Or that if it does, it's only steam rising from a rotting pie. I believe Lynch. But I also believe Lana. Because all that glorious Americana takes its cues from somewhere, right? There exist long stretches of open road flanked by desert and mountain and surf. There exist giddy poems about the individual, uniquely American spirit. The style and swagger of *Mad Men* has just as much to do with the devotion to historical accuracy as it does to the lighting department.

But to revel, even for a moment, in that America is to betray the one we live in. Lana Del Rey offers an alternative. She isn't just for those who can't tell whether it's patriotism or Stockholm syndrome; she's for those who don't care about the difference. "Millennials and #Merica"—an MTV study released this month found that while "young people possess a deep connection to America" they are "hyper-aware of its flaws." In fact, "8 in 10 young people agreed that some actions of the American government make it hard to be proud." The word *merica*, the grunt of pride most often associated with rural Republicans, is now a meme. #Merica functions both as a label for the jingoism many of us now see as perverse—while also comfortably situating the tropes and heritage markers we still use. It's a deliberate exaggeration, like Lana, captioning both the worst of our stereotypes and the most endearing.

Lana Del Rey reacquaints with the danger and intrigue that pop culture once promised our borders held. Borders of class, race, gender, geography—their drama instead of their unromantic factuality. In “National Anthem” she casts A\$AP Rocky as Kennedy—as if we don’t currently have a black president. She traces her acrylic nails along the leathery shoulders of old men as if she doesn’t already have a song called “Lolita.” She raises her arms to the sky on the back of a motorcycle speeding down a southwestern highway as if we haven’t already checked the weather and ETA for our destination. She sings in a church as if Forever 21 hasn’t already sold tank tops with crosses on them. And she signs “the body electric” as if Levi’s hasn’t already made an ad with narration from a Walt Whitman poem.

Yes, it’s a classically white nationalism, one as fizzy and consumable as the Pepsi and Mountain Dew that appear in Lana’s songs (never the more globalized Coca-Cola). An American generation starved for an unfraught image of home can be sated by a pop star whose references are too stale to offend sung in an affect too flat to risk moving us. We know to take it as a product, not a symbol. The cowboys of yesteryear charged with “taming the frontier” are now just white men in hats with guns. And Lana will sing about them pretending they’re the most interesting men in the world.

She calls it Hollywood Sadcore; she could’ve called it anything at all. The point is that the rising strings and bluesy guitars collect the detritus of a failed vision of America. Not failed through trial, but failed as a vision. Because it won’t survive inheritance.

For those of us who grew up post everything she offers an easy patriotism that can be worn like a flag that isn’t also a salute. Like an alien excavating all that we once claimed made us American, Lana takes the artifacts that are

too white, too ahistorical to be taken seriously, and removes the insistence upon them. It’s an obfuscation that isn’t facilitated through irony; it’s facilitated through a recent past that foreclosed on the promise of American symbols and reemphasized the primacy of images.

Lana Del Rey’s short film *Tropico* features Marilyn Monroe, John Wayne, and Elvis. Or more accurately, impersonations of all the Marilyn, Wayne, and Elvis impersonators that form succeeding generations’ memory of the characters. Lana Del Rey herself isn’t yet an icon; her magic is less static. She curates putatively mundane Americana as exotic. The careful pastiche that earned her derision upon her debut is the very reason why she resonates today. The “authenticity” Lana’s earliest critics spent months interrogating is a wholly irrelevant question to the young people who gaze approvingly at her flower crowns and gold chains.

Lana Del Rey’s America is corny and flat but makes her neither because she isn’t corrupted by faith in the image she offers. She’s resilient in her non-committal twirling and forthright appropriation of America’s most overexposed iconography. The perpetually mournful singer manages to sound reassuringly anonymous as she sings “Springsteen was the king, don’t you think?” It’s an act beyond irony, an attempt to reinvigorate belief by celebrating cultural exhaustion through affective emptiness.

For those who spent their teen years typing in scare quotes, Lana lets us negotiate American identity with less cognitive dissonance by serving patriotic cliché as kitsch. When she urges, “Be young be dope be proud, like an American,” she may as well be an impressed tourist. Affectless without irony, full of pop-symbolism that refuses to signify, perhaps an American culture drained of all moral qualities or ethical commitments is worth holding onto. A finally palatable Americana: full of no more sentiment than an Instagram grid. **TNI**

Once Upon a Dream

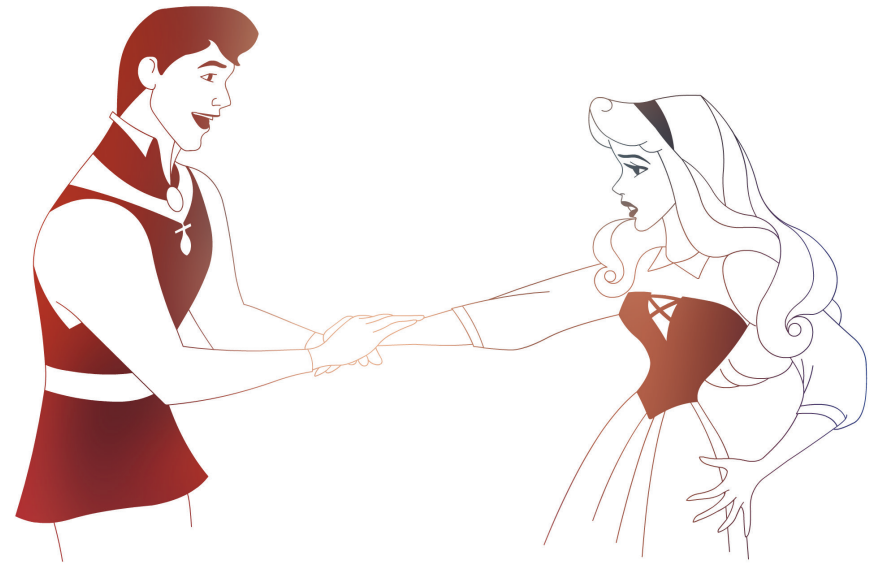
By JOHANNA FATEMAN

Why Angelina Jolie tapped Lana Del Rey to sing “Once Upon a Dream” for Maleficent, Disney’s first rape-revenge film

*I know you, I walked with you once upon a dream
I know you, that look in your eyes is so familiar a gleam
And I know it’s true that visions are seldom all they seem
But if I know you, I know what you’ll do
You’ll love me at once, the way you did once upon a dream*

MALEFICENT is for grown ups. That’s what I thought, watching the trailer for it with my kid last winter before a matinée screening of *Frozen*. It was an unexpected thrill: Angelina Jolie, more gorgeous and goth than ever, with prosthetic cheek bones and leather horns, is a vengeful fairy who confronts a cowering king in the first ten seconds. (“Well, well ...”) Then, Lana Del Rey’s vocal begins.

