Sex and Celebrity Media

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Routledge Companion to Sex and the Media
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Introduction: The Intimate Lives of Public Selves

> *I am extremely concerned for you that those around you have led you to believe, or encouraged you in your own belief, that it is in any way 'cool' to be naked and licking sledgehammers in your videos.* Sinned O'Conner, open letter to Miley Cyrus[1].

Mediated contexts of celebrity have been undergoing shifts in meanings in the late-twentieth and early-twenty first century, making celebrity seem at once more accessible, attainable and personable, but equally more invasive: and so fragmenting illusions of private life, including the celebrity's sexual and intimate relations. Although our categories of celebrity have always been about 'living in the spotlight', a 'demotic' or 'hypertrophic' turn in celebrity culture means the personal lives of the rich and famous are made much more fluid and flexible, suggesting not only that we can glean insight into the personal lives of celebrities, but that we may also live the life of one (Redmond 2014, Turner 2013).

Reality TV has been one of the most significant markers of the changing nature celebrity culture, giving 'celebrity' the appearance of a democratic and attainable identity category. Happening at 'celebrity's border zone', the mechanisms through which the 'ordinary' person reaches celebrity status takes place through a process of self-revelation, confession and the public documentation of private life (Couldry 2001: 111, Littler 2003). Meanwhile, new media technologies have produced their own 'micro' celebrities, through online platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, that create new categories of 'DIY' celebrities and 'unintended' celebrities through practices of tagging, sharing, remixing and the meme (Attwood 2006, Marwick and boyd 2011, McNair 2002, Turner 2013).

Against the backdrop of seemingly democratic celebrity and narrowing concepts of public and private lives, celebrity culture has itself become both more intimate and public. Lady Gaga, Justin Bieber, Taylor Swift, and Miley Cyrus tweet the mundanities of everyday life to millions of fans. Intimate moments between celebrities have also become more visible. The sex tape, for example, has become a managed promotional tool: Kanye West's recent music video for *Bound 2* featured West and Kim Kardashian simulating sex on a bike, with images from the video alluding to climax and oral sex. No longer the grainy images of *A Night in Paris* or the infamous Pamela Anderson and Tommy Lee tapes, the highly stylish and stylized gyrations of *Bound 2* present a controlled and manufactured version of what sexual moments shared between the couple 'might' be like.

Alongside the visibility of the intimate lives of celebrities, we have also witnessed heightened examples of privacy invasion. In 2014, 'The Fappening' saw young female celebrities, including Jennifer Lawrence, having their personal devices hacked in order to access naked images of them. The act of hacking private accounts and posting such images online was explicitly misogynistic, and sexually aggressive; in name alone, the hacking's use of the slang term 'fap' as a synonym for masturbation suggesting that the public consumption of these images would likely be used for sexual pleasure. Lawrence, among others, called the hacking a 'sex crime', and evidence of an increasingly prevalent 'rape culture' (see Ferreday, 2015, for further discussion of rape culture). Infringements also include, for example, legal action by the British Royal family against the French *Closer* magazine in 2012, which printed topless images of Kate Middleton on holiday. The images of Middleton, despite being banned in the UK, were able to proliferate through social media platforms.

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[1] http://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/oct/03/sinead-o-connor-open-letter-miley-cyrus

Fueled by new formats and contexts, the mediation of celebrity has altered dramatically over the last hundred years. What has changed very little, however, is the importance of celebrity 'sex' and 'sexiness'. Elvis' suggestive hip-swinging and Marilyn Monroe's pout and 'come-hither' gaze of the 1950s and 60s, followed by the 'sexual revolution' of 70s celebrity; Madonna's liberated and expressive 'sex bomb' femininity in the 1980s; Sharon Stone's seated seduction in 1990s film *Basic Instinct*. Celebrity culture, as Dyer (2004) suggests, gives us opportunities to chart society's changing relationships to sex, sexuality and sexual appeal (see Mercer's 2013 Special Issue of *Celebrity Studies* on Sex and the Celebrity). The celebrity sex symbol bears the symbolic weight of taboo breaking and the changing moral codes around what we understand 'sexy' to mean: as such, celebrity seems to ooze sexiness.

