

- ARTICLE -

The Edge of Ladyspace: Ladi6 and the Political Limits of Self-Branding

Annalise Friend

Abstract

Musicians connected through online and offline networks make use of a personal brand to represent themselves and their work. This self-branding must be recognisable, repetitive, and 'fresh' if it is to cut through the deluge of contemporary media content. The brands of politically engaged performers—referred to as 'conscious' performers—often revolve around political critique, 'oneness', and personal and spiritual uplift. These notions are often placed in opposition to the apparent commodification of performers through practices of personal branding. The circulation and consumption of personal brands may not necessarily however, preclude the impact of apparent political critique. This article will explore how the Samoan Aotearoa-New Zealander vocalist Ladi6 plays with the role of 'lady' in her brand as a politically engaged strategy. Ladi6 draws on genre resources from conscious hip-hop, soul, reggae, and electronic music. Her assertion of female presence, or creation of a 'ladyspace', is both ambiguous and reflexive. While the *production* of her personal brand—found in videos, lyrics, photos, online presence, merchandise, and live performances—operates according to the logics of global capitalism; the *consumption* of this brand can provide an alternative 'conscious' mode of engagement with the Ladi6 musical commodity.

Introduction

This article presents Ladi6 (Karoline Tamati) as a case study of a performer who uses the role of being a 'conscious' artist as her personal brand. This type of branding implies that her lyrical and musical content is politically critical. However, through my analysis of Ladi6's work I also question the critical potentials of self-branding as a radically political strategy. For example, various elements of Ladi6's brand that suggest that she is soulful are also identified, and discussed in the context of an era through which individual self-commodification is increasingly becoming the norm. By looking at Ladi6's personal brand, the assertion of her female corporeal and vocal presence, or the creation of a 'ladyspace', is also examined through the lens of feminist debate about sexualisation. This analysis focuses on her performance practices, cover art, and lyrics. In particular, her 'play' with her self-image as being either an 'exotic Pacific beauty' or a

Annalise Friend is revising her doctoral thesis for the University of Wollongong, titled *The Political Limits of the Conscious MC Brand: Urthboy, Ladi6 and K'naan*. She is a performer and teacher of rhythm, movement and words, and is interested in popular music studies, feminism, and digital humanities.

'respectable Samoan woman' are investigated in terms of their radically political potential. Finally, Ladi6's theme of being 'liberated'—through which she invokes a sense of universalist 'oneness'—is viewed through analysis of her branded items of merchandise.

My Thing

Self-branding, according to Mauricio Lazzarato (1996, 4), includes all that is connected to an individual in the public sphere, where the subject as 'unit' performs the intellectual, managerial, creative, and entrepreneurial work to promote themselves. Musicians' self-branding includes elements such as a logo, avatar, item of costume, or font. Yet, this definition of self-branding is more than a group of products or representations of a life narrative, because it also includes a set of expectations about relations with the audience, as described in the self-branding of reality-television performers (Hearn 2011). Specifically, a brand (whether of the self or a 'corporate identity' in Lazzarato's terms) 'no longer refers to a simple commodity but to an entire "virtual context" for consumption; it stands for a specific way of using the object, a propertied form of life to be realized in consumption' (Arvidsson 2005, 244). This idea prefigures that audience engagement with a performer will be one of consumption: there is *something* to be consumed, even if it is not concrete.

This emphasis on producing something for consumption in the presentation of a personal brand has been viewed as a form of 'immaterial labour', or intellectual and managerial work (Lazzarato 1996). This immaterial labour has been further defined by Lazzarato as 'involv[ing] a series of activities that are not normally recognized as "work" . . . the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and . . . public opinion' (Lazzarato 1996, 3). These activities invoke oppositional relationships, as 'there is no self without the other' (Lo and Reyes 4). Extrapolating this sense of relationality to an exploration of the self-branding of Ladi6 means that the material analysed here, such as cover art, lyrics, costume, merchandise, and audience photographs, are considered with the knowledge that they exist in a well-populated, interactive 'brandscape' (Goldman and Papson 2006).

This article draws its analytical framework from the work of Kristin Lieb, whose book *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry: The Social Construction of Female Popular Music Stars* (2003) focuses on the production of contemporary female pop stars as short-term, predominantly visual, brands. Through interviews with music industry gatekeepers, Lieb traces the pressures brought to bear on women musicians to (re)package themselves for visual consumption. In the promotion of these performers, music operates as a 'tertiary concern, behind the body and the star's ability to use it to maximum effect in videos, on magazine covers, in endorsement deals, and on stage while on tour' (Lieb 2013, 11). The personal brands of these stars are characterised as 'sex-first' (Lieb 2013, 33). The obligation to form a personal brand

through recourse to sexualised tropes is also felt by individuals outside popular music. This has been observed in studies of reality-television performers (Hearn 2010, 2011), fashion models (Mears 2011) and television personalities (Persis Murray 2015).

Further, Lieb's discussion of MTV's impact on pop stars in terms of the increased value of the visual in pop-cultural commodities, has become increasingly relevant in the case of smaller-scale, independent artists such as Ladi6. This is due to the inter-textual—highly visualised—online platforms through which musicians now engage (Andersen and Frenz 2010; Lieb 2013; Oullet 2007). Currently, images—in the form of profile pictures, avatars, and promotional photographs—often travel independently of an artist's music. The pressures of packaging oneself as a visual brand are felt by independent, as well as mainstream, female artists.