“I know you, I walked with you once upon a dream,” she sings, a cappella



for a few lines, in a slowed-way-down version of Princess Aurora and Prince Philip’s theme song from the 1959 animated classic *Sleeping Beauty*. Del Rey’s timbre instantly evokes the atmosphere of her oeuvre. More than a hazy, Instagram-y dream world, it’s a signature dissociative state—being sad but feeling beautiful, observing one’s own desolation through the lens of a tingling body high. Fairy tales are set in a mythic realm of feudalism and candelabras, but, of course, they’re written and rewritten to reflect contemporary anxieties and aspirations. Who better than Del Rey—with her thing for tragic archetypes, with her widespread castigation as a fraud and her rise to stardom despite it—to bring *Maleficent*’s excavation of female evil, its themes of cruelty, enchantment and transformation, into the present?

During the trailer’s montage of lush CGI action, *Maleficent* fills a cradle with curls of acid-green vapor, and a spinning wheel’s needle gleams ominously. As eerie and majestic orchestral instrumentation joins Del Rey’s

voice, giant tree creatures explode from the ground for a supernatural battle between the magical land of the Moors and the human world it borders. For most of this, my kid—she was still four then—clutched my forearm and stared at my rapt expression instead of the screen. So I didn't bring her when I went, opening weekend, to see *Maleficent*, Disney's first rape-revenge film.

Written by Linda Woolverton (*Beauty and the Beast*, *The Lion King*), it was conceived as a prequel to, and revision of, *Sleeping Beauty*, in which the glamorous villain's curse upon Princess Aurora at her christening would be put in context. The old Maleficent's evil was capricious and congenital; the new one would have a real motive. "The biggest challenge was how to make a villain into a protagonist," Woolverton told *The Hollywood Reporter*, "How on earth was I going to justify that this woman would curse a baby?" Inspiration struck as she studied the original animated character. Maleficent is supposed to be a fairy, but where are her wings? Woolverton decided that they had been taken.

The act itself, the severing of her powerful wings from her drugged body, isn't shown. Instead, we see Stefan—a human, Maleficent's childhood love who's grown into a weak and power-hungry man—come up with the idea. He can't bear to kill her, but he's got to show proof of her defeat to become the king's successor. Cut to her waking: Maleficent screams with anguish as she rises, and when she walks, she stoops, wincing with pain. "We were very conscious, the writer and I, that it was a metaphor for rape," Jolie said of the scene recently, during a BBC *Women's Hour* interview regarding her appearance at the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict. Though the scene is coded as date rape, with its long walk in the woods and trust-building conversation before the sleeping potion is introduced, it also resembles "sexual violence in conflict," where the rape, maiming, and humiliation of civilians terrorizes a population and produces grotesque trophies, like the wings Stefan keeps in a glass case when he's king.

In the wake of the assault, the Moors darken and Maleficent morphs from benevolent protector to despotic mistress, signaled by a change in her costumes' color schemes—from mossy browns to dominatrix black. Speaking to *Vanity Fair* about the fabrication of her character's horns, Jolie explained, "Actually we went online and found these great leather workers and people who do these more, kind of, elegant fetish clothes." But, of course, the kinks get straightened out. I don't want to give too much away, so suffice to say, *Maleficent*—however slyly campy, misandrist, moving, and much better than traditional Disney fare it is—conforms to a mandatory narrative arc of redemption through love. And it is, after all, a movie for kids. The trailer's dread-inspiring version of "Once Upon a Dream" is saved for the film's credits, after we know that everything turns out okay.

Maleficent became Jolie's highest grossing movie the same week that Del Rey's *Ultraviolence* took the No. 1 spot on the *Billboard* 200. It's the sophomore triumph to disprove the smoke-and-mirrors theory that Del Rey's "Video Games" buzz was pure hype and *Born to Die* marked the official exhaustion of a one-trick persona. In her new songs, the sardonic, aggressive edge to her impressionistic lyrics is sharper, and there's something like anger in her relentless sexy posturing. The press emphasized that Jolie herself—megastar, businesswoman, Special Envoy for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, mother of six, and once-upon-a-time cutter—tapped Del Rey to perform the fairy tale cover, and I'd like to think it's because she gets it, why her cinematic aura of loss and longing belongs with the origin story of Maleficent's "evil." In the trailer, Del Rey's voice—what it sounds like, what cultural anxieties it provokes—sets up the horror of Maleficent's traumatic past. And when the credits roll, it's a haunting postscript to the Disney resolution. Del Rey represents the real possibility of an unhappy ending. **TNI**

Wifey Status

By GABBY BESS

Being a bad bitch on the side might not appeal to fools like you

“I don’t know,” said Rachel. “It feels too ‘suburban mom.’”

After finding it in the bottom of a drawer, taking it out of its black box, and carefully polishing it, Rachel slid her forgotten wedding band down its finger. She looked down, wrinkling her nose. Her other rings were brassy, bohemian, collected over the years from flea markets and vintage shops. A cheap, silver crescent suggested living carelessly from moon to moon; the shiny princess-cut diamond bespoke the opposite: formality, obligation, and planning. She said the ring looked tacky. I laughed, said something about how “suburban mom/wife” should be her summer look—as if a working-class family life was something to play dress-up in. I thought it was glamorous.

But where did the glamour lie? Was it in the act of marriage or in the unnameable alchemical forces that transform a woman into a wife?

On a continuum, tackiness is the embarrassing cousin of glamour. There’s an over-the-topness to the image of Lana Del Rey in monogram Chanel studs, a thick gold rope chain, and a three-finger ring that says BAD



in gold script that somehow never topples into “too much.” This is what I was fascinated with. Rachel, placing an overly shined ring next to her carefully disheveled collection, was the opposite of effortless. In one act, her aesthetic was confused and transformed. She became the wifey and all that it signaled; paying homage to all the possible women she could be at once. Glamour was, perhaps, just a meticulously practiced skill, of teetering on the edge of poor taste but always gracefully landing on beauty.

Similar to a *Real Housewife* or a *Basketball Wife*, to claim wifey status, you need not be a wife by ring or by ceremony. Devotion, it seems, is the key element. On November 26, 2013—long before Kanye West hired a 90-piece orchestra to play Lana Del Rey’s “Young and Beautiful” during his proposal or commissioned her to perform at the pre-wedding party at Versailles—Kim Kardashian demurred in the shadows while Kanye sat down for a radio interview. In the video footage, Kim is wearing a black long-sleeve turtleneck, camouflaging against the studio walls. Save for her newly dyed caramel-blonde

hair falling over her shoulders and framing her face, she is barely seen. Presumably before the camera starts rolling, the radio host asks Kim why she is sitting in on the interview. On camera she answers, “I just came to support him,” as she gestures to Kanye and smiles.