This chapter presents dominant approaches to making sense of sex and celebrity media. I begin below by outlining approaches that suggest celebrity is read as representation of 'our times', and for its processes of production and consumption. Following this survey, the chapter then explores feminist approaches to celebrity culture, paying special attention to notions of 'the sexualisation of culture', postfeminist celebrity culture and the objectification of female celebrities. Case studies are drawn from analyses of the fetishisation of female celebrity bums, and the sexualised, gendered, classed and racialised representation of body parts. I finish the discussion by drawing attention to the selective but hyperbolic media discussion and reaction to sexy and publicly intimate performances of celebrity culture with reference to Miley Cyrus, where the layering of commentary on top of commentary reflects a cultural anxiety around intimate life, and concern for future sexual conduct.

Representing Celebrity
Traditional approaches to celebrity studies are rooted in film studies and the analysis of 'stardom'. While not the first analysis of 'the celebrity', Richard Dyer's discussion of Paul Robeson, Marilyn Monroe, and Judy Garland in *Heavenly Bodies* (originally published 1986, reprinted 2004) has been particularly important in shaping academic discussion of celebrity (see also Dyer's earlier influential book, *Stars* 1979). Principally an analysis of representation, Dyer was interested in the 'ideological function' of the star and the way in which this comes to shape the available discourses for making sense of the self (Dyer 1979). Dyer's (2004: 19) notion of 'discourse' refers to a set of 'media signs' that, far from being coherent, contain 'clusters of ideas, notions, feelings, images, attitudes and assumptions', meaning that the star image could be understood as a representation of wider social, political and cultural sense making.

Dyer's (2004) analysis of Marilyn Monroe, for example, focuses on the way Monroe came to represent sex during an historical period of shifting notions of what 'sex' meant. As the first centrefold of the *Playboy* franchise, and in the wake of the Kinsey reports (1948 and 1963) that reshaped notions of 'normal' sexual practice, Monroe's sexuality became filtered through ideas of the naturalness of sex and sexual innocence. Thus while her *Playboy* centrefold was controversial and challenged sexual attitudes of the time, her quip: "It's not true I had nothing on. I had the radio on", plays with notions of the naturalness and normalcy of the naked body (Dyer 2004, Scheibel 2013). Alongside these shifting concepts of sexuality, Dyer (2004) also notes the growing significance of psychoanalytic language in the 1950s, and its view of inherent sexual difference. Here, Monroe represented something of 'ideal' femininity: vulnerable, dependent on men, and visually desirable.

Dyer's (2004) analysis of the sexiness of Marilyn Monroe suggests that the meanings that were attached to her were permissible to mainstream America because of their associations with purity. Monroe's image is socially significant because she was able to act out American values of femininity: as a symbol of femininity, her whiteness and blondness meant that sex could function in society (and to her audience) in ways that did not present sex appeal as dangerous and sinful.

Monroe's sex symbol status allowed people to make sense of ideological conflict during a period of social anxiety about the meanings of sex.

Dyer's (1979, 2004) approach to understanding celebrity has been important because it was one of the first to take the meaning of the celebrity as having wider cultural significance. For Dyer (2004: ix-x) the study of stardom was able to open up questions of emotion, sexuality and everyday life, reflecting what kinds of people we are able to become in particular social and historical contexts. Accounts since have invariably drawn on Dyer's approach, but have also brought an understanding of media industries to bear on the significance of celebrity culture in contemporary society. Rojek (2012), for example, understands celebrity as something that is staged and carefully managed, produced through a supply-demand relationship between the celebrity and their audience, while Turner (2004) likens celebrity to a relationship of 'commercial property' that can mutually benefit both commodity and celebrity brand.

However this supply-demand model is often highly unstable. For example, following revelations of Tiger Wood's infidelities in 2009 and 2010, he was dropped by several of his endorsees, and overexposure in the media arguably lead to a decline in the profits of those brands that continued to support him: a loss that was subsequently passed onto shareholders (Rojek 2012). The relationship between overexposure and market decline, however, does not always hold. For example, Rojek (2012) cites the release of 'soft-porn' images of Madonna, which were then used by her management in the run up to the publication *Sex*. In this case, Madonna's overexposure worked in favour of her celebrity brand, leading Rojek (2012) to claim that 'the fame formula is a deeply flawed doctrine' (81).