However, female artists who work on a smaller scale to those discussed by Lieb may be able to negotiate the pressures of being a visual brand in a different manner. Independent artists not signed to major labels, and those whose merchandising efforts are also independent of major corporations may also brand themselves differently to mainstream pop-stars. Ladi6 demonstrates this. In particular, she differs from the pop stars studied by Lieb through her explicit references to the conscious hip-hop genre, and to the soul music style.

A Conscious Soul

The context of Ladi6's international distribution as a musical performer—and the personal brand that spreads out from her performance and recordings—is 'Aotearoa-New Zealand hip hop'. For example, a promotional blurb for a free concert states that she 'has been a vital part of the NZ hip hop scene since its inception' (Winter Games NZ Trust 2015). It is debatable however, whether Ladi6 is 'strictly' hip-hop. She also draws on production and vocal styles from electronica, soul, and reggae: the same blurb emphasises that she has developed a 'smoky soul sound' (Winter Games NZ Trust 2015). Furthermore, she has collaborated with other Aotearoa-New Zealand acts such as all-female hip-hop act Sheelaroc, and jazzy hip-hop group Verse Two. She has also been a guest vocalist with Fat Freddy's Drop and Solaa, who draw on funk and jazz style and instrumentation.

Nevertheless, Ladi6's brand emphasis on her Samoan nationality stresses the importance of hip-hop as a source of identity for many Māori and Pacific Islander people in Aotearoa-New Zealand (Colchester 2003; Henderson 2006; Kopytko 1986; Mitchell 2000, 2001; Zemke 2001, 2005). Further, Ladi6 distinguishes herself through self-branding copy that emphasises her position as a 'conscious' artist. For example, a phrase that recurs in her promotional blurbs (on print media profiles, her CD liner notes, and on the interconnected network of music promotion websites) describes her work as possessing 'socially conscious lyrics' (see, for example, ladi6.com). The term 'conscious' is often used to distinguish hip-hop that overtly includes lyrics about

political and social issues (Spady, Alim and Meghelli 2006). Conscious hip-hop MCs act as a political critic, poet, and/or prophet in their performance aliases (Perry 2004; Rommen 2006). In hip hop studies, such performers and their lyrics have been celebrated as politically resistant, or at least as ‘representing’ minority identities that need to be recognised by the (white, Western) mainstream for political change to occur (see Armstead 2008; Fernandes 2003; Fernando 1994; Mitchell 2000). Reading *for* resistant identities, however, needs a further step, as one could also consider that identities are not just located in individuals or even the site of performance. Instead, they spread out to inhabit the contemporary ‘brandscape’, or a terrain of brands (Goldman and Papson 2006). These personal brands require immaterial labour, and once they exist, they also ‘go to work’ in a market economy.

Ladi6’s personal brand demonstrates conscious hip-hop’s imperative to highlight social issues. For example, in a media interview, Ladi6 described the influence upon her of her Samoan parents, who ‘started up a youth centre in Christchurch, [and] founded a women’s refuge. . . . They were always bringing work home with them, kids home with them—they were social workers’ (Gilchrist 2008, 3). A key detail used to promote a documentary filmed about her return to Tanzania was that she lived there as a teenager while her parents volunteered for community initiatives (Glucina 2014).

However, rather than overt political critique in her lyrics, Ladi6 works with conscious hip-hop’s generic trope of ‘uplift’. This has been defined as ‘a movement directed at uplifting or bringing toward self-actualization an individual or group of individuals taken to be in need of such assistance’ (Peoples 2008, 28). For public figures, the choice of themes and elements in their brand is meant to result in this ‘uplift’. The Ladi6 brand works with the notion of being a ‘lady’ in contemporary music, however, whether or not this role is an uplifting one is complex, and is explored further below.

Making Ladyspace

‘Being a lady’ implies sexual prudishness, elegance, and being middle or upper class and respectable. However, the dichotomisation of women as conservative or progressive is problematic, not least because they are not applied to male performers in the same way. Hip-hop is stereotypically associated with hypersexual performance by women, and descriptions of women—usually by male artists—as ‘bitches’, ‘hoes’, or ‘chickenheads’, who exist for the sexual gratification of, and abuse and degradation by, heterosexual men (Hunter 2011; Hunter and Soto 2009). This has arguably been exacerbated by the popularisation of commercial and gangsta hip-hop from the 1990s, which made frequent use of prostitution and groupie focused narratives.

This stereotype of women performers in hip-hop exemplifies a hypersexuality required of (implicitly, heterosexual) women, and is relevant to the debate over the ‘sexualisation of culture’ (Gill 2012, 483). Across psychology, media and cultural studies, what ‘sexualisation’ may actually mean is itself a contested notion (Gill 2012,

493). However, for the purposes of examining the gendered nature of Ladi6's self-branding, two phenomena are relevant. They are, firstly, the idea that the word 'sexualisation' is 'used to capture the growing sense of Western societies as saturated by sexual representations and discourses, and in which pornography has become increasingly influential and porous, permeating "mainstream" contemporary culture' (Gill 2012, 483). The most relevant example of this is in music videos and advertising of the post-1980's MTV era, where 'a "porno chic" aesthetic can be seen' (Gill 2012, 483, see also Andsager 2006, 34). Secondly, a study of the 41 best-selling U.S. hip hop videos from 2007-2008 concluded that 'hip-hop's focus on conspicuous consumption, buttressed by the success of entrepreneurial rap moguls, has merged with strip club culture to create a new gender relation based on sexual transaction' (Hunter 2011, 15). It has been further argued that the link between this new gender relation and a consumption culture creates a normalisation of a 'pornographic gaze' towards women of colour, who are most associated with being hip-hop video dancers (Hunter and Soto 2009, 174).

