

2019

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Recommended Citation

Rosenberg, Linnea, "Emerging Dark Matter: LA's Underground Women Musicians in the Digital Age" (2019). *Scripps Senior Theses*. 1267.
https://scholarship.claremont.edu/scripps_theses/1267

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**EMERGING DARK MATTER: LA'S UNDERGROUND WOMEN MUSICIANS IN THE
DIGITAL AGE**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

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DECEMBER 14, 2018

I. Introduction

Virtual Angel is an independent e-zine publication that attempts to frame an emerging canon of self-made, women musicians that work in the margins of Los Angeles' music and culture industries. In a metropolis historically glamorized for its hub of major record labels accompanied by the lure of celebrity stardom, budding artists that do not conform to the traditional Hollywood mold have become disillusioned by capitalist venture. Instead of pursuing commercial success by conventional means of distribution and corporate ownership, young musicians are more often opting for a distinctly Do-It-Yourself approach to music production, as well as independent representation, self-promotion, and fan engagement. The rise of social media networking, in tandem with the increased accessibility of the digital economy, the democratization of the Internet, and the availability of inexpensive audio recording and production technologies, have offered a new generation of women entrepreneurs the tools to become leaders in their alternative communities. With the ability to engender empowering social spaces and participate independently in an underground economy under the guise of the Instagram account, women marginalized by the mainstream can autonomously cultivate their individualized aesthetic and develop their personal brand, deliver their visual and audio content directly to specific audiences, and further the inclusive politics of the counter-cultural musical genres with which they identify. The unconventional musicians and diverse identities featured in *Virtual Angel's* first issue, including La Goony Chonga, Callie Ryan, Kaili, and Christiane Øyen, are representative of a contemporary post-feminist youth movement that is responsible for merging underground spaces and alternative music content onto the digital sphere. The first 18-page issue of this multimedia magazine, befittingly entitled "Dark Matter" in reference to Gregory Sholette's theory of the structural invisibility of underground arts and culture producers,

features an obscure mass of invisible women musicians essentially responsible for sustaining the industry within which they operate (Sholette, 1). *Virtual Angel: Dark Matter (Issue 1)* intends to assess these individuals' usage of a highly visual platform such as Instagram, which yields them the power to generate representation and solidarity within their marginalized communities.

Through in-depth interviews, portraits, and digital photographs of the city of Los Angeles, my thesis project seeks to contextualize and document this innovative and overlooked division of gendered cultural labor, as well as use their status as subcultural icons to draw implications about the aesthetic, economic, and political ideologies that encompass their unique social groups.

II. Project Format and Zine History

Before its mainstream adaptation, the zine was a self-published, self-distributed publication whose form and content reflected the needs, concerns, and leftist interests of youth communities ignored by conservative corporate media. Oftentimes, these groups tended to gather around a common cause or the subversive politics of a particular music scene. For example, the iconic punk generation of the 1970s and eighties employed the zine for its inexpensive reproduction costs for large-scale dissemination of copies. With the accessibility of technological advancements such as the Xerox copier, distribution of curated images and written information could easily reach thousands within a given subgroup.

In the nineties, women marginalized by the male-dominated punk scene, as well as mainstream women's interest magazines, saw the potential of the zine to empower excluded individuals and incite direct action that challenged this prejudice—as exemplified by the feminist contributions of the fans and members of the riot grrrl movement. Beginning as a publication written for a select group of women, the zine evolved into a nationwide feminist agenda. Predating Web 2.0's email and instant messaging by three decades, feminists and punk youth

utilized the zine as a mode of “mass” communication and activist organizing, much like how contemporary youth employ Twitter, Facebook and Instagram to engender virtual social spaces founded upon mutual interests, shared identity, and revolutionary politics.

As an alternative mode of media, the independent zine historically functions within an underground economy that is largely operated by forward-thinking youth. Triumphant over the interests of ordinary people over the glitz and glamour of celebrity culture, zine producers are responsible for catering to communities with diverse interests and identities. Thus, their primary interest is not monetary gain, but the redefinition of labor. As elucidated by Alice Marwick in her essay *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age*, zine writers redefine work in a new creative economy of “flexible” freelance work, rejecting “wage slavery” and the hierarchical capitalist system of working for another’s profit (Marwick, 52). This relates directly to the autonomous cultural labor performed by the diverse women featured in *Virtual Angel*, who use their voices to enable themselves financially and uplift their communities without having to appeal to mainstream corporate interests.