Radio Host: Oh, you’re on wifey duty?

Kim: I’m just wifey for the day.

Kanye: Oh you’re wifey for the life now!

Circa “Video Games,” Lana used terms like “the gangster Nancy Sinatra” and “like Lolita got lost in the hood” to describe herself and her style. She was innocent yet hardened and, in this way, she appropriates hip-hop’s trope of the wifey. She’s the mythic creature who is half good girl and half bad bitch. Under the Tumblr tag #wifeystatus, unglamorous “taco Tuesdays” and pasta salads are the images that are collaged next to Lana Del Rey in a fur coat. There is only one image of her amongst pedestrian selfies and uploads from porn blogs that post women bending over in thongs playing house. One such image bears the following tags: #cooking, #housewife, #wife, #booty. At first glance, Lana seems out of place here, and the disconnect between the aspiration and the reality of the wifey is striking. But in the near endless scrolling, they fold together, lending their context to each other. To quote a quote in the tag, the wifey “gets hurt because of the things you do but still forgives your mistakes, can’t bring herself to hate you, even though everyone says she should, has only good things to say about you, cried because of you countless times but smiles even when you’ve done nothing for her.” If the wifey is not Lana, she is at least a Lana song. She is the sum of Kanye’s illogical equation: one good girl is worth a thousand bitches.

But to attempt the illogical, as Lana does, serves to reveal our own bodily constraints, pushing up against ideals and exposing expectations. Lana Del Rey—like the widely circulated picture of Kim Kardashian pushing baby

North’s stroller with silver-rimmed eyes, a full-volume blowout, and full-volume cleavage—is a *Yeezus* lyric personified.

For Lana Del Rey, love and obsession is the ultimate expression. Since releasing “Video Games” in 2011, wholesale devotion has been her stock in trade: *It’s you, it’s you, it’s all for you*. “Growing up I was always prone to obsession, partly because of the way I am, but partly because I felt lonely for such a long time,” she told the *National* in 2012. “So when I found someone or something that I liked, I felt hopelessly drawn to it.” In the trappings of another, she found her freedom. She found a way to survive. On the cover of *Ultraviolence*, she stands in front of an old car on a tree-lined street, the image black, white, and moody as if snipped from a Douglas Sirk film. It reminds us of two things: that violence is inseparable from domesticity, and that domesticity is glamorous. The lyric “get a little bit suburban and go crazy” has a much different meaning for a wifey than for a teen, and Lana’s near steely look doesn’t let us forget that, either.

Then again, it’s only a little bit. For the wild, directionless, and adamantly free—as Lana proclaimed herself in “Ride”—a nice married life can be something to aspire to, an *idée fixe*. Just as something out of your reach is all you want to go after. While feminism has been fighting against the confines of the mother and the wife, Lana revels in it. Through wifedom she finds her own resistance and mechanisms for survival under patriarchy. She passes as the devoted wife figure, doing anything for love, but in the same breath she lets us know what she’s really after: money, power, and glory. And she’ll take it from you. It’s a sleight of hand trick, a seduction that’s actually a power grab.

In Lana Del Rey’s three-ringed hands, references to symbols of suburbia and Americana become wistful and lust-worthy. Lana Del Rey’s guns, bibles, American flags, Chevy Malibus, and domestic life are lifted from the context of the most obvious country song and given a rich texture that drips opulence.

This is the luxury of leaving, of only *playing* house. Lana Del Rey's glamour lies in her ability to look onto the suburban, become a temporary native of it, and then drive away, off to the next sunset.



Lana's *mélange* of banality, glamour, and reverence for low-class aesthetics characterizes the striving girl that, above all, prioritizes the present over the future. Those who survive in this way are mutable. Previously, Lana Del Rey has been Elizabeth Woolridge Grant, Lizzy Grant, May Jailer—but like the boyfriends and sugar daddies along the way, she's left all those girls behind in favor of an incarnation that has allowed her to fill out the shape of stardom. In an interview with *Vogue* U.K. she explains, "I wanted a name I could shape the music toward. I was going to Miami quite a lot at the time, speaking a lot of Spanish with my friends from Cuba—Lana Del Rey reminded us of the glamour of the seaside. It sounded gorgeous coming off the tip of the tongue." From the perspective of self-alteration by any means, I can understand why a suburban life can be romanticized and al-

most necessary. Any chance to leave behind a former identity is a chance to be taken—whether it's in the form of a new stage name or a new surname. Both could lead to a better life.

We've witnessed this before. When Vickie Lynn Hogan married her first husband Donald R. Hart, she underwent her first transformation to become Nikki Hart. By the time she made her first *Playboy* cover appearance in 1992 she was *Anna Nicole Smith*. Like Vickie Lynn Hogan, and their foremother Norma Jeane Baker, Lana was born with transformation in her veins. Their men, money, and self-made status are built on lower-class beginnings. Lana's self-imposed exile of living in New Jersey trailer parks, falling in with biker gangs and cults, purposefully add to her mythology. These origin stories—Marilyn's foster care childhood and Anna Nicole's strip-club genesis—fold into the idea of what signifies an aspirational life.

On Tumblr, an image set lays out a scene from the *Anna Nicole Show*:

Woman: I think you're great! But I think you're being exploited.
Anna: Oh, yeah. Well, I don't mind... As long as I get paid for it.

It was as much as Vickie Lynn could ask for. She used every ounce of feminine charm to take what she could from men, becoming the seductress, the wifey, and then the widow. Now she's an icon to be venerated and reblogged by teen girls for whom the details of Anna Nicole's life are hazy. In pictures, Anna Nicole Smith lives frozen in the black-and-white images of her Guess-campaign youth. Even the moments after her star faded and she herself became unhinged are still celebrated with thousands of notes on Tumblr, captioned with "She is my hero." Through the Trimspa ads, weight gain, and subsequent nervous breakdown, she hung on to an undeniable allure. Time and distance wash out and over all things, until they are pale enough to reblog. As Lana Del Rey sings in "Old Money," "*My mother's glamour lives on and on.*" **TNI**