There are two points I want to take forward in linking these previous approaches to the study of celebrity in feminist media studies. From accounts of representation, Dyer's approach to understanding the celebrity has been useful for feminist media studies because it pays attention to representations of gender, race and sexuality. These issues have been undeniably important in feminist analyses of contemporary celebrity representations, as have accounts of celebrity-as-commodity. Here, the industry approach allows us to make sense of the 'exchange value' of female celebrity bodies. I discuss these below, paying particular attention to the celebrity bum.

Sexy Bums and Body Parts
Feminist approaches to celebrity have been important in making sense of the limited roles that women and female celebrities have played in the media, and the way their images are presented to us, especially through the intersections of class, race, sexuality, and physical embodiment (Gill 2007). This approach has been particularly important in making sense of the assumed democratisation of fame and celebrity, and the associated promise of social mobility alongside the denigration of particular groups of women through the celebrity system (Biressi and Nunn 2004). While the 'celebrity' category becomes less rigid and seemingly more replicable through platforms like reality TV, what counts as 'sexy' remains homogeneous and hierarchical: the white, slim, middle class female body maintains desirability (Evans and Riley 2013, Gill 2007).

In the UK, a particular political and cultural moment has shaped notions of disgust in relation to class and gender; new forms of hate have been encouraged through the representation of poverty (e.g. *Benefit Street*), and reality TV celebrities who become glamor models are by equal measures hyper-sexualised and denounced as trashy, slutty, vulgar and unclean (Tyler and Bennett 2010). Race and ethnicity also play a part in shaping celebrity's democratisation: for example, in the way *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* worked to represent Roma, Gypsy and Traveller brides as antithetical to constructs of the sexy, modern, self-determined woman, and the show's popular reception marked the 'Gypsy' bride as the tasteless white-other, with their sexuality often located with the excessive, overly fleshy body that reaffirms associations between consumption, body weight and

sexuality (Jensen and Ringrose 2013, Tremlett 2014, Tyler 2013). Women who fall outside of celebrity's cultural constructs of 'sexy' are often violently denied and denigrated, despite celebrity's seeming accessibility.

Feminist media studies has been equally interested in how intersections of class, race, gender, sexuality come to frame the way the celebrity body is imag(in)ed and how these intersections determine the commodity object of the female celebrity body. A key term in making sense of female celebrity has been 'objectification', wherein the selective process of turning the visual image of women's bodies into discrete parts constitutes a form of gender power. The objectification of female body parts is evident, for example, in the sexualisation of celebrity's legs, breasts, labia and buttocks. In a series of upskirting shots taken by the paparazzi in 2007, for example, images of celebrity female labia worked to sexualise and class the female body. Where the upskirting of Paris Hilton was normalised as evidence of the celebrity's overexposure and attention seeking, the intrusive images of Britney Spears held a different meaning: her postpartum cesarian scar and 'white trash' status branded her a bad mother and a dangerously excessive, pathologically (hetero)sexual subject (later cemented in her apparent 'breakdown') (Schwartz 2008).

