



# I Just Ride

## White Femininity, Melancholia, and the Settler Colonial Aesthetic in Lana Del Rey's America

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### Abstract

With over 54.9 million monthly listeners on Spotify alone, Lana Del Rey has taken the world by storm with her melancholic music and vintage American aesthetic (Spotify, 2024). This article seeks to identify and analyze the perpetuation of settler colonial memory and power structures within the music and aesthetics of Lana Del Rey. Despite having the potential to critique an idealized notion of the American dream, I argue that Del Rey's aesthetic ultimately perpetuates settler-colonial power structures and imaginaries through a nostalgic idealization of America and of white femininity, founded on settler colonial violence. I interrogate Del Rey's use of aesthetics through Kevin Bruyneel's (2021) concept of "settler memory," which describes how structures of settler politics, history and media selectively remember and frame the past to erase Indigenous existence and sovereignty. I first argue that Del Rey's aesthetic romanticizes open landscapes and erases the past and ongoing reality of settler-colonial violence within the United States. I then highlight how Del Rey's depiction of Kennedy-era politics reaffirms settler colonial power structures and white heteropatriarchy. I finally analyze the implications of Del Rey's "sad girl" aesthetic in bolstering white fragility and framing the sexuality of Indigenous and racialized women as inferior and degrading. Del Rey's contributions to settler memory as one of the most popular female artists and celebrities of the early-mid 2000s are largely underdetermined and deserve further analysis.

### Keywords

Settler-Colonialism, Aesthetics, White Femininity, Thematic Analysis, Lana Del Rey, Visual Media

## **Introduction**

Lana Del Rey, born Elizabeth Woolridge Grant, is an 11-time Grammy-nominated American singer-songwriter, known for her melancholic depiction of America across landscapes of Las Vegas, New York and Old Hollywood. Central to her early albums *Born to Die* (2011), and *Paradise* (2012) is an exploration of American identity through the lens of longing, loss, and nostalgia. An abundance of academic analysis has centered around Del Rey's music and Americana aesthetic as a critical performance of the neoliberal American dream (Crutcher 2019; Usmar 2014; Nurani & Ananda 2025; Kruger 2025). However, I argue that despite the transformative potential of Del Rey's work, her discography ultimately perpetuates settler-colonial power structures and imaginaries through a nostalgic idealization of America and white femininity founded on colonial violence. For the use of this paper, "Americana aesthetic" broadly refers to a sentimental utilization of American history, pop culture, iconography and material culture (among other themes) as a form of cultural heritage (Holtsträter & Pöhlmann, 2024). As Del Rey is born and based in the United States of America, this essay will largely define Americana and America within the context of the US. While Americana is an incredibly broad and subjective concept, this conceptualization serves the purpose of this paper as a tool for understanding how collective notions of America are continuously shaped, performed, and constructed (Holtsträter & Pöhlmann, 2024). Using a framework of settler colonial theory, this essay will first examine Del Rey's perpetuation of settler-colonial narratives. It will then examine her representation of temporal aesthetics as they intersect with her portrayal of nostalgic yearning for America. Finally, it will examine the critical constructions of white femininity amidst her settler identity and "Question for the Culture" public statement. With roughly 54.9 million monthly listeners of Del Rey on Spotify alone (Spotify, 2024), her contributions to settler narratives, as they are digested and solidified into a settler imaginary through mass consumption are quite significant and warrant further analysis.

## **Review of Literature**

Communications theorist David Marshall argues that "celebrity status" confers a certain level of discursive power within a society. Celebrities simultaneously represent a marketable commodity, an example of individualistic success in their given field, and "a voice above others, a voice that is channeled into media systems as legitimately significant" (1997, p. x). Dyer &

McDonald, (1998) similarly view celebrities as constructed vehicles for competing hegemonic and subversive ideologies. Through their concept of “star theory,” Dyer & McDonald argue that celebrities attempt to manage competing forms of ideology in three major ways: displacement (i.e. by remaining apolitical), foregrounding one side as either hegemonic or subversive, or reconciling conflicting ideology into their work and celebrity persona (p. 26).

Much of Del Rey’s transformative potential has been defended by scholars as taking place across a similar line of gendered and sexual reconciliation. Crutcher (2019) and Usmar (2014) argue that Del Rey’s use of the Americana aesthetic is one based in a respective “American grotesque,” and “American gothic” that romanticizes America’s chaos, material culture and idealistic potential, while playing within the tension of its violent structural failures. Crutcher (2019) cites Del Rey’s ability in particular to “depict herself both as street prostitute and as the Virgin Mary, as a rough biker’s Ol’ Lady and as a glamorous Malibu homeowner” (p. 251). As Dyer & McDonald (1998) explain, celebrity culture perpetuates often contradictory gendered and racial ideologies, condemning women’s sexuality while expecting female celebrities to be simultaneously virginal and sexy—an expectation Del Rey performs, mocks and embraces throughout her array of work.