Transitioning from the physical pamphlet to the intangible PDF, the zine has become a commodity in the 21st century underground digital economy. Although many zines are still bought and sold in physical releases, others have opted to distribute online using ecommerce and promote their content through social media outlets. Collages of tweets, pixelated screenshots and iPhone selfies of the e-zine have replaced the familiar grit of the paper zine’s gritty materiality, hand-drawn images and scrawl. This refined, highly graphic aesthetic reflects the characteristics of the manicured cybernetic spaces in which contemporary youth congregate and construct their social identities. As with Instagram, the modern zine employs a new subjectivity. In its series of profiles that mimic the personalized and graphic nature of new media participation and rapid

cultural consumption, *Virtual Angel Magazine* encapsulates the aesthetic and social experience of Instagram through informal interviews and high-resolution photographs. Accessible via Instagram (@virtualangelmag) and online (www.virtualangelmagazine.com), *Virtual Angel* is an accessible online archive that allows fans and strangers to personally discover the ideologies and practices that inform the image of the subcultural icon.

III. Online Labor Ideologies

The women included in the group portrait captured within *Virtual Angel's* first issue all participate within the underground digital economy as cultural laborers and self-promoters independent of capitalist media. These women rely on their digital platforms as the foundation for their public-facing careers and a means to primary or supplemental income. For my entrepreneurial subjects, Instagram serves as their main outlet for advertisement, fan-engagement, and in some cases, networks for artistic collaboration and support. While all participants identify as self-made musicians, each individual possesses their distinct cultural voice and engage in intersecting identity politics that form the basis of their online persona and determine their audiences. Distinct from entertainers of the past, independent musicians in the digital age must perform their labor outside the context of performances and public appearances; They engage in constant maintenance of their image so as not to fall into oblivion or lose traction within the fast-paced cultural economy. Frequently employing Instagram's variety of features—including Instagram Live, stories, polls, embedded links, and Q&A's—these artists command the awareness of others, directly interacting with their audiences as a part of cultivating an alluring and personable brand (Marwick). As micro-celebrities in their respective subcultures, these women are required to uphold their statuses by creating a persona, generating appealing content, and producing an air of “authenticity” in the eyes of online admirers (Marwick). Often, this

includes an element of exhibitionism and transparency. However, distinct from the carefully moderated online presences of conventional celebrities, these micro-celebrities develop their image without oversight from talent managers and without contracts. Lacking these protections, independent musicians are expected to expose every aspect of themselves to their online fans, and are thus made much more vulnerable in the public eye.

However, these sacrifices made and risks taken by women active in the underground cultural economy are often articulated as labors of love. Referred to as “aspirational labor” by sociologist Brooke Erin Duffy, the independent creative work is situated at the intersection of leisure and labor, and is expected to pay off in the long run in the forms of monetary rewards or social capital (6). Interestingly, this uncompensated online labor practice, most common in the creative industry, is also derivative of traditional notions of “women’s work.” As in domestic roles, caregivers, and reproductive labor, women aspirational laborers similarly occupy undervalued and invisible economic roles, although they perform essential functions in the consumer capitalist, media-based economy (Duffy, 8). Employing postfeminist ideologies of hyper-visibility and commodity-based individual expression as paths to financial mobility, the social media icons featured in *Virtual Angel* perform cultural labor that remains devalued by the mainstream industry, but their contributions continue to be primarily motivated by their engagement with their online fan bases.

Like contemporary zine producers working in the margins of the cultural economy, underground women musicians express perspectives that are largely absent from popular culture. A rejection of corporate media, independent approaches to cultural production of music content and alternative music consumption can be considered deliberate acts of capitalist, political, and feminist resistance (Marwick, 52). Women producers utilize social media to construct their own

politicized identities on the web for their own gaze and for those who identify with their experiences, embracing their race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and/or ability as an interpellation of self-actualized representation and an undertaking of subcultural leadership.