It is in the context of this increased incidence of 'sexualised' images of women in hip-hop—particularly women of colour—that Ladi6 positions her brand. Her association with conscious hip-hop can be placed in opposition to the 'commercial hip hop' images (which are linked to those of gangsta rap). Such an opposition follows the tendency of some scholars to dichotomise conscious hip-hop's perceived values (of 'uplift' and minority representation) with those of commercial hip-hop (see Clay 2003). In this dichotomised framework, commercial hip-hop is presented as exploitative and sexist and opposed to a presumed discourse of female empowerment and feminism in conscious hip-hop. The latter, importantly, elides with a relatively conservative performance of female sexuality

For women in conscious hip-hop, this opposition suggests that they are somehow free of the sexualised culture observed in, for example, studies of mainstream hip hop music videos. It is possible to make such a reading of Ladi6's costume choices and other visual elements in her own music videos, as well as photographs and performances. The music video for the track 'Dark Brown' for example, sees her styled as a Motown singer, rather than an object of the 'pornographic gaze' (theladi6 2012). Ladi6's stylised movement in this video mixes contemporary hip-hop gestural movement with a fluid motion of hands that recalls movements performed by women in Samoan dance, while sexual movement of her hips is emphasised by a tasselled dress.

A nostalgic style that invokes the soul musical era associated with Motown artists is also evident in her video for 'Walk Right Up'. Alongside shots of Ladi6 in contemporary hip-hop clothes, she nods her head as her cousin (and then-high profile MC), Scribe, raps a verse (theladi6 2008). This suggests that Ladi6 is the contemporary inheritor of the heightened status of being a lady, a role also occupied by Motown singers. As both the 'Dark Brown' and 'Walk Right Up' videos were directed by another of Ladi6's

cousins, Oscar Kightley, there is a further suggestion of valorising both the Samoan director and a lady worthy of the aura of Motown classiness. The aesthetic in these videos builds a Ladi6 brand that works with the role of a diva (or a lady), with a self-conscious wink towards being 'retro'.

In other videos, as well as onstage, Ladi6's choice of loose, draped dresses and tops, and the length of her dresses, could be read as 'sexy', but also 'classy', in terms of propitious middle-class women's sexuality. However, caution needs to be applied when celebrating a ladylike presentation in contemporary popular culture, as a limiting 'respectability politics' affect such a reading (Higginbotham 1993).

Coined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, 'respectability politics' describes self-policing within minority groups (Higginbotham 1993). Censuring minorities made to feel different from a social norm for their behaviour has been critiqued as being based on conservative judgements that do not recognise fundamental power disparities. Further, encouraging individuals to lift themselves out of poverty and oppression by virtue of their behaviour and self-presentation places responsibility on them to overcome significant structural inequality. In the case of Higginbotham's analysis it also shifts attention towards self-policing present in, for example, Black and queer communities at the expense of other forms of political action (Higginbotham 1993, Harris 2014). 'Respectability' becomes another form of judging individuals, and women are subject to judgement from many quarters. Therefore, seeing Ladi6's costume and image choices as 'respectable' and therefore capable of fostering pride in being a woman is problematic. In this sense the polarisation discerned in the debate over the sexualisation of culture is played out in readings of a female musician's brand.

A further problem with the notion of 'respectability' is that its 'twenty-first-century version . . . [also] works to accommodate neoliberalism' (Harris 2014, 33). This is seen in the emphasis on preparing individuals for a competitive market economy, rather than on communities of people helping each other out of economic and social oppression. In this sense the idea that conscious music is a political tool that can encourage pride and social change finds limits in its accommodation of respectability politics, and the corresponding neoliberal emphasis on individualisation.

Hip-hop's aptness as a vehicle for self-branding that makes use of notions of respectability demonstrates the limits of such a politics. Ladi6, however, does not simply perform respectability. She also plays with normative notions of femininity. For example, she sometimes wears black Doc Marten boots—usually associated with working class masculinity and punk subcultural style. These elements of her style can also be seen as gestures towards normative understandings of pop music 'authenticity', which is generally coded as masculine. Here, Ladi6 subverts pop music's gender norms, while also building a personal style, or brand.

Ladi6 also has a tall, statuesque figure. Onstage, she stands firmly in a central spotlight, usually flanked by two male musicians (performing production and drums), I argue

this is a corporeal enactment of ‘wrecking the space’. Creating ‘wreck’ is defined by Gwendolyn Pough specifically in relation to Black women in the United States as ‘moments when Black women’s discourses disrupt dominant masculine discourses, break into the public sphere, and in some way impact or influence the U.S. imaginary’ (Pough 2004, 76). The sense of disrupting a dominant masculine space can be extrapolated to the contexts in which Ladi6 performs and in which her self-branding is present (theladi6 ‘Dark Brown’, ‘Walk Right Up’, ‘98 Til Now’, ‘Like Water’, Ladi6 and Electric Wire Hustle).

However, to make a distinction from the use of ‘wreck’ to describe Black women of the ‘Hip-Hop generation’ in Pough’s work, I am terming Ladi6’s self-created space for Pacific Islander, female embodiment ‘ladyspace’. ‘Ladyspace’ also has some correlation with Ronni Armstead’s analysis of *Las Krudas* (The Crude), whose member Pelusa identified herself and fellow members as “poor, women, artists, Cuban, Black, Hip Hop” (Armstead, 131). Ladi6’s disruption of an Orientalist and objectifying gaze towards a Pacific Islander woman through hip-hop performance in public space specifically works with the complex notion of being a ‘lady’, which is another reason that I apply the term ‘ladyspace’.