A great deal of academic analysis has therefore taken a postfeminist approach to Del Rey’s discography, interpreting her use of aesthetics as a form of transgressive gendered performance. Kruger (2025) suggests Del Rey’s work as a performed “queering” of white femininity and the neoliberal figure of the “ideal woman” in a method akin to drag. Nurani and Ananda (2025) likewise highlight Lana Del Rey’s reclamation of sadness and emotional vulnerability, debating its value to construct a more transgressive version of “female empowerment” based in emotional complexity rather than postfeminist detachment and “polished strength” (p. 76). While these sources advocate an intentional manipulation of gendered aesthetics and ideologies on Del Rey’s behalf, a thorough analysis of how race intersects with her performances is lacking from both Crutcher (2019), Usmar (2014), and Nurani & Ananda’s (2025) analysis. While Kruger (2025) acknowledges Del Rey’s aesthetics of white femininity as they are tied to supremacist themes of purity and fragility, her analysis is largely isolated to a gendered approach, separated from Del Rey’s use of the Americana aesthetic. The use of this aesthetic is inherently grounded in cultures and landscapes of settler colonial violence.

Scholars such as Mooney (2018) critically address the intersection of race within Del Rey's work. Mooney argues that while sadness can be employed as a form of resistance, Lana Del Rey's "sad girl" aesthetic is an affective performance of race based on the weaponization of white victimhood and cultural appropriation from West-coast Latina/x artists—who first coined the "sad girl" movement to cultivate solidarity and resist machismo culture within their communities. Oakeby (2024) similarly utilizes the concept of the "eternal feminine" to describe Del Rey's nostalgic depiction of whiteness, post-war consumerism, and "the all-American girl" who reproduces and loves her white nation, as she does her white lover (p. 6). While Oakeby argues that Del Rey is ultimately disillusioned by her fatherland throughout *Born to Die*, one can't help but consider the idealized, white-coded form of patriotism underlying her vision for America in the first place. In this sense, while much of the existing literature has explored Del Rey's discursive and feminist potential, and, in some cases, the intersection of racialized and gendered themes within her work, this analysis has remained largely separated from a critical settler colonial perspective.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Del Rey's ability to project herself across and onto various time periods and landscapes of the United States can be understood through Kevin Bruyneel's (2021) concept of "settler memory." Bruyneel uses settler memory to describe how Indigeneity is "variously constructed, reaffirmed...and refashioned through such means as elite narratives, popular culture, historical teachings, national and communal myths" that render Indigeneity as highly visible and exploitable, yet simultaneously eternally absent (p.14). Considering Del Rey's discursive celebrity power, I analyzed her work as a legitimate and potent contribution to collective understandings of settler colonialism and Indigeneity. Addressing Del Rey's use of distinct time periods and eras within her work (i.e. 1960s America), I draw on Mark Rifkin's (2017) concept of "settler time" as a contribution and framing force to settler memory. Settler time describes the process through which colonial nations have historically regulated time as a tool for instilling colonial patterns, assimilation, and systems. This is achieved through both memory of time (i.e. how and what is remembered through history), as well as control over how time is conceptualized (i.e. the ways in which time is gendered and raced). I examine how Del Rey's manipulation of time and space perpetuates a settler version of time, contributing to greater

settler-colonial themes and power structures. Given the role of settler colonialism as a continuous process of physical dispossession and violence, settler memory plays a vital role in organizing the cultural discourses and political meanings that justify these physical structures (Bruyneel, 2021).

Furthermore, as a white settler scholar writing from the traditional territory of the Neutral, Anishinaabeg, and Haudenosaunee peoples, I am largely shaped by these dominant settler narratives. I acknowledge my position and distance from lived experience as an inhibitor and source of bias in my ability to critically analyze Del Rey's work. Included in this was my decision to centre Bruyneel, who is another settler scholar, as the main theoretical source for my paper. While I want to emphasize the utmost importance of centering Indigenous scholarship in analyses of settler colonialism, I use the concept of "settler memory" as a grounding theory for the multitude of academic study conducted around the political, cultural and social mechanisms of settler colonialism. Considering the constraints of a shorter essay, Bruyneel's reliance on a wide and diverse range of Native, Indigenous, and Black scholarship allowed for my analysis to remain in dialogue with multiple interconnected perspectives. While this does and should not serve as a replacement for direct engagement with Indigenous scholarship, I made this methodological choice with the aim to provide a concise and specific grounding lens for my analysis of Del Rey's work.