IV. Participants

My first subject, La Goony Chonga (@LaGoonyChonga) represents an unusual voice in LA's hip-hop scene. A queer, Cuban rapper from Miami, La Goony Chonga identifies not only as a prolific musician and independent record label founder, but also a young mother and former stripper. Fundamental to her distinct subcultural identity, the artist embraces her Latinx, working-class background as a woman raised in the hood of South Florida defined by cholo/chonga culture. As explained by Jillian Hernandez in her article, "Miss, You Look like a Bratz Doll," the chonga identity is at once a hyper-visible figure in pop culture and an invisible one in the margins of postfeminist scholarship. Reclaiming her heavily politicized body on the Internet, La Goony Chonga participates simultaneously in race and gender discourses and autonomous image production—especially palpable in her countless selfies on her Instagram page touting arms covered in black-and-grey tattoos, eyes coated in a thick layer of eyeliner, and ears embellished with massive bamboo hoop earrings. Rapping in her native tongue of Spanish, she rejects the post-colonial and patriarchal hegemonies of the Western music industry, targeting an audience of primarily Latinx women and queer folks of color. Her Instagram emphasizes her control over her image, admired by a sizable following of 31,000 supportive fans that find solace in her sexually empowering music as an integral dimension of this multifaceted image. Her transparency online is also remarkable, considering that she uses Instagram stories to openly share her challenges with motherhood and details about her intimate relationship with fellow rapper Rue Maneli, discuss her encounters as a sex-worker, and elaborate on her consistent

struggles to succeed without representation in an industry dominated by men. In essence, she is a pioneer—mapping an intersectional space for women of color who identify with the narratives of male-dominated rap music but seek an emboldened female role model to call their own.

Christiane Øyen (@ChristianClub_org) is an emerging icon in the transgender-youth community as a gender-fluid femme and in Los Angeles' underground electronic music scene as a self-taught producer and performer. On Instagram, she promotes her Bruce-Springsteen inspired ballads accessible via Bandcamp for a small fee and announces her weekly DJ-sets that occur throughout Los Angeles. As a working-class community college student still living at home with her parents, Christiane depends on her album sales and DJ-sets for supplemental income. When she lands a paid gig, she performs as her Communist preacher persona, *The Christian Club*, in a typical DIY-venue—a shipping warehouse in the Fashion District transformed by strings of Christmas lights and disco balls. When she's not playing shows or making music with her collaborators, Christiane spends ample time on Instagram. Using the story feature, she shares her personal life, including her daily activities and interactions with her girlfriend, to her modest following of 3,000. She also frequently communicates with her followers about her struggles with mental health, financial hardship, gender transitioning processes, and other serious issues facing the queer community at large. She also utilizes Instagram to express her feminine identity through alternative fashion, posting extravagant outfits and makeup looks every week. Embodying a catwalk and a soapbox, Christiane's Instagram account functions as a hybridity of music and aesthetic content, personal diary entries, and a space for gender discourse and trans-visibility.

Callie Ryan (@callie.01) is a self-taught electronic producer and singer, resident DJ for a radio station called DubLab, and holistic health enthusiast. With 1,500 followers, Callie's

Instagram is dedicated to documenting the highpoints of her career as a musician and her life in South Pasadena with her drummer boyfriend, Arlen. Her Instagram feed features a mix of graphic DJ-set posters and radio show announcements, poses of the musician wearing vintage dresses, and pictures of her nutritious culinary creations in hand-made ceramic vessels. In contrast to micro-celebrities like La Goony Chonga, Callie approaches social media with striking candor, humor, and informality. Dispersed among promotional content, she chooses to disclose her personal traumas, mental health, body image and physical disabilities on her Instagram stories. She readily discusses her battles with having had multiple uterine surgeries, indigestion, and depression. As an artist who explores sexual vulnerability and the feminine body throughout her musical oeuvre, Callie Ryan chooses to present herself with openness in an effort to generate solidarity among her largely female following and live by the very healing ideologies imbedded throughout her music.