An emphasis on ‘being a lady’ complements the idea of personal liberation. In fact, the title of Ladi6’s second album is *The Liberation Of...* The phrasing echoes Lauryn Hill’s *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (Lauryn Hill, 1998). Hill’s album has been viewed as a landmark work by a woman in a male-dominated field (Hobson and Bartlow 2008, 5). In both Hill’s and Ladi6’s cases, the titles suggest that the albums are in some way a revelatory fable about the ‘character’ of the artist. This reinforces the sense that they are producing conscious work; that the music of the album and all of its dispersed branded artefacts will inform the listener about how to be educated (or not), or else how to be liberated. This is congruent with the genre resources that mythologise the political and personal expression possible through MCing (and in both of these artists’ cases, also singing). These albums *are* ostensibly the education, and the liberation, and are sold as such to the listener. This places the artist in something of a hallowed, or at least pedagogical, position; by being liberated, it is suggested, Lauryn Hill or Ladi6 may inspire others to be similarly free. This suggests that the function of this role is indeed to ‘uplift’—in terms of conscious hip-hop—to use ‘a political education and the tools of critical analysis’ to emancipate listeners (Peoples 2008, 29). Exactly how this may occur is not specified. Nevertheless, the use of these titles primes the listener to respond to the album in such a fashion.

Importantly, however, the works of both Lauryn Hill and Ladi6 suggest that the site of emancipation (from being uneducated, from not being liberated) is the individual. Instead of arguing for the rights of a people, the individual journey, performance, and brand are the site of education. In fact, *being me* or *becoming me*, is the goal. Indeed, Lauryn Hill’s album title ends with her own name, and in Ladi6’s case, it is implied (as in *The Liberation Of... Ladi6*).

While this conscious directive to preach and even embody a message for others is visible in Ladi6's second album, the snag that uplifting emancipation hits is that it is also an exercise in self-branding. Music is more than branding, of course, but the subtext of the 'message' (so important to 'conscious' hip-hop) here is 'look at my (neo)liberated self and consume it', and 'you could also achieve self-realisation through selling who *you* are on the market'. In this sense, the embodied person of the artist and the perceived message of the neoliberalised labour and self-branding are linked. The faces of these women, their hair and bodies, are linked to their voices and their music through a wide range of artefacts. The physical self—the body—becomes a unit of neoliberalised labour.

Ladi6's liberation as self realisation also runs counter to the idea that women's liberation has to be found through unbridled sexual expression, as found in so-called 'raunch culture' (Levy 2005). However, if asserting a female presence, or ladyspace, requires a toning-down of sexual expression, this is not necessarily an escape from the objectification of women's bodies. Of course, a woman need not be 'hypersexual' to be liberated; in fact many scholars have interrogated the equation of liberation with being visibly sexual. Indeed, as Rosalind Gill has suggested, we could 'add *compulsory (sexual) agency* as a required feature of contemporary post-feminist, neoliberal subjectivity' (Gill 2008, 41). The interesting combination of Ladi6 disrupting an exoticising gaze towards her body while using the role of a lady is further understood by the way her ethnicity is represented.

Looking Out of the Frame

The context of Ladi6's female personal brand is her existence as a Pacific Islander woman in Aotearoa-New Zealand: this is her cultural *milieu* (Webb 2007). Pacific Islander migrant communities have been described as 'self-contained church communities' whose second and third generations became more youth-oriented and started to look 'outwards' to global influences (Colchester 2003, 171). This combination of both respecting and looking outwards from the Christian values of these migrant communities towards global influences, such as hip-hop, is commonplace among contemporary expressions of Pacific cultures, and is seen in the music videos, cover art, and lyrics from Ladi6's debut album, *Time Is Not Much*.



Figure 1: *Time is Not Much* cover art (Ladi6 2008)

The painterly image of a flower on Ladi6's face makes an abstract reference to kitsch and Orientalising 'Black Velvet' portraits of Pacific Islander women popular in the 1950s and 1960s. They have since been reclaimed as nostalgic and apparently ironic vintage icons by interior-decoration enthusiasts (for example, see darnsexysecondhand 2011). Male Samoan MC Tha Feelstyle has also used one of these portraits as the cover art of his album *Break It To Pieces*.