### **Methodology**

Considering Lana Del Rey's vast discography—including over nine studio albums—the scope of this project required a narrowed focus. I decided to concentrate on two of Del Rey's earliest works: *Born to Die*, and her extended play *Paradise*. I chose these early albums as they constitute the foundation of Del Rey's discography and use of her iconic Americana aesthetic. While Del Rey's entire discography is highly aestheticized, *Born to Die* and *Paradise* represent distinctly temporal and spatial works. As *Dissent* writer Kate Arnoff describes, Lana Del Rey's *Born to Die* persona revolves "in one way or another around death, bad boyfriends, and Americana—sometimes all three at once, and always painted in a thick, tacky coat of nostalgia" (2014, p. 11).

Over a two-week period (from November 4–18, 2024), I consolidated the lyrics of Del Rey's songs, within a shared document, organizing each song within a table and each album

within a different document section. I primarily focused on an analysis of the songs “Ride,” “National Anthem,” “Born to Die,” and “Off to the Races.” From there, I conducted a thematic analysis through a close reading of her lyrics and their associated visual works, specifically the music videos for “Ride,” “National Anthem,” and “Tropico.” While selecting my material I drew from Bruyneel’s (2021) analysis of the “mutually constitutive relationship” between heteropatriarchy, anti-Black racism, and settler colonialism through his concept of “settler memory” (p. 32). I analyzed content based on three main criteria: connection to a melancholia and the white feminine aesthetic, broader relationship to the Americana aesthetic, and explicit contribution to settler-colonial memory. I sought to analyze how these intersecting hierarchies of oppression intertwined within the works of Del Rey to construct an aesthetic of nostalgia and whiteness. While my choice of visual and lyrical evidence is perhaps not novel in the greater scheme of analysis on Del Rey’s work, little examination has been done to connect these themes within a settler colonial theoretical framework.

### **“I Just Ride,” Settler Desire and Relationality to Land**

Del Rey’s song “Ride” on her EP *Paradise* (2012), is a ballad saturated with classic American iconography. The accompanying music video depicts Del Rey perched atop a motorcycle as she rides across the open desert, smoking, and drinking with a group of Hells Angels in a romanticized performance of wild freedom. Drawing from the work of scholar Kim TallBear, Bruyneel (2021) argues that settler memory fundamentally operates through a “simultaneous past and present,” one that “mnemonically absorbs” Indigenous identity into the background of settler (especially white settler) life, absorbing Indigeneity into easily controllable symbols, stereotypes and aesthetics (p. 29). The chorus of the song, “I’ve been out on that open road...I’ve got a war in my mind/So, I just ride” and Del Rey’s opening monologue within the music video, where she refers to herself as a “chameleon soul/with no moral compass pointing due North” (Del Rey, 2012e) position the Nevada desert as an empty, open, landscape for self and sexual discovery. This structure of memory relies heavily on depictions of *terra nullius* or “nobody’s land,” a concept historically enacted throughout the political and cultural history of the US, used to frame territory as untouched and inherently available for conquest (Moreton-Robinson, 2015, p. xx). In this case Lana Del Rey’s spiritual, emotional, and artistic conquests. Indigeneity is not fully erased in this regard, but as TallBear describes, it is

fundamentally craved and consumed by White America, used as a nation-building tactic to establish a moral and physical claim to the land of America (TallBear cited in Bruyneel, p.19). Del Rey’s hunger to consume and claim Indigeneity is made tremendously explicit through her appropriation of the headdress, which she wears while laughing, singing, and toting a handgun (see Fig. 1). In her desire to embody the all-American girl (Oakeby, 2024), Del Rey engages in a form of appropriation akin to mascotry, one that attempts, as Bruyneel (2021) describes, “to acculturate a sense of settler belonging on this land” by acknowledging Indigenous peoples as historical figureheads, while rendering their contemporary identities, autonomy, and claims to self-determination obsolete” (p. 142).