My final candidate, Carrie Sun (also known by her Chinese given name, Kaili) (@carriekaili), is a first-generation Chinese woman who works by day as a software programmer at BRUD Agency and plays out at night as an underground dancehall and afrobeat DJ. Carrie recently graduated from the University of Southern California, earning a practical degree in computer science and a social network that has allowed her to find her place within the POC electronic dance community of Los Angeles. As a female DJ of color, Carrie has had to make a name for herself in a genre largely colonized by white male producers. On her Instagram stories, Carrie promotes her DJ-sets that are held at safe-space venues sponsored by an LA-based promoter called Directory Service. She also actively uses her Instagram feed to promote the work of other female producers of color, circulate her own SoundCloud radio mixes that she puts together in her spare time, and express her appreciation for the alternative dance community.

While she does not rely on her work as a DJ for a significant source of income, Carrie identifies strongly with her subculture. Exhibited in her plethora of Instagram posts, her bleached eyebrows, short pixie cut, tattooed arms, and athleisure wear situate Carrie within neo-rave culture.

V. Production Process

Virtual Angel is an archive that documents and investigates the fluctuating image, online experiences, and ideologies of underground women musicians and would not exist without their participation and direct input in the form of portraits and extensive interviews. Similar to the unpaid aspirational labor that these women perform in the necessary acts of self-promotion and self-branding within the digital economy, the contributions of my subjects were not compensated by money but by the promise of exposure through my small academic circle of distribution. When contacted by an unassuming Scripps undergraduate via email in early September, most of the women who responded to my interview requests were enthusiastic to discuss the theoretical frameworks within their music at no cost. This immaterial exchange among DIY content producers is very common in the underground creative industry, where money is often scarce but favors are readily negotiated to benefit both parties.

Over the course of two months, I arranged personal meetings with my four candidates, including La Goony Chonga, Christiane Øyen of the Christian Club, Callie Ryan, and Carrie Sun. After receiving a plethora of responses from diverse musicians across Los Angeles, I decided to narrow my scope from a general overview of underground musicians to self-made women musicians. Aside from having attended high school with Christiane, I encountered the other women directly through their Instagram accounts when I was struck by their individuality. Christiane, a transgender woman who uses music to express her gendered identity; La Goony

Chonga, a queer Latina sex-worker and mother with a budding rap career; Carrie, a Chinese tech employee who doubles as a dancehall DJ; and Callie Ryan, a college-graduate who believes in the power of music as a tool for holistic healing from sexual trauma and abuse all differ from the mainstream in their deliberate practices and political ideologies. I also had the opportunity to see a few of them perform live in the last year, but had never spoken personally to any of the women about their work outside of this context. The intimate domestic setting of the interview, along with my probing questions about their personal values and sacrifices for their career, intimidated me at first. However, I was humbled by the many invitations I received to visit these women in their homes across the city.

Each weekend in October, I sat down with a different musician with the intention of getting to know them as a personal admirer and academic. I could not help but feel an overwhelming sense of awe when seeing these digital micro-celebrities in the flesh. While none of my candidates have an enormous following on Instagram, they embody significant translocal icons in their respective alternative communities and possess an illusion of social capital on screen (Subcultures Network, 96). At the same time, the interviewees' friendliness and hospitality, casual demeanor and humility impressed me. When we spoke, it was like I was chatting with a new friend about a shared interest: her music. When each candidate theoretically discussed her craft and the cultivation of her online persona, she intrinsically revealed her identity and core values. Although the interviewees have distinct backgrounds and experiences that shape their career, they were united by their identities as marginalized women who saw themselves and their intentions as too radical or unconventional for the mainstream music and culture industries. They positioned themselves democratically in their subcultures as

simultaneously participants and pioneers, responsible for organizing their communities online and generating music for fans from all walks of life to consume and share.

I presented each of my subjects with the same set of questions that investigate their viewpoints of their own cultural and digital labor, their definitions of success, as well as the politics inherent in their music. When debating the pros and cons of aspirational labor in the digital realm, the producers gave divergent responses. Some careers were more dependent on Instagram than others, especially that of La Goony Chonga. Of all my candidates, La Goony Chonga puts in the most labor online day-to-day, creating engaging visual and interactive content to curate her persona for thousands of consumers. She views her participation on social media as professional work and a valuable investment, and thus situated herself emotionally at a distance from her fans and followers more so than Callie Ryan, for example. Callie Ryan, a musician who explores the vulnerability of the feminine self and centers the body in her oeuvre, expressed anxiety when discussing her relationship to Instagram. The pressure to perform uncompensated emotional labor online was tangible to all musicians interviewed for *Virtual Angel*, and all participants spoke of this push for self-branding as one expected from contemporary creatives who seek to maintain their powerful status as leaders in their subcultures.