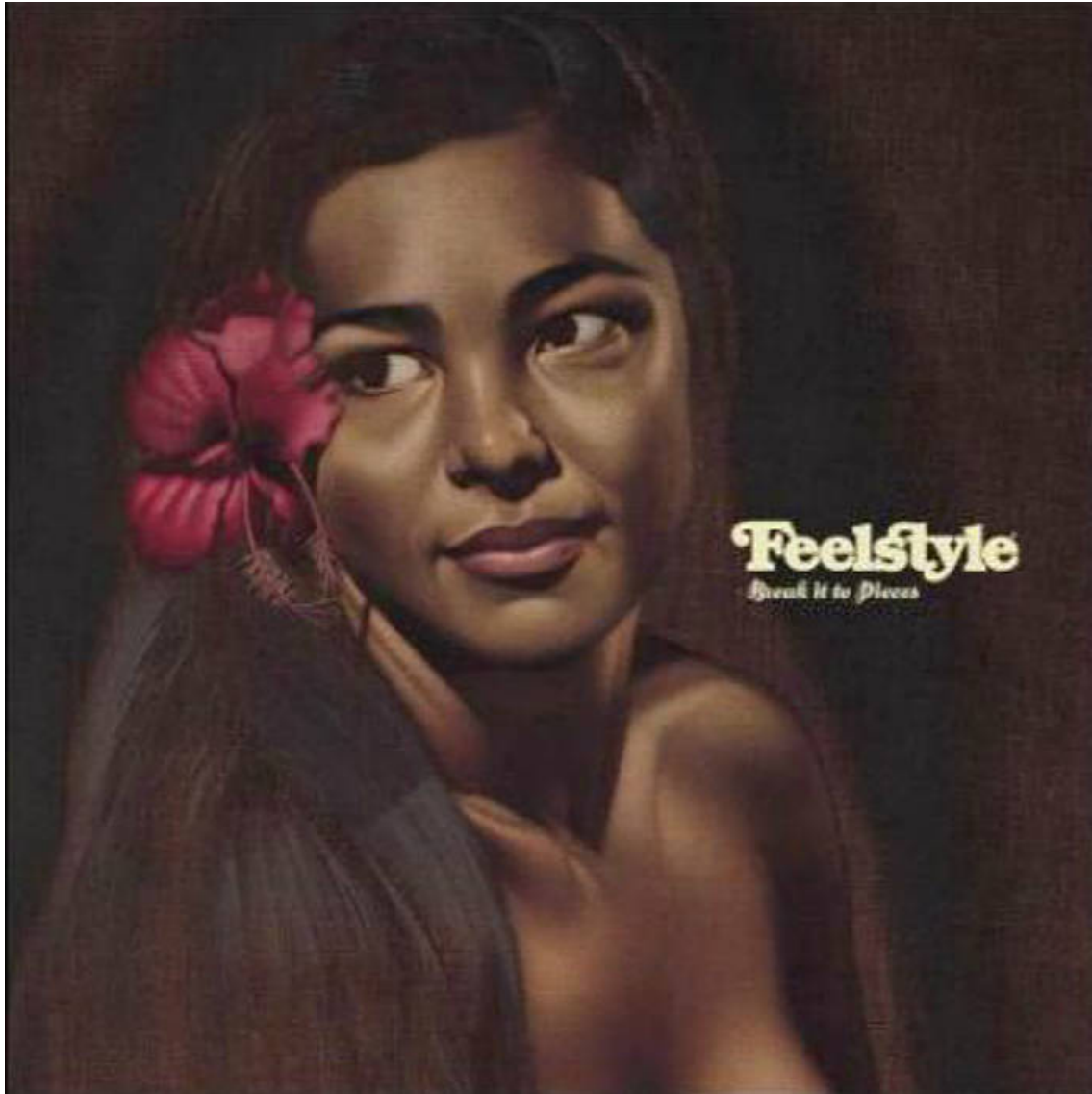


Figure 2: *Break it to Pieces* cover art, designed by Kas Futialo, Andy Morton, Grant Osborne and Andrew B. White (Tha Feelstyle 2004)

Re-signifying the Black Velvet aesthetic is complex. Its use by Pacific Islander artists suggests reclamation from an exoticising framing of Pacific Islander women for Western eyes and exploitation. However, it also complies with their nostalgic revival and shores up a myth that the mid-20th century was a simpler time when one could unproblematically appreciate a portrait of an exotic beauty. This escapist nostalgia has been described in a revival of rock 'n' roll, 'fifties nostalgia intensified as the bummed-out, burned-out uncertainty intensified in the first few years of the seventies' (Reynolds 2011, 216). An analogous desire to be free of an awareness of postcolonial identity politics and feel that the male gaze towards the image of a topless woman is unproblematic is reinforced through the framing of such art as simply 'retro chic' (Filmshop New Zealand 1998). The allure of Black Velvet portraits draws on tropes of Aotearoa and its neighbours as occupying an idyllic, Pacific Eden located in an imagined past. This tropical paradise has a long history in literature and visual art, and

is often represented by sensual ‘dusky maidens’ ready for the discovery of the White male explorer. Such ideas were perpetuated through the now-debunked anthropological writings of Margaret Mead (1928).

An example of this is evident in a documentary about these Black Velvet paintings. Titled *Velvet Dreams*, the documentary is described in an excerpt on YouTube as ‘titillating’ (Filmshop New Zealand, 1998). Its interviews are framed through the conceit of a gumshoe detective wanting to get close to the dusky maiden of his painted dreams (Filmshop New Zealand, 1998). This nostalgic emphasis on exotic beauty is continued in spite of the inclusion of comment from a Samoan reverend, who says that Samoan communities saw the Black Velvet paintings as ‘pornographic’ and disapproved of them. The portrait by Charlie McPhee titled ‘Velvet Dusky Maiden’ (Figure 3) was used for Tha Feelstyle’s cover art:



Figure 3: *Velvet Dusky Maiden* (darnsexysecondhand 2011)

Ladi6’s *Time Is Not Much* cover, then, echoes the Black Velvet representations of Pacific beauty—she even wears a hibiscus in her hair. The emphasis however, is clearly on her face and her eyes are downcast, suggesting interiority; this is not a model exhibiting her face for the exoticising artist. In this sense she is using the resonance of these

previous images, but suggesting a personal pivot on them.