**Figure 1:**

*Del Rey wears a headdress and holds a handgun in the music video for “Ride” (2012).*



One can also point to Lana Del Rey’s romanticization of the “travelling biker” as an expression of white-settler masculinity and heteropatriarchy. The “Ride” music video is interspersed with romantic dalliances across the desert between Lana Del Rey and several different members of her biker crew, ending with Del Rey and her lover screaming at each other in wild release (Del Rey, 2012d). Her depiction of these relationships are often intermingled with shots of her brandishing her handgun while wearing a headdress and racing down the open road with her lover. These images call back to an aesthetic of white settler masculinity, a taming of the “wild frontier” and “wild west” through which white heteropatriarchal fantasies of sexual, physical, and territorial domination have been imagined and enacted (Bruyneel, 2021, p. 128). Just as Del Rey submits to the open road, to her lovers, and to the “war in her mind,” she frames

the open landscape of America as a conquerable wild resource for self-discovery and pleasure. As Moreton-Robinson states, “In its self-legitimacy, white possession operates discursively through narratives of the home of the brave and the land of the free” (Moreton-Robinson, 2015, p. 52), a trope echoed in Del Rey’s *Ride* monologue: “I believe in the country America used to be, I believe in the person I want to become, I believe in the freedom of the open road” (Del Rey, 2012e).

### **A White Woman’s “National Anthem,” Settler Nostalgia and Heteropatriarchy**

Del Rey directly explores this notion of the country America used to be in her song and music video for “National Anthem.” Adopting the polished glamour and hazy Technicolor-esque look of the 1960s, Del Rey personifies herself as late First Lady Jackie Kennedy, with rapper A\$AP Rocky by her side as her modern JFK (see Fig. 2) (Del Rey, 2012f).

#### **Figure 2:**

*Lana Del Rey and A\$AP Rocky as John and Jackie Kennedy, with two of their children running playfully through several luxurious 60’s-era estates in the music video for “National Anthem.”*



The opening lines of the song, “money is the anthem of success/so before we go out what’s your address” (Del Rey, 2011), set the stage for her romantic entanglement and ultimately doomed romance with a Kennedy-era American dream (Samuel, 2012). Considering the violent end of the music video, many scholars have pointed to Del Rey’s iteration of JFK’s death, as a satirical portrayal of institutional power, a false American dream that inevitably ends in tears and destruction (Crutcher, 2019). Kruger (2025), moreover, highlights the radical juxtaposition of

historically white-coded family values expressed by the Kennedys, contrasted with the “ghetto” rap culture embodied by A\$AP Rocky, as an intentional queering of race as a stable category and a rejection of white supremacist power (pp. 254–255). Swezin (2024) similarly highlights the casting choice as a rejection of cinematic convention, and a means of challenging the hegemonic power structures of the early 60s (pp. 120–121).

However, when asked about her decision to draw on early 60s-era aesthetics in the “National Anthem” music video, Del Rey stated in a 2013 interview with *Nylon* that she, “loved the idea of a girl telling her boyfriend, 'Tell me I'm your national anthem, your star-spangled banner, salute to me and love me'... I wanted to show how modern-day romance could still have that classic feel” (Nylon, 2013). Rather than an intentional transgressive queering of the era, Del Rey evidently draws upon an old-fashioned, nostalgic imaginary of heteropatriarchy, calling for utter devotion on behalf of the ideal man, who paternally cares for his woman as he would his (white) nation. Metaphorically and physically mapping herself onto the American flag, the National Anthem, and as the figure of the First Lady, Del Rey constructs a “motherland” of America grounded in a false notion of white femininity and womanhood (Oakeby, 2024). Referencing the highest paragon of white, nuclear heterosexuality, she romanticizes a white institutional idealization of heteropatriarchy that has somehow been tainted over time, having lost its elusive “classic” roots. The language of reclamation, and of proudly embracing America’s romantic and brave past, has been historically invoked as common settler-colonial talking points (Bruyneel 2021). In her obsessive reinstatement of an America that does not and has never existed, Del Rey obscures the history and collective memory of an era distinctly marked by a strengthening Civil Rights Movement and systematic colonial projects such as the operation of residential schools and the Sixties Scoop (Bruyneel, 2021).