Full-Time Daughter

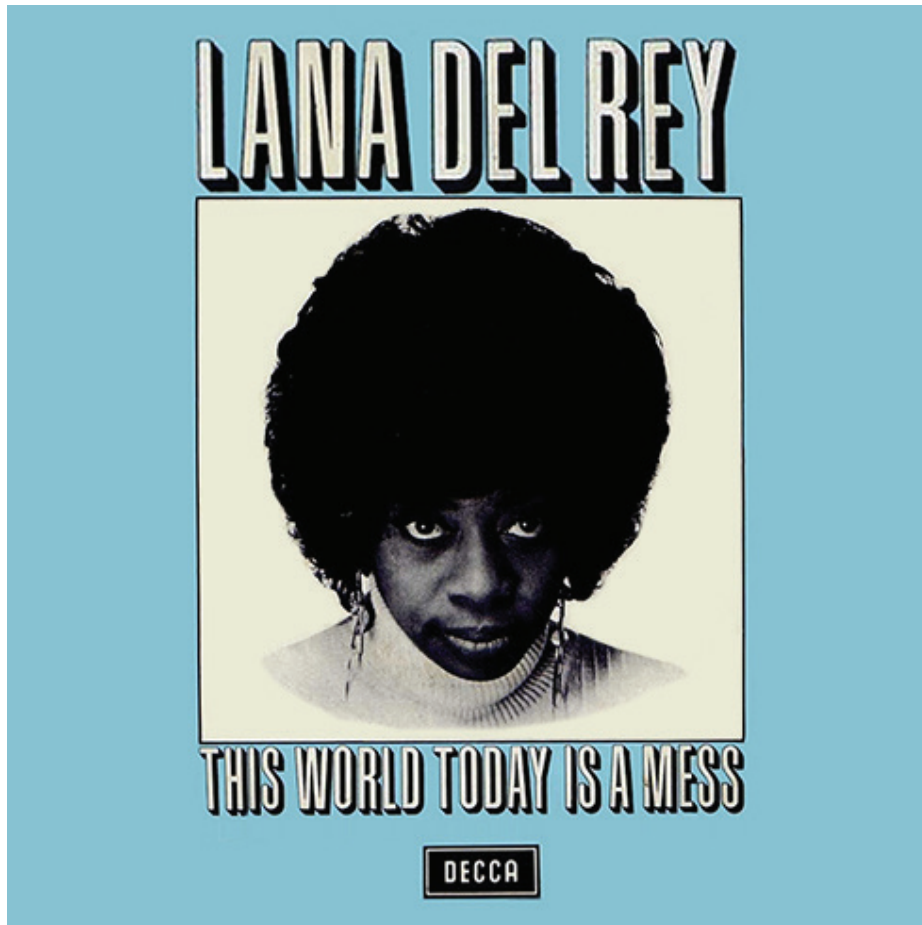
By HANNAH BLACK

Lana Del Rey's Americana shows its demand for a feminine desire that knows how to long for death

LANA Del Rey uses the imagery of American nationalism to construct the kind of iconic girlhood that white America goes crazy for. But her relation to this history feels complicated. She aims to be “classic,” an aesthetic throwback to a bygone time when music was music and men were men and so on. But something is wrong with the picture. Ostensibly, she gives white America what it wants—an image of itself as lethal but beautiful, guilty but forgiven, an image of violence as indistinguishable from romance. If a straight white man *hits* you, it means he wants to kiss you—get it? The albums sell, but it’s not enough; critics berate her for not being convincing. But maybe it’s not Del Rey’s fault that this gloomwashing of whiteness (“Okay, we suck, but look how much we hate ourselves!”) doesn’t work. Maybe the material can no longer be made convincing.

Del Rey’s whiteness is unstable because it seems somehow faintly disturbed by the knowledge of its formation. Why else the death wish? Why





else do her lips circulate independently of her face? Her lips are so plump and pleasingly symmetrical that when she first became famous a lot of people thought they were fake. The mouth became a phenomenon in its own right, signifying some kind of excess that couldn't be assimilated. There was an exposé of her alleged "lip-enhancement surgery" and a Tumblr where someone Photoshopped the mouth onto images of celebrities. With a couple of exceptions, most of the famous faces enhanced with Lana lips on this blog belong

to white people. Evidently the joke doesn't work so well when the lips are transposed onto black people's faces. When thick lips belong to black people, they are part of the apparatus of racial and racist identification. But on a white girl, big lips are sexy and suspicious. *They must be fake meaning they look fake* might be interchangeable with *they better be fake*. In the context of American whiteness's paranoid relation to what it perceives as the blood taint of blackness (which is also the taint of white guilt), false full lips might be deeply preferable to a real full mouth, even if they are superficially derided.

Del Rey has said she wanted the new album *Ultraviolence* to have "beautiful jazz undertones." The smokiness of her voice is vaguely jazzy in a white way, a neutered and bleached jazz—the voice of a white girl draping herself in an acceptable, decorative blackness. It's not the intense, yearning rasp of Holliday or Fitzgerald or Simone. Where blackness is deployed as an undertone, an underneath, the surface is wipe-clean and white. This structure deflects the unbearable history of American capitalism, turning it into mere texture. In "Dark Paradise" (2012), Del Rey "lives on the dark side of the American dream," but it's okay because she "can be your china doll." From the outside, white womanhood looks like a place scrubbed clean of history where the violence of white men can be maintained, at least symbolically, as enjoyment. This is absolutely not meant to criticize or comment on actually existing white women, or even the actually existing Lana Del Rey, but only to register what is negated or held at bay in the image of white womanhood, from the perspective of blackness.

In the video for "Ride" (2012), she is on the road with some bikers, all big white guys. She wilts on the back of a bike, detached and dead-eyed, in a novelty T-shirt. In the opening monologue, she tell us, "I believe in the country America used to be." (To quote Hennessy Youngman: "Which good old days do you mean? The good old days when people owned slaves? Or

maybe it was the good old days where n—s were free, but they couldn't vote?") Her trembling tininess is a compliment to the men's bigness. "You can be my full-time daddy," she croons. White heterosexuality is like a photographic perspective trick in which the man stands very close to the camera and the woman stands far enough away that a radically diminished version of her seems to stand on his palm.

As ever, she is awkward and weirdly unconvincing on camera. Her awkwardness is so intense that it overwhelms her beauty, even though beauty usually reads as competence. In a sex scene, she leans on a pinball machine, doll-like and detached, as a guy fucks her from behind. It's hard to tell if it's meant to be consensual or not. She reminds me of the gawky teenagers in porn, the ones advertised as "amateurs," whose erotic charge is exactly in their incompetence. They too are overwhelmingly white, whether pretty or ugly, fat or thin. Daddies can be dangerously aroused by signs of sexuality, signs that are almost interchangeable with those considered marks of blackness—a full mouth, emphatic hips, a sexual appetite—but they are basically safe if you are able to reassure them that you are a "china doll," a white full-time daughter.