Ladi6's personal brand subtly profits from her assuming the role of an admired Pacific beauty. However, this does not mean she occupies the position of an objectified Black Velvet maiden. Samoan Reverend Mua Strickson-Pua described the Black Velvet paintings as '*palangi*' (foreign to Samoan culture, often White) (Filmshop New Zealand 1998). In this sense, Ladi6's image fosters a sense of belonging among Pacific people with similar notions to Reverend Strickson-Pua's. This sense of a respectable 'ladylike' role model is, however, problematic, for the reasons of respectability politics discussed above.

By overtly referencing stereotypical depictions of Pacific Islander women, deploys essentialised tropes of 'race' as well as gender to further her brand. This intersectional presentation differs greatly to Cashmore's reading of Beyoncé. Cashmore saw Beyoncé's brand (and the industry of sales, merchandise, clothing, perfume, endorsements, and sponsorships it represents) as aspiring towards a 'post-racial' America, where "'race" is not within her [Beyoncé's] range' (Cashmore 2010, 137). Instead, he sees Beyoncé's brand as emblematic of the idea that, under advanced capitalism, individual success is a preferable focus for Black artists to racism and inequality (Cashmore 2010, 137). Beyoncé brand's appearance of being 'beyond race' differs to Ladi6's, who deploys overt signifiers of *Polynesian* femininity.

Ladi6's 2008 signification and subversion of the exoticising Black Velvet genre joins those of fellow Pacific Islander artists, such as the *fa'afafine*² visual artist Shigeyuki Kihara (Rosi 2007; Milford Galleries Dunedin 2014). Ladi6 reclaims a Pacific Islander cultural practice (of wearing a hibiscus behind the ears), which has its own significance outside of the exoticising frame of commercial Western art reproduction. Echoes of the hibiscus motif are used in Ladi6's music videos and merchandise, suggesting a personal use of this reclaimed cultural material to further her self-branding.

She does this through a subversion of visual signifiers. *Time Is Not Much* cover art is an abstract, digital working of a painterly portrait of a Pacific Islander woman. The deep black has a crispness and no longer flirts with an innuendo of dusky brown skin and, perhaps, vaginal mystery. By choosing to reference and then update this art, Ladi6 presents a fresh interpretation of the identity of a Pacific woman, who is more than an exotic beauty to admire, but who is in fact the active, creative artist, as seen in the inclusion of her logo/graffiti tag, 'Ladi6', in the bottom right corner. *She* is the writer here, and not just a 'muse'. The elegant font of her name reflect the connotations of being a 'lady', its narrowness and slant speaking of a design aesthetic that doesn't need to use fat, stereotypically masculine fonts or graphics to participate in the hip-hop genre. Ladi6's portrait in this cover art reclaims in actuality the *apparent reclamation* of Black Velvet works as retro kitsch. This is an example of a politically critical use of branding, one that 'disrupts an orientalist gaze' and creates space for a woman—a lady—in the male-dominated music industry (Armstead 2008, 130).

Another representation of Ladi6's physical self is used on an inside page of the cover booklet of *Time Is Not Much*. A photograph shows Ladi6's hand-playing keyboards, featuring a tattoo on the back of her hand that is a diamond pattern interspersed with stars. This pattern is also echoed on the front cover, in a light grey superimposed over the black background. Using this imagery positions the album as an intimate expression of the body—similar to a tattoo. The photograph of Ladi6 playing keyboard also portrays her as a creative and musically able Samoan artist. The image could also be read as a nod to Pacific cultures being respected for their *tatauing* (tattooing) histories, and as having reached aesthetic heights and rich levels of meaning with their tattoos (Ellis 2006; Thomas et al. 2005; Wendt 1996). The pattern is used in Samoan *malu* tattoos, which are positioned on some women's thighs. The placement on Ladi6's hand is a personal interpretation of a traditional identifier. These images of Ladi6 as a working, creative musician suggest that both her tattoos and her music are personal reflections on being situated in current cultural practice. Again, this differs from Beyoncé's claim to be 'universal' as Ladi6 includes specific cultural identifiers (Cashmore 2010, 144).

Nevertheless, like Beyoncé's, and all other personal brands, Ladi6's self-branding is traded and judged in a capitalist media context of commodity consumption. Even a personal and bodily element of a brand such as a tattoo can become abstracted into a commodity; like 'the object of the logo or trademark . . . [it] can now become the sign of a definite type of social identity, which summons consumers into relationship with it' (Hearn 2008, 199). In the case of images of a musician, even the culturally important and feminist implications of being a Samoan lady in contemporary popular music are bound into a system that invites listeners to be consumers, to primarily consider whether they are 'buying into' the individualised Ladi6 brand. This is parallel to the observation that, in advertising, 'women's liberation metamorphosed into female narcissism unchained as political concepts like liberation and equality were collapsed into distinctly personal, private desires' (Douglas 1994: 247–8).

However, in significant contrast to the example of advertising Revlon products that Douglas writes of, or of the entire industry of consumer items that Beyoncé's brand fronts, Ladi6's brand is small-scale and is based around her activities as a musician (Cashmore 2010, 139). Her brand is primarily associated with her recorded music and live performances, but also appears on a small amount of selective merchandise.