The visualisation of celebrities' labia are rendered intelligible through the camera's association with heterosexuality and its (implied) penetration; whereas the bum has been a mainstay of racialising representations of the sexy female celebrity, where 'black female sexuality is literally embodied in voluptuous black buttocks' (Railton and Watson 2005: 56). In Beltran's (2007: 281) analysis of Jennifer Lopez 'cross-over butt', for example, she suggests that the discussion surrounding the celebrity's backside during the late-1990s amounted to the 'exoticization and sexualisation of the non-white body' (similar arguments could be made about the treatment of Kim Kardashian's bum in the media, and its capacity to 'Break the Internet', see Evans 2015). Lopez's 'cross-over butt' became an object of public obsession and fascination, alongside her repeated proclamation that she was happy with her curves. While the language of positive body image employed by Lopez suggests self-image control, agency and transgression, bringing new, non-white and Latina bodies into the public consciousness, it also poses questions about the viability of equality merely through becoming visible. Beltran's (2007) analysis demonstrates how Lopez's image was also used in ways that alluded to colonial discourses that shape how sex, sexiness, and the sexualisation of non-white women come to be imagined. The intense public scrutiny of Lopez's posterior bears close resemblance to the treatment of black women's backsides during the colonial period, where they were treated as objects of scientific experimentation and public display because of the associations made between large buttocks and savage sexuality (McClintock 1995). The representation of non-white women is not homogeneous; however, by locating non-white women as being closer to nature, or as 'dangerously' or 'excessively' sexual, non-white female sexuality is demarcated as animalistic and immoral, in contrast to white female sexuality which becomes moral and civilised (Beltran 2007, Railton and Watson 2005, McClintock 1995).

A useful contrast here is the media discussion of Pippa Middleton's backside during the wedding of her sister, Kate Middleton, to Prince William in 2012. The wedding itself was presented in the media as a moment of national pride and evidence of the meaningfulness of love and romance; but Pippa Middleton's backside also took up a significant amount of media discussion. This was followed shortly after by the creation of the Facebook group 'Pippa Middleton ass appreciation society' and reported requests in cosmetic surgery consultations for the 'Pippa' (see McCabe 2011). In her 'buttermilk body-skimming gown', Kate Middleton's sister 'seductively embodie[d] a type of feminine empowerment that is completely digestible' (McCabe 2011: 355-356).

In the context of a traditional, if highly mediated, 'white' wedding, the fstishization, objectification and sexualisation of Pippa Middleton's sexy bum was largely unremarkable: indeed its location as a sexy object at the intersection of upper-middle class whiteness remained invisible. It was not

deemed necessary, for example, for Pippa to constantly extol her own pride in her body or her ethnicity, neither was it suggested ever that Pippa's curvy backside has any relationship to her sexual appetite. A similar observation of celebrities' 'sexy bums' is suggested in Railton and Watson's (2005) analysis of Kylie Minogue's whiteness in music videos, which is only made visible through comparison to the representation of black female singers, such as Beyonce and Rihanna.

Railton and Watson (2005) suggest that Beyonce's video for *Baby Boy* is exemplary of the representation of sexy black female celebrity through associations with an excessive and dangerous sexuality. Variously located in the jungle, by the sea, on the beach, her body is affected and moved by the environment, and her body, backside and hair are always shown in constant, often uncontrollable, movement (Railton and Watson 2005). In contrast, Minogue's video for *Can't Get You Out of My Head* is clinical, clean, light and white. Her sexiness is controlled through the use of slow motion techniques that work to manage the body's movement: this body does not writhe, roll, crawl, or get covered in sand or water in the same way that Beyonce's does (Railton and Watson 2005). Comparing the two celebrities' use of the body in performance allows for an analysis of the hypersexual and primitive sexuality represented by Beyonce's music video, which makes visible the purity represented in the performance of Minogue (e.g. motionless hair and flawless, taut skin).

The status of celebrity sexiness in contemporary culture bears signs of classed, racialised and gendered inequalities that have a history that still carries weight today (see McClintock 1995). While limited constructs of sexiness still shape the way we view female celebrities, what has changed is the media landscape and the technologies that we have available to produce, maintain, share, and comment on these images. This takes place alongside an explosion about sex and sexiness throughout the media, referred to variously as 'pornification', 'raunch culture' and the 'sexualisation of culture' (Attwood 2009, Evans and Riley 2014, Gill 2012, McNair 2002). Below, I suggest that drawing together these accounts to analyse contemporary sexy celebrity has wider implications for understanding contemporary sexual identity. I do this by focusing on the recent media attention on Miley Cyrus.