Ultraviolence, building on the spirit of "Ride," extends out from this amateur affect, a whole album's worth of the fantasy of the violence of desire: "I can hear sirens, sirens / He hit me and it felt like a kiss / I can hear violins, violins / Give me all of that ultraviolence." This deeply ambivalent image of masculine desire—an eternal hard-on of the spotless mind—requires a feminine desire that knows how to long for death, and therefore how to really love white masculinity. There may well be suicidal femmes in non-white culture, but the pop-culture Beautiful Girl Who Longs For Death is paradigmatically white. She could take her pick of the spoils of white patriarchy, but instead she wants to lie down and die. In this alone, perhaps, she is very sympathetic.

She wants to die, but until then, she guards her man jealously. Who

from? In the song "Black Beauty," the protagonist of the song is angry with her blue-eyed boyfriend for fucking around with "Spanish women" who will lead him to ruin, instead of him leading her to ruin, which is also what she is offering him: ruin. But her ruin is white. Deploying the aesthetic of white America tends, necessarily, at best, toward suicidal self-loathing. To achieve anything of note with this repulsive material, you have to take the only reasonable course and wish yourself dead.

Unlike Ciara, whose own song "Ride" is an open celebration of her own sexual skill, when Lana "just rides" she coyly flips the interpretative work onto us. Of course her "Ride" works only because the trouble she's telling us she's trying not to get into sounds like sex. But as a dedicated white girl, Lana can only arrive at this through a tortured and euphemistic tale of driving through the night to throw herself at Daddy, who might send her home. She is frozen in the long white night of sex as ambivalence. At moments the girl in the song turns "I just ride" into the bittersweet simultaneous spell of sex and escape that pop excels in. She is trying to cleanse herself in sex from the spell of sex. But "Ride" is full of fathers, and she can't drive anywhere that isn't daddy.

Wherever it goes, whiteness abolishes ancestors. It's easy to understand this refusal to be haunted by the dead shipped as commodities, starved, infected, worked to death, and so on. In the absence of its dead, white patriarchy has to do extra work—the phallic father becomes an erotic mirage, and Lana Del Rey tries to love it. In "Old Money" on *Ultraviolence*, she celebrates the paternal line where the money came from: "My father's love was always strong," she sings. But she can't help adding, "Yet still inside I felt alone, for reasons unknown to me." Maybe she doesn't know the reason, but her work seems troubled by an inkling of it. How convenient that the white fathers, unable to bear the tragic structure of desire that Del Rey constructs in their image, accuse her of faking it. **TNI**

Run, Boy, Run

By NINA POWER

“Money, Power, Glory” says I can fuck (with) you, but I will also destroy the whole world that makes “you” possible

WE WANT IT IN CASH, RETROACTIVE AND IMMEDIATELY, AND WE WANT ALL OF IT. This demand, made in a flyer by the New York Wages for Housework Campaign, finds a curious echo in Lana Del Rey’s recent “Money, Power, Glory,” despite her protestation that she finds feminism “boring.” Here she too demands “money, power, glory,” swearing that she’ll alternately take “you” and “them” for “all that they got.” You motherfuckers have everything, and you did nothing to get it but steal from the people who did all the work but got nothing in return. This track, ostensibly about a hypocritical religious figure, could just as easily be read as a feminist or reparations revenge anthem.

Typically, revenge anthems—like love songs—are too limited. Why



Crowds Cheer Outbreak

punish one cheating bastard when you can eviscerate the whole lot at once? Why demand one person love you when you could destroy the couple form as such and never have to worry about it again? Having already worked her way through the recognition and critique of emotional labor in “Video Games,” where Del Rey professes the creepiest possible version of devotion in order to pass through it to something much weirder: “It’s you, it’s you, it’s all for you / Everything I do / I tell you all the time.” I tell you all the time because emotional labor is its repetition. Where Britney’s “I was born to make you happy” captures an older existential image of love as destiny (albeit no less creepily than Del Rey), “Video Games” makes it clear that love is a repeated performance, one that is often miserable.

When emotional labor reaches its breaking point, not in irony or over-performance but in a realization of its revolutionary potential, everything love represents hypothetically becomes a real demand. It is the transition from “playing video games” to demanding that the entire structure that separates virtuality from reality be dismantled. “Money, Power, Glory” is the recognition that the material inequalities of the world play out in such a way that their dismantling must in the first place be their recapture—and that

will include “dope and diamonds,” inebriation, and exploitation. Contra Audre Lorde’s argument that “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house”—or, indeed, the singer Lorde’s claim that “that kind of luxe isn’t for us”—Del Rey understands that the master’s house and the master’s tools are all there is, and if they enjoy it so fucking much, despite doing nothing to get it, then a transitional demand for as much excessive pleasure as possible is only fair in its unfairness.

Alternating between demanding everything from “you” and everything from “them,” Del Rey goes for both agents and structures, and the fantasy of expropriating the expropriators becomes less of a dream than a real, living threat: “Alleluia, I wanna take you for all that you got / Alleluia, I’m gonna take them for all that they got.” The slide between “you” and “they” sees theft as both personal and systemic: I can fuck (with) you, but I will also destroy the whole world that makes “you” possible.

Heaven is no longer a place on earth with you, as it becomes clear that the material world is all there is. Everything that you have ill-gotten is going to be taken from you—at gunpoint if necessary—as the full working out of Del Rey’s American fantasy project surely implies. **TNI**

Wound Down Inside

By ROBIN JAMES

Ultraviolence's suffocated soars frustrate critics' attempts to feel good about Lana feeling bad

ULTRAVIOLENCE talks about some ugly feelings, but its music is really pretty—one of the tracks is titled “Pretty When You Cry,” after all. Alexis Petridis, writing in the *Guardian*, describes the album as “a beautiful, gauzy shimmer of tremolo guitars and reverb-drenched drums, with a lot of attention clearly paid to subtle details.” Its music is so calm and peaceful that many reviewers find it *boring*: Petridis



**TRAPPED BY FLAMES,
53 PERISH ON LAKE**

calls it “relentless and monotonous,” and Laura Snapes uses more euphemistic terms—“stately” and “languid”—to describe the album’s lack of musical tension, intensification, or variation. Nearly every review I read remarked on the album’s “unwavering” (Snapes) pace: 11 songs, all at about the same staid tempo, with little in the way of peak, break, or drop. Del Rey may talk about fucking her way to the top (on “Fucked My Way Up to the Top”), but the music sure doesn’t seem to climax or climb.