One example of such Ladi6 merchandise is, perhaps surprisingly, a tea-towel. This concrete fragment of the widely dispersed Ladi6 brand sees her face, and in particular her eyes and eyebrows, used in a stencil (Figure 4). The choice to include a tea-towel in her suite of merchandise could suggest a domestication of the liberated lady. However, it is congruent with the affection for kitsch items and recycling of the idea of the Aotearoa-New Zealand 'Kiwiana' aesthetic being out-of-date, and of mixing times in cultural products. It also suggests a reconstituting of domestic space and objects as the tea-towel is made into an artwork that could be hung on a wall.



Figure 4: Ladi6 tea towel, property of author (photograph by Pedro Altuna 2014)

The conjunction of the hibiscus motif, the Ladi6 logo, and the snowflakes speaks of both chilly Aotearoa-New Zealand and the Pacific, and the history of Pacific Islander migration to Aotearoa-New Zealand. These symbols and themes have been used consistently in the promotion of Ladi6 as an artist, and in her songs and videos.

Repeating the hibiscus across different platforms suggests that, like the Ladi6 brand, the Pacific heritage is a continuous thread in all of her work. The use of her face on this tea towel also resonates with the *Time Is Not Much* cover art and the sense of interiority or soulfulness. Screen-printing on a tea-towel speaks of a do-it-yourself aesthetic that appeals to those who love handcrafted products. This so-called 'hipster' emphasis on handmade and 'low-tech' items is an aestheticised version of thriftiness.

Even within a do-it-yourself aesthetic, however, the tea towel is also an item of distinctive merchandise that makes use of personal branding and circulates in a market economy. Relatively small-scale, independent artists such as Ladi6 do differ significantly to Beyoncé or the pop stars studied by Lieb in both their aesthetic and the scope of their industrial output. However, even in a tea-towel hanging on a fan's wall, the underlying logic of self-branding, of making abstracted use of a self-image to emphasise individual success and a relationship of consumption, is still present.

Transcendence

Is it possible to transcend the consumer relationship through music? I would argue that 'soulfulness' can obfuscate this relationship. Descriptions of Ladi6 often claim that she is 'sublimely soulful' (ladi6.com). This is implicitly placed in opposition to other female pop and hip-hop artists, who are regarded as being inauthentic or 'superficial'. This works in a similar way to the metonymy outlined by Norma Coates, where 'rock is metonymic with "authenticity" and masculinity, "pop" is metonymic with artifice' and femininity (Coates 1997, 52). While not figured as masculine as rock, soul-based genres use opposition to artifice and are associated with depth, or performing 'genuine' authentic feeling.

An example of this reflective quality is the title of *Time Is Not Much* . . . Using the mind or imagination to transcend everyday challenges is an optimistic theme that Ladi6 explores in her lyrics, such as when she sings in the track 'Walk Right Up' from the *Time Is Not Much* album:

We're gonna walk right up into the light

...

When the shit's goin' down, I'm gonna hold you up (Ladi6 2008).

There is potentially a sense of communal solidarity here. However, these kinds of encouraging lyrics can also be used to bolster the confidence of the individual who listens, and no more. The message of 'uplift' here can be employed by listeners to more efficiently participate in an economy that prefers cutthroat competition and individual focus to communal causes.

Ladi6 features on a track by genre-crossing Aotearoa-New Zealand outfit Solaa, titled "Sylphlike". In the lyrics, abstract, uplifting notions are again invoked:

Cherish every moment for they are all that we have
 Like a river time is flowin' on and on (Solaa 2006a).

A sylph is a 'slender, graceful, lightly moving woman or girl', or else, 'one of a race of imaginary beings' that 'inhabit the air' (Macquarie Dictionary 2010, 1771). The music video uses images suggestive of cosmic waters and an animated process of creation. Ladi6 and the musicians from Solaa are visually splashed with images of stellar explosions and cellular life. The title, together with the cosmic theme, suggests a feminine creator, addressed in song by Ladi6:

Eternal creation nurtured us with infinite love

...

Mother creation, we must return to your love (Solaa 2006a).

The lyrics evoke being in a cosmic womb and yearning to go beyond the physical boundaries of selfhood. The track is a prayer or cry to a feminine creative force. This is a radically different expression of spirituality to the emphasis on Christianity in Samoa and the Samoan diaspora, as typified in the phrase on the Samoan crest *Fa'avae I Le Atua Samoa* (Samoa is founded on God). The title could also suggest that Ladi6 herself is 'sylphlike' and contains some of the qualities of feminine divinity that she is invoking. There is a sense of yearning to return to the popular conception of imagined historical matriarchies, or at least to a feminine aspect of spirituality (a 'divine feminine'), which is here invoked as peaceful. This guest spot also connects to, and uses, Ladi6's brand as a soulful lady.

The track 'Oneness' from the same Solaa album is credited on the compact disc cover as 'Solaa feat. [featuring] Ladi6'. The title connotes the catch-cry of much popular music (in particular, reggae and hip hop genres) of 'one love', stemming from Bob Marley's lyrics from the song of that name, and often repeated as sung lyrics or as a spoken 'call' to the audience or listener (Bob Marley and the Wailers 1984). 'Oneness' more broadly speaks of an imaginative, humanist, connection across ethnic, social, and political boundaries and also a unity in, and perhaps through, music. From the credits and the title, an optimistic note is sounded even before the track is played, one that invites a listener into relationship, into 'oneness'. The use of the term and its implications also connects these performers to 'brand oneness', or all other works using this idea.