When considering success in the digital realm, my subjects generally expressed fulfillment and pride in their accomplishments as independent creators and validation from their subcultural fan base. The words “community” and “scene” were employed frequently in reference to their followers, indicating a sense of acceptance and belonging to subgroups in which youth cultivate their identities, interests, and lifestyles (Subculture Network, 98).

Following the interview portion of our meeting, I conducted an informal photo session in a location of their choice so as to document the styles and semiotics of their respective

subcultures. Callie Ryan and La Goony Chonga insisted on having their photographs taken in their home studios, which served as a fitting backdrop for the women who spent most of their time recording with their partners. Callie wore a simple black smock dress while La Goony Chonga readily showed off her jewelry and tattoos in a sleeveless pink tracksuit. Callie was rather camera-shy, but she eventually opened up and gave me her best smile. On the other hand, La Goony Chonga was certainly a natural in front of the camera, offering a range of fierce poses and the occasional smirk. For her, it was all business. Carrie suggested we have a casual photo shoot at the Atwater Bike Path, an industrial setting in LA where many up-and-coming artists and models get their portraits taken. She was hesitant while having her picture taken, but I reassured her that the candid shots I captured of her reflected her vibrant personality. Lastly, Christiane asked me to document her debut show as *Christian Club* at midnight on a Tuesday in Downtown LA. She wore a plaid red dress and thick eyeliner, a grunge-inspired costume to match the gritty warehouse venue. It was my first time photographing a live concert with a portable flash in front of dozens of people, a challenging and rewarding experience I will never forget.

After hours of transcribing interviews and editing photographs in November, I had yet to construct an e-zine that would do justice to the creative forces featured and reflect the graphic aesthetics of LA's contemporary youth culture. To accompany the portraits of my subjects, I took pictures of the cityscape on my commutes into and out of Los Angeles, capturing the beauty and grime of the metropolis that for self-made musicians was an emblem of opportunity. Using Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator to format my text and images, I created a rich layout that emphasized the visual authority of images. Like Instagram, my zine intends to reflect the

experience of an imaginary, curated space as well as examine the semiotics of subcultural belonging.

As a whole, the first issue of *Virtual Angel Magazine* functions as an empowering archive that reifies the contributions of marginal musicians highly active in the mutable world of social media technologies, yet overlooked by the corporate music industry. In a world of fleeting information and constantly emerging pop culture icons, these underground women will not be paid tribute, if not anything, for their prolific labor in the underground digital cultural economy. From this stimulating experience of meeting my personal idols, I can now comprehend the insurmountable labor, financial investments, and emotional sacrifices these women have put in to achieve their scarcely visible status as micro-celebrities. For some, like Callie Ryan and Carrie Sun, they are relatively content with their status and contributions to their communities. For others, like Christiane and La Goony Chonga, they have far-reaching goals of fame and financial stability that have yet to be realized. From these interviews, I discovered that while each artist has their own ideas of success and definitions of progress, they all expressed gratitude for their online subcultural fan bases that continue to validate their efforts and inspire their creative drive.

While their music and images are circulated and promoted online, the most tangible outcomes of their cultural labor are best perceived in the shining eyes of alterative youth hitting the hidden dance floors of LA's nightlife, the routines of women of color working late nights at the strip club or the celebrations on their nights off, the escapist cosplays performed by trans youth musicians, and the private moments of healing for those afflicted by trauma. The distinct anthems produced by Carrie Sun, Callie Ryan, La Goony Chonga, and Christiane Øyen empower individuals and enable collective congregations of youth in the physical world. I am humbled by the efforts of the self-made women who not only pursued their creative intuitions, but also used

their status as micro-celebrities to build alternative communities of solidarity for a generation of restless youth.

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