The album’s climaxes aren’t absent, just muted—infra-ed rather than ultra-ed. For example, “Cruel World” contains two extremely diluted soars. Popularized by EDM-influenced pop, the soar is a compositional technique for generating sonic tension and energy. Most EDM soars build rhythmic intensity up to the limits of human hearing by repeating a percussion sound at increasingly fast intervals that eventually pass the point at which we can

distinguish individual beats. The buildup is usually followed by a measure of either silence or some sort of scream or siren, which culminates in a flourish or “hit” on the downbeat of the next measure. Maxing it out beyond the point of diminishing returns (into the “ultra-” sonic, you might say), soars crash a song so that its phoenix-like rise sounds all the more spectacular.

“Cruel World” suffocates its soars. The first part of the soar begins at the pre-chorus when a drum comes in on the offbeats (“Got your Bible...”). Adding rhythmic ornaments in the drum part till there’s a clearly audible drum hit on each beat, the intensity of rhythmic events builds over the pre-chorus, peaking at the end and spilling over into the chorus proper with an ever-so-gentle and reserved pair of sixteenth notes on the pickup and downbeat of each of the last two beats in the phrase (and an extra eighth note on the “and” of four). The chorus continues to build, peaking on the line “you’re fucking crazy.” Pulsating guitar reverb emphasizes this “crazy,” making it the most musically unstable part of the song. This reverb echoes EDM pop’s use of treble synths to build rhythmic and timbral intensity. Usually these synth lines build up over a measure or two to give added *oomph* to a downbeat. This guitar reverb, however, comes in on a downbeat and unfolds over the rest of the measure, spinning out rather than building up.

Undercutting the sonic impact of a downbeat is not a new thing. In 19th century European “classical” music, composers softened a song’s harmonic resolution by placing the cadence on an off-beat rather than a downbeat. This technique was called, infamously, a “feminine ending”—“feminine” because it’s a weaker cadence than a conventional, on-the-downbeat one. Might Del Rey be “feminizing” the soar by decelerating it, pulling it back rather than pushing it harder?

Maybe. Though “Ultraviolence” sounds like just another entry in the recent-ish spate of flat, anticlimactic pop songs, it doesn’t share their sonic

post-maximalism. This post-maximalism pushes brostep- and EDM-style sonic maximalism even harder, so that maximalism itself shifts registers, sublimating into something else. Alex Niven argues that this sublimation isn't limited to the sonic:

I think that what we are seeing now is something like the sublimation of the Soar. Piling layers of artificial sonic squall on top of a track began as a way of achieving commercial hyperbole, a classic case of steroid-injection to allow a chorus-hook to soar above its airwave rivals. Of course, industry pop is still motivated by this instinct, but now The Soar also seems to be giving expression to *more genuinely populist sentiments*. [emphasis mine]

The soar, a sonic metaphor for an individual rising above competitors, is sublimated into populism. Or, the soar's implicit *I* is transformed into *we*. In this short passage, Niven implies that this shift in perspective from *I* to *we* is the effect of pushing already maxed-out soars even further into the red. *That's* the sublimation: sound becomes perspective.

Miley Cyrus's "We Can't Stop" is a great illustration of this sublimation. Its main soar begins when the percussion drops out and Miley noodles around on some "yea-eh-ay-ae"hs. Instead of dramatically soaring up to or pausing in anticipation of the downbeat of the chorus, Miley's vocals *decrease* in rhythmic intensity as the song gently swells into the "aaaaand" of the chorus's first line. This soar is more molehill than mountain. Even though every individual in the song is partying out of bounds, from the macro-scale perspective of the *we*, no individual case seems to be particularly transgressive. That's why the first line—"It's our party we can do what we wanna (no drama)" isn't contradictory, and a song about wild gaga partying is really low-key (like "Ke\$ha on Benadryl"). The muted soar is the effect of the shift in narrative perspective from *I* to *we*.

Though *Ultraviolence* shares "We Can't Stop's" relaxed, anticlimactic

music and its dedication to individual excess, Del Rey still speaks as an *I*, not a *we*. Everything is decidedly close up and singular: what I want, what you did (to me). Her songs don't treat her excesses as something other people can or want to identify with—they're not the hard-partying fun of Miley or Ke\$ha, or Gaga's supposedly artistic and activist boundary-pushing, or evidence of our matured perspective, as in Lorde. Rather, Del Rey's songs depict her excesses as singular and individuating. As Mark Richardson says in Pitchfork, "she's an utterly distinctive figure in popular music—not part of a scene, with no serious imitators—and befitting someone completely off on her own, she's lonely." Rather than sublimating the soar (or its correlate, "gaga feminism"), Del Rey internalizes it, using its energy to subject herself to the strictest of scrutiny. From this perspective, for example, "Brooklyn Baby" is a merciless self-parody. The music's flatness expresses Del Rey's siphoning of pop's energy for her own self-vivisection. *Ultraviolence* undercuts itself both musically and narratively.

Perhaps we feel like Del Rey is a bad girl because she *perverts* the soar instead of sublimating it. Petridis's review suggests as much:

But she's definitely to blame for its big failing, which isn't so much that its view of the world is weird and unpleasant—plenty of rock and pop music can claim that distinction—but that it's relentless and monotonous, too: you don't have to be a radical feminist to feel wearied after a full hour in the company of *Ultraviolence's* collection of alternately feeble and awful women. The ... problem with *Ultraviolence* remains the same: Lana Del Rey keeps repeating herself.

For Petridis, what's objectionable about the album isn't, say, its glorification of domestic violence, but its failure to make something new and exciting out of all that pain and damage. Del Rey make critics uncomfortable because her *music* doesn't sublimate their characters' personal damage into something these critics can feel good about, either aesthetically or politically. **TNI**

The Fake as More

By SARAH NICOLE PRICKETT

*Lana's look is not to
make it look easy*

IN 2011, Lana Del Rey showed up to the chillwave party with flowers in her hair and a video she'd made herself. She was awkward, a pity guest tugging at the hem of her hand-me-down dress. She didn't know how to do eyeliner. The video—for “Video Games”—looked something like a camcorder montage played at an early funeral, and something like a collection of messages left on Skype for a long-distant lover, and then like something less altogether, a naive and half-stoned distraction from full-time basement life. Singer and video both were accused of the ultimate high school don'ts: “being fake” and “trying” (the new “selling out”). In response, Lana shrugged



and said that really, she should've tried harder. “Had I known so many people were going to watch [it],” she told *The Daily Star* in 2012, “I'd have put some more effort into it. I would have got my hair and makeup done and tried not to be so pouty, seeing as everyone talks about my face all the time.”