In fact, 'oneness' can be deployed as part of the visual branding of an individual. Ladi6 rebranded, or extended her branding, both as a lady and a soulful, spiritual messenger, in the costume, videos, and photographs associated with her second solo album, *The Liberation Of...* (2010). In particular, her use of a gold cowl, which is worn with other outfits for performance and music videos, casts her as bathed in light. It suggests that she is bringing a metallic royal presence and a clever design aesthetic that uses the 'essence' of the hood, and its connotations of hip hop, street culture, and being a wise

prophet or hallowed figure.



Figure 5: Ladi6 Live, Ladi6 and Electric Wire Hustle (iPhone photograph by author)

Figure 5's pixelated iPhone photo of a live performance in Sydney is an example of the dispersed artefacts that make up a contemporary musician's brand. This suggests that costume choice is highly reflexive, as some artists will now be aware that they will be photographed, filmed, 'saved', and 'shared'. In this sense, even if they are playful or have a personal meaning to the performer, these items that form part of an artist's brand can also become part of their audience members' own sense-making about music and performance in their lives. The trace of the performer's branded self can be found in audience member's files and consumption practices.

In this photo, Ladi6 uses both the brightness and illumination of gold against the depth of a black backdrop. She has continued to use this combination of bright yellow/gold and dark purple/blue/black in her costumes, stickers, and posters associated with *The Liberation Of* A precursor is seen in the bright yellow compact disc itself used for *Time Is Not Much*. Bright yellow-gold is associated with various ideas of light in spiritual and religious traditions (for example, the Christian halo). Nevertheless, this forms part of the visual branding that is dispersed in concrete objects, digital files and in-person performance. Even when performing lyrics with 'depth' and uplifting others 'right up to the light', using the branded self reinforces the idea that a focus on the individual is preferable to a focus on social causes. The message of 'oneness' is in fact

tethered to a brand that works within a system of neoliberal individualism.

Conclusion

Ladi6 mixes the Motown lady of soul, the Black Velvet Pacific beauty, and a contemporary Samoan woman in her personal brand. Her self-branding also positions herself as a positive Samoan role model, and is aligned with the lineage of ladies and queens established by female conscious hip-hop artists. This signification on the role of being a woman of elevated status is connected with motifs such as the hibiscus to effectively brand *this* lady as a Samoan incarnation.

As Ladi6 is a female Samoan MC and singer who has performed often in Europe and Australia, this representation through performance does revise stereotypes of what it means to be Pacific Island woman in hip-hop. In this sense she both ‘wrecks the space’—or in the very least, acts in a way that shows resistance—and ‘disrupt[s] the classificatory eye’s Orientalist gaze’ through her physical performance (Pough 2004, 78; Armstead 2008, 130). The agency asserted in Ladi6’s performance can be met with relief and encouragement, as heard in the audience member’s shout while waiting for the next song at a Ladi6 show, ‘Come on, Lady!’ (Ladi6 and Electric Wire Hustle 2011).

Ladi6’s use of the lady role moves along the conscious end of a hip-hop genre spectrum, where the rhetoric of uplift is meant to inspire both social progress and respectability in listeners. This may be acceptable within Pacific Island Christian culture, however, Ladi6’s emphasis on female liberation suggests an ambiguity about what being ‘respectable’ entails. For example, the religious echoes found in Ladi6’s style are reinforced by her gestures to a feminine creative force of ‘oneness’.

In the physical space of live shows, and in recordings and online videos, Ladi6 is a prime example of ‘conscious’ political expression and critique through her very presence. Her creation of a ‘ladyspace’ in contemporary popular music disrupts an exoticising gaze towards a woman of colour. This intervention in a sphere credited with contributing to a sexualisation of culture is significant. However, its aptness to be used to promote a limiting respectability for women is problematic. Similarly, an experience of ‘oneness’ found in Ladi6’s work is commodified. The limit to the expression of uplift is that it points back to a system that places a performer as the individual, charismatic beacon who must lead others in a ‘walk right up to the light’ (Ladi6 2008). Further, the self-commodification this entails encourages the audience to compete as individuals.

Nevertheless, self-branding is used as a personal object in the daily lives of listeners who pick up a sticker with a copy of her CD at a live performance, and which may become faded over time (Figure 6). These personal objects may prompt them to think about ‘the liberation of’ women and ‘ladies’ in their lives, or for themselves. Listening to and moving to music and attending performances by a female performer such as Ladi6, can also be a hopeful and imaginative experience of feminine divinity and

embodied female agency, or ladyspace. Individuals can, of course, make their own meaning out of such an experience.



Figure 6: Ladi6 *The Liberation Of...* sticker, property of author (photograph by Pedro Altuna)

However, from an analytical perspective, the limits of self-branding remain evident. Branding is a level of abstraction for trade away from the performer, which produces artefacts, both virtual and concrete. This level of abstract promotion can engender the same cynical response in listeners who are constantly being subjected to branding in an advanced capitalist era. Self-branding encourages a relationship of consumption to be present alongside political allegiance with any emancipatory message a performer communicates. The system of branding places pressures on individuals to 'responsibilise' themselves, to submit themselves to a 'neoliberal governance of self', which can include being a 'liberated' individual, rather than focus on structural inequalities (Lavernce and Lozanski 2014). Optimistic experiences of 'ladyspace' find an edge. The branded self of conscious performers, then, is currently both a medium of, and a hindrance to, direct political expression.

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Notes

1. Lauryn Hill is now often referred to as 'Ms Hill' or 'Ms Lauryn Hill'.
2. As Rosi writes in her profile of Kihara, a *fa'afafine* is 'a man who identifies as a woman in a traditional transgender role, considered anomalous in New Zealand' (Rosi 2007, 72).

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