Narratives of Concern: What is 'Sexy' Celebrity?
The pop star Miley Cyrus has been one of the most talked about celebrities in recent years. Alongside her constant public performance of celebrity through social media, every act or public 'confession' seems worthy of scrutiny for what it represents of the body, sexuality, rumored sexual practices, sexiness, and femininity. Social commentary surrounding Cyrus has become all-pervasive, producing an intense media noise. Cyrus' most controversial moments to date have been the release of the video for *Wrecking Ball*, her performance at the VMAs with *Blurred Lines* singer Robin Thicke and her popularization of 'twerking'; but even small deviations from normative notions of good, white, innocent femininity have been controversial.

One example of the media hyperbole surrounding Cyrus was her 2012 haircut. Cyrus posted images of having her waist-length hair cut short on Instagram, resulting in a backlash from her fans, who deemed the cut both unfeminine and too sudden. Cyrus' long waist-length hair had represented an appropriate heterosexual femininity, whereas the short haircut located her as potentially 'boyish'. Even while Cyrus' image was just-about-hetero-sexy enough, the apparent deviation from normative scripts of good girlhood also lead to speculation about her sexuality (as potential lesbian or bisexual) that worked to fold gender, appearance and sexuality into a series of heterosexist binaries (McRobbie 2008). But the haircut was also, we were told, part of her managed 'rebranding'.

Cyrus' provocations appeared, however, before the notorious haircut. In 2009, Cyrus' Teen Choice Awards performance of her single *Party in the U.S.A*, in which she briefly dipped against a stage-

prop pole, became part of the narrative of sexualisation, and evidence of the exploitation of contemporary young female stars by celebrity industry: the 'sex sells' motto of modern capitalism. Online discussions of the performance questioned Cyrus' authenticity, agency and choice, suggesting that the dance was the product of her management (Lamb, Graling and Wheeler 2013). Because of her location within the celebrity system and our current cultural preoccupation with neoliberal postfeminist notions of 'choice' and 'freedom', Cyrus' routine was deemed as a manufactured performance of sexy and therefore not representative of modern, sassy, self-knowing sexiness (Lamb, Graling and Wheeler 2013). These claims were later repeated by Sinned O'Conner in her 'open' letter to Cyrus. In response to Cyrus' *Wrecking Ball* video in 2013, Conner stated that:

> *The music business doesn't give a shit about you, or any of us. They will prostitute you for all you are worth, and cleverly make you think its what YOU wanted... and when you end up in rehab as a result of being prostituted, 'they' will be sunning themselves on their yachts in Antigua, which they bought by selling your body and you will find yourself very alone.*[2]

What I am interested in here is the public reactions to these mediated 'moments'. I am also interested in how we have made these moments 'public' through insisting that sex, sexuality and sexiness is visible and accountable (Foucault 1976). This is not to say that we shouldn't have an emotional response to Cyrus, either finding her a worrying example of the exploitation of a young woman who grew up in the spotlight of the celebrity 'star' system, or a playful symbol of sexual exuberance and healthy, youthful body confidence. Both responses are not only reasonable, but necessary given the current ways we have of making sense of sexy celebrity. But following Dyer (2004), we could also turn our attention to the public response to the rise of Cyrus as 'sex symbol' as a reflection of current notions of what the 'sexy' female body means today; about our cultural values toward sexiness and 'sexualisation'.

If we take this approach, then it can be argued that cultural feelings around sexiness are the result of a deep anxiety about (youthful) female sexuality. The public reaction to Cyrus demonstrates concern over the 'tarnishing' of good, clean, proper and pure femininity (with all its racial connotations), a lack of agency over her own sexual representation, and also sometimes a reaction to prior 'prudish' attitudes towards sexuality: a celebratory cheer for sexual liberation. For instance, the social commentaries around Cyrus' *Wrcaking Ball* video, whether celebratory or concerned, were quick to place its cultural meanings within the realms of sex. Discussion of the video paid little attention to the fact that the lyrics of *Wrecking Ball* are not overly sexual. Commentary assumed that the young naked female body was in itself a sexual and sexualised object, not merely a naked body. Unlike Monroe's quip about having the radio on, which Dyer (2004) tells us reflects the normalcy of the naked body, Cyrus' rebuttal and appeal was to seeing the video through its emotional value[3]: this was a naked body that needed defending, and not one to make light of.