That year in fashion, the yen for pastels reached a zenith, and few stars went paler than Lana. I remember trying the trend, sort of—I'd bleached my hair to death in 2010, then infused it with lavender, rose—but when it came to clothes that matched, I felt ridiculous. I balked at what I then called “the bad girl gone *Lula*” look, which a “hazily pastiched” Del Rey embodied

in and around her “Video Games” fame. I didn’t care if her lips were fake; I cared that the cigarette between them went unsmoked. (As a failed evangelical Christian, I have never understood why anyone would *pretend* to have sin.) Her songs I liked, but the outfits bored me: stiff, prim, and so often *pastel*, a hue synonymous with sweetness and artificiality. Pastels, and the Pleasantville styles they come in, also connote (to me) an anodyne, ladylike feminism that prizes smartness and self-righteousness at the expense of not only sex appeal but those who use it to win, as if brains are any less a thing of luck and cultivation than bodies, or as if the average intellect is any less artificial than (allegedly) Lana’s lips or Lana’s nose.

I find it funny-sad-true that in trying to look “smart,” she basically just dressed “non-slutty”: Google-image “Lana Del Rey 2011” and “Lana Del Rey 2012,” and you’ll get gowns to the floor, shirts buttoned all the way up, fuzzy sweaters, and cinch-waisted frocks. She dyed her Lizzy Grant-era, Britney-blond hair a respectable, honeyed shade of brown. She lowered her voice, because “people didn’t take [her] seriously with a high one,” but then they didn’t trust her femininity with a low one. So she sang “Blue Velvet” but wore strawberry pink and mint green, peach and lemon and violet. And white—never white like a bride, but white like the girl who wears white to someone else’s wedding.

Why was Lana never believable as a Kennedy, whether she was playing Jackie or dressing like Carolyn Bessette? Because she was in on the joke. At 14, she was sent to Kent School, the 19th most expensive private high school in America; famous graduates include composers, actors, opera singers, Meryl Streep’s daughter, and a “yachting cinematographer and lecturer.” When she left to go sing about it (see: the painfully pre-fame “Boarding School,” 2009) she knew exactly what she was running away from; when she sang about “doing crack and drinking Pepsi,” she

was announcing herself as the anti-Diet Cokehead. The kind of girl she grew up against is classy, symmetrical, “well off” (not “rich”), and thin; her beauty labor is 90 percent hidden, an alembic of genes and expense. She gets \$900 blonde highlights, \$140 blowouts, and \$18 juices, goes in for daily personalized workouts and twice-weekly facials, and spends an hour a day taking vitamins, only to smile apologetically and say, “I swear, it’s just lip gloss and Touche Éclat.” Meanwhile, Lana came out looking like she spent more time on her face than in bed.

Accordingly, *Born to Die* (2012) took a *Blue Velvet*-ier direction. But for the album’s Pepsi-colored cover shoot, and for most of that year’s concerts, acceptances, and appearances, Lana put on a Sunday look she couldn’t altogether pull off. Pale prep revivalism made Taylor Swift look like a debutante, and Lana Del Rey like a runaway in shoplifted trends. Both Taylor and Lana are former tomboys with loaded dads and blue-collar origin stories. But Lana, dressed like a sweetheart, was nobody’s.

Not until the video for “Ride,” with its naive Amer-arcana and manic declaration of independence, did my impression make sense of the rest. Lana’s whiteness had never been innocent, or wasn’t now; her look was suddenly so conscious, so caricaturing of its influences that I could have sworn she was appropriating whiteness. The dresses had never been “daddy’s girl,” but “daddy’s *little* girl.” I was wrong about the cigarettes, too. *Fader’s* cover story has her “chain-smoking Parliaments,” a brand nobody buys to look cool, and her speaking voice is first-hand proof. Sober for a decade, she still sings about whiskey and “white lines.” She has never been spotted near a gym. Nor has she ever “opened up” about her weight, in regard to which she’s one of the less bothered pop stars alive. As seen in *Tropico*, Lana’s body is ripe, trembling, and defiantly unmaintained, a body as far out of time as her voice.

Because she seems not to take care of herself (that unfairest of modern mandates), Lana's beauty is both laborious and ad hoc. It's fake nails, false eyelashes, and lashings of powder and kohl. Her hair, which has always looked dyed from a box, is now the nightshade hue of *Secret* nylons. Just as her reply to "trying too hard" on "Video Games" was to try a lot harder—her colors more and more saturated over the course of *Born to Die*—so too, now that she's famous enough to get her makeup done for a bodega trip, does she refuse the kind of Beyoncé-level mask that looks (but isn't) effortless, or even good, up close (see: her *Fader* cover shoot, in which the cameras get hi-def and the makeup stays lo-def). The message is clear: Stay your distance. Or maybe: I can't bear my skin, but also: Who the fuck are you to think you're entitled to the "real" me? She looks supreal. She looks... exhausting.

"I wish I was dead already," she says, but "I wish I was dead" was already sung on "Dark Paradise," and we (the media) didn't freak out two years ago. We either did not hear or did not take seriously the lyric. Failed to believe she had written it, assumed she herself did not believe it, we are trained to think of the pop star's persona as safely removed from the person, the same way we recast as "fantasy" what we're afraid to say we really, really want. I too think this of most personas, but not of Lana's. I think, What if Lana did fuck her way to the top? What if she was hit? What if she liked it? What if her pussy tastes exactly like cola? And if all she wants is dope and diamonds, so what? What if the most radical—fuck it, feminist—thing you can do is believe everything a girl says about her life, whether or not you like it?

Two years ago, the prevailing (male) establishment didn't like it one bit. Reviews had Lana looking not all that dark, only noir: a vamp, a tramp, the new *Blue Angel*, accused of luring lonesome crowds of indie boys from their shitty lo-fi principles. The *New York Times's* Jon Caramanica called

her a poser, a meme, and a has-been, suggesting she could only try again by "wash[ing] off that face paint" and "muss[ing] up that hair." In other words, Lana Del Rey should do a better job of *passing*—of being a "natural woman."

Instead, Lana has replaced Anna Nicole Smith as the reigning "faux queen," a former blue-jean baby whose rejection of upwardly mobile feminism and/or high-class femininity in favor of fatalistic glamour and female-to-female drag makes her a gender deserter to some, but a godsend to most, because at least she never makes it look easy. And what a relief. When straight girls and women are meant to choose between chic, studied effortlessness (creative upper class/Manhattan) and tweely aestheticized failure (creative underclass/Brooklyn), Lana's truth is way, way in between: Being a man-loving woman is not an identity; it's a job. It's a glamorous job, but the hours are long and there's often no future and it sucks, it scars, and it hardens, and it's hard. (Here I admit that it's tempting to read "man" unliterally, as something big and impossible to get out from—drugs, fame, money, a whole damn country. In melodramatic pop songs, almost any relation is easier read as a relationship.)