Public reactions to Cyrus' various performances also need to be located in the context of her celebrity narrative. Having come from the successful Disney show *Hannah Montana*, Cyrus is already located in a recognizable 'sexy' narrative: Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera, both of whom appeared as Disney stars, were also framed through media storytelling as having 'transformed themselves' into sex symbols in response to the transition into adulthood (and in ways that also included changes in haircut, whether shaven or braided). Our concern with their transitions into 'adult' sexuality are not only located in their image, but their audience. Having previously been consumed by a 'young', largely female audience, the narrative of concern that follows these celebrities is also a concern with their apparent 'role model' status, and the 'effect' that this may have on young girls (even while young girls reproduce the same narratives of concern around celebrities like Cyrus, see Jackson, Vares and Gill 2013).

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[2] http://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/oct/03/sinead-o-connor-open-letter-miley-cyrus
[3] http://www.mtv.com/news/1713881/miley-cyrus-defends-wrecking-ball/

The noise about Cyrus and other 'sex symbol' celebrities is therefore not a concern about the celebrities themselves, but a future-oriented concern for a new generation of women and their sexual behavior. In a recent article in the *Daily Mail*[4], journalist Laura Cox reported on a study that found that sexy celebrities such as Cyrus 'affect women's confidence, education and even their employment prospects', because of the 'mixed messages' that these celebrities send out to 'impressionable' young girls. Nearly 350 comments follow the article, many of which lambast the recent sexualisation of women:

> *The rise of so called feminism has damaged women so much, instead of being the sexually liberated sex they keep telling us they are, they have only become more and more exploited.Women are now meat products being exploited for a sex driven culture. Sad.* (Lemonsorbet, Ireland)

In the article and in nearly all comments following it, the reaction to Cyrus (and others) demonstrates a concern that young women are going to be unable to take part in the continuation of middle-class self-betterment (education, employment) because of a sexualised media context that encourages them to be more sexual, thereby reducing the narrative of concern 'to a problem of sexual behaviours and sexuality rather than sexism' (Egan 2013: 267). In addition, the article associates sexualisation with body issues, lack of confidence and poor self-esteem, taking place within a culture that demands that women 'love their bodies': a cultural discourse that extols women to already understand their bodies as a site of failure of confidence (Gill and Elias 2014). The discussion takes place within a sentiment where young girls' 'confidence' has become an individual problem, not a societal issue perpetuated by the very same noise represented by the social commentary around celebrity sexiness (Evans and Riley 2014). Where any societal blame, of course, lands is at the feet of feminism itself - as suggested in the comment above - for providing a framework for 'sexual liberation' in the first place! (see Ringrose 2013 for a similar observation of how feminism becomes discredited in education discourses).

Public reactions to Cyrus therefore suggest that intimacy, sexiness and sexual subjectivity have become sites of anxiety, with attendant concerns about the 'proper' sexual conduct of a future generation of women, who are expected to 'do' sexiness in particular ways. What is perhaps more intriguing about the mediated noise and anxiety surrounding Cyrus, whose 'sexiness' has become an issue of public concern, is where the noise doesn't follow. In 2013, Cyrus released short film *Tongue Tied*. The film featured Cyrus against a white backdrop, wrapped in latex, covered in black paint, and variously drew on allusions to bondage, S&M and fetish fashion. It was perhaps best defined by the expression 'porno chic' (McNair 2002). Yet there was little media discussion or contention surrounding this video. And what seemed to differentiate this representation of Cyrus from others that year was its production. The video was produced by Quentin Jones, a photographic artist. The hyperbole around sexy celebrity is thus selective. We might therefore want to suggest that *Tongue Tied's* comparatively 'high-brow', 'tasteful' and 'stylish' production deemed it outside of the realms of concern, anxiety and regulation. Thus the apparently 'democratic' media-spheres in which we live today are only available to those few with the cultural capital to understand its codes and take up its calls to 'sexual liberation'.

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[4] http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2419993/Miley-Cyrus-Rihanna-damage-girls-self-esteem--harm-education-job-prospects--says-academic.html

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