Against the glistening "unlistenable" void of *Ultraviolence*, its clamor and glitz and classless, naked aspiration (shared also by the best songs on *Born to Die*), Lana's old pastels seem cold in a newish light. Everything Ambien blue, Paxil pink, Oxycodone mint. Celexa peach, Klonopin yellow, Wellbutrin violet—the "violet pills" she sings of in a bonus track, maybe... but she's off it all now. Gone are the prescriptive hits. Gone the flowers. Everything fades to bruise, until: the cover of *Ultraviolence* is her in black and white with a white car and a white simple V-neck over a white, visible bra, as if to say, "Is this real enough for you?" It's strange. No one has ever looked less comfortable in a T-shirt. For a week I couldn't figure it out, and then I thought: She looks like a patient escaping. **TNI**

Die 4 U

By STACEY MAY FOWLES

Lana Del Rey's sound is nostalgia for an old lie



“Darling, you can’t let everything seem so dark blue.
Oh, what can I do?”

—“*Black Beauty*,” Lana Del Rey

THE summer I was 16 and cripplingly awkward, my father’s job moved our family from Toronto to the Southern U.S. After spending my whole young life in Canada, I started my first day of 10th grade at George Walton High School in East Cobb County, Georgia, and the ensuing culture shock was about as harrowing as you can imagine for an already uneasy teenage girl.

The high school of nearly 2,700 students was primarily white and Baptist, complete with daily prayer around the flagpole, pancake breakfasts for Jesus, and a *Friday Night Lights*-style football obsession. On game days, fully suited football players brought roses to their assigned cheerleaders, while the girls, clad in their freshly pressed red-white-and-blue uniforms, provided players with baked goods and breakfast sandwiches from Chik-fil-A. The town was famed for a 56-foot-tall steel-sided chicken statue, and for being an early adopter of *EVOLUTION IS JUST A THEORY* stickers for its science textbooks. In one memorable round of bullying, a few other students decided I was a weirdo and a freak and threw food at me in the cafeteria while gleefully chanting insults.

The only way to suffer through 18 months in the slo-mo sport-movie montage of Southern teen culture was to fetishize Americana—protests in Marietta Square and peach pies cooling on windowsills, buttery Waffle House grits and chain-smoked Marlboro Reds with bottomless diner coffee, and the appealing façade of Southern hospitality. It was a bright-side approach to darkness, a juvenile fascination with the great American road trip, with drug-fueled binges for the sake of poetry and art, with Hollywood

glamour and revolution and the blinking lights of Vegas—a false frontier mentality that made America seem majestic rather than menacing. Deluding myself into survival, I found something to love where there was nothing. And decades later, I’ve found that Lana Del Rey that sounds exactly like that glorious pretense. Her songs, are in essence, nostalgia for an old lie.

The culture makes a dictum of authenticity and a near tyranny of the

“genuine,” so that anyone who capitalizes on untruths is sinning against the virtue of transparency. We so often destroy people who are truly themselves in all their brokenness, yet loathe those, like Lana, who can tell a whole lie (or at least make many music critics think she’s “fake”). But artifice is not only armor, and performance is not the same as faking it. It’s a salve against day-to-day cruelty to rewrite reality, to build pretty, fictional worlds to live



inside for a time, because the alternative is to writhe in agony without them.

Lana Del Rey's music is a tiny harbor of safety, not unlike the Americana of my teen imagination. She is hated not because she's faking it, but because she's faking it in an unsanctioned way, and even worse, is unrepentant about it. "My pussy taste like Pepsi-Cola, my eyes are wide like cherry pies. I got a taste for men who're older," she croons in semi-ridiculousness. "I've got feathers in my hair. I get down to beat poetry, and my jazz collection's rare," she brags without the necessary irony. She's playfully wrestling with bikers in the desert, safely submitting to her old man, glorifying things that never were and will never be. In essence, she's a grown woman living inside that timeless teenage daydream of what it means to be an adult—yearning for agency but still wanting to be someone's baby, too terrified to grow up but hating the powerlessness of youth.

While the media harps about the lies this self-styled daddy's girl is spinning, those who enjoy her find her tall tales a balm. Some say she's bored or boring (with "Lana Del Nyquil" being my favorite nickname thus far,) but hers is a comforting fantasy in its repetitive romantic tedium, an all-consuming, unsustainable love on an endless loop. Del Rey's *Ultraviolence* is brutal, sexy, and submissive, but she's managed to make herself the subject of the narrative not the object, even if the subject is a passive one. This is not the (male) fantasy of Aguilera's Dirty-girl chaps, or Spears being a Slave 4 U with a python hanging from her all-American neck. It's also not the hyper-caricature of over styled pop-culture pleather BDSM, though it's just as performative.

This is not to say that Lana Del Rey doesn't suffer, but that when she does it's quick. Then she curls her hair, smokes a Parliament, and gets a little bit of bourbon in her. (I get a little bourbon in me, and I either need to have a cry or go to bed. Listening to Lana Del Rey is like doing both.) When, in an

Ultraviolence lyric, she tells us that his "Bonnie on the side" makes her a "sad, sad girl," we don't really believe it. Her heart seems unbreakable, and there is no better "fake" daydream than the invincible heart.

In another lyric, Del Rey really misses you but is ultimately glad you're gone—her sadness nothing more than a pretty song that can be skipped on the album. She is like a chameleon that got stuck on one comfortable color and decided to stay there while she made herself a martini. Sometimes she gets so lazy, lounging her linens, that she does nothing more than make Didion-style lists to combat life's ugliness: "blue hydrangea, cold cash divine, cashmere, cologne and white sunshine, red racing cars, Sunset and Vine..."

As I grow older—age being the thing that the Del Rey persona fears the most—the future has become increasingly dictated by diminishing choices, and has increased the value of my (and Lana's) long-fading fantasies of the wide-open road. All the hyper-romantic "die for you" sentiments of *Ultraviolence* are as impossible to sustain as they are beautiful, like love notes, folded and stored in shoeboxes in an adult bedroom closet. Her realm is the furthest thing from taking the kids to soccer practice, mortgage payments, and desk jobs, just like it was the furthest thing from the horrors of high school.

We know it's impossible to love someone " 'til the end of time," or to "just ride," but Del Rey's gleefully artificial landscape softens the edges of those brutal truths, and belies the argument that she should stop all this faking. There is a forgotten part of me that would like to believe that—like in *Ultraviolence*'s "Old Money"—if you send for me, you know I'll come, and if you call for me, you know I'll run. But I know I can't run. There are responsibilities and bills to pay and errands to cross off a tedious list, and for those trapped in whatever cage they've found themselves in, fantasy is necessity. Song by song, Lana's telling us her pretty lies in her little red party dress, and we can enjoy her longing to believe them, even if we can't. **TNI**