Just as she paints over decades of settler-colonial violence and genocide, Del Rey similarly erases how dynamics of “utter devotion” and paternalistic care are products of white settler patriarchy. Her romanticization of such aesthetics severs them from the violent racial and colonial structures by which they are produced. White heteropatriarchy in particular denotes access to white women and marriage as constructional resources to white male citizenship, while framing Black and racialized women as “invisible nonsubjects” (Bruyneel, 2021, p. 65). Rifkin (2017) explores in this regard, the notion that the “classic” nuclear family has been historically and currently used as a vehicle for constructing a settler timescape. The seizing and division of

Native land through allotment policy and private ownership enacted a physical and temporal reframing of life itself—shifting patterns of labour, development and kinship to rely on the isolated heteropatriarchal family structures (Rifkin 2017, p. 96). As Rifkin (2017) states:

Native activists and intellectuals have argued against the idea of inclusion within the United States, understanding that gesture as an erasure of the specificity of Indigenous geopolitical claims, rights to self-determination, autochthonous existence as polities distinct from the settler state, and, perhaps most pointedly, the ways the colonial violence of settler rule has worked through forced incorporation of Indigenous peoples into the “domestic” space of the nation (p.60).

Lana Del Rey’s use of the Kennedy aesthetic represents a romanticized and temporal reframing of domestic space as a nostalgic fantasy. This form of settler time can also be understood as a method of “reproductive temporality” through which the convention of marriage and heterosexual courtship, as a fundamental force in settler-colonial power and capitalism, is naturalized and solidified (Rifkin, 2017, p. 37). A\$AP Rocky’s ultimate fate, as he is “sacrificed” like the real JFK, reduces his role from powerful president to a disposable body within a colonial framework which delineates and erases him as consumable. As Hartman (2006) discusses, Black sovereignty is not necessarily “the dream of a White House, even if it was in Harlem, but of a free territory. It was a dream of autonomy rather than nationhood” (Hartman 2006, as cited in Rifkin, 2019, p. 46).

Just as Del Rey erases Indigenous sovereignty and memory from the open road of *Ride*, A\$AP Rocky is further framed to bolster Del Rey’s white feminine identity, especially its association with tragedy and sadness, the weeping Jackie who mourns her dead, expendable husband. Del Rey’s appropriation of land and memory can be understood as interconnected to her depiction of family and A\$AP Rocky in the *National Anthem* music video. As Bruyneel (2021) describes:

Settler desires for control over land, women, and racial others are at the propertied and patriarchal root of the production of white standing that formalizes...anti-Blackness, and

the genocidal elimination and dispossession of Indigenous peoples—of necro-Indigeneity (p.67).

While Lana Del Rey’s depiction within “National Anthem” may not have been an overt and intentional display of anti-Blackness, her romanticization of the heteropatriarchal nuclear family, in combination with her cultural appropriation and claiming of land in “Ride” combine to cultivate a “necro-Indigeneity” that frames Indigenous lives, sovereignty, and claims obsolete, similarly structuring Black lives as disposable and consumable. Her desire to claim control over women, specifically by appropriating from and villainizing women of colour, will be explored in the next section.

**“Sad, Sad Girl,” White Melancholia & Settler Colonialism:**

Icons Jackie Kennedy and Marilyn Munroe included, upper-class white women have been historically constructed as symbols of the American nation, portrayed as the “reproducers” of a white society requiring the protection of white men (Perry, 2004). This parallels the settler colonial framing of America itself as stolen land that must be preserved and defended at all costs (Bruyneel, 2021). Lana Del Rey perpetuates this dynamic through her music and visuals. Across albums like *Born to Die*, *Ultraviolence*, and *Paradise*, she embodies an idealized version of fragile white femininity, frequently portraying herself as the object of male desire, under the control (financially, sexually, and emotionally) of older white men (see Fig. 3). In her song “Off to the Races,” Del Rey describes herself as the young Lolita to her male lover who she depends upon for happiness, “Light of my life, fire of my loins/...cause I'm crazy, baby/I need you to come here and save me” (Del Rey, 2011).

**Figure 3:**

*Lana Del Rey and her older male lover in the “West Coast” music video, Ultraviolence (2014).*



A defining feature of the “sad girl” aesthetic is its reliance on white women’s public displays of fragility, melancholia, and victimhood, historically used to skirt accountability and villainize women and people of colour (Mooney, 2018). Del Rey, who falls asleep in an American flag in her *Born to Die* song “Cola” (Del Rey, 2011), is nursed and nurtured by the patriarchal and settler colonial safety that she accesses through her white womanhood and nation (Oakeby, 2024) Within a broader sociopolitical context, this aesthetic is often exercised through the performance of “white woman tears,” the weaponization of white women’s emotional displays to incite racial violence and punishment towards people of colour (Phipps, 2021).

Del Rey’s aesthetic capitalizes on this historical framework evident in her 2020 “Question for the culture” post on Instagram. In this online message, Del Rey defended her Americana aesthetic, claiming that there was no room for “women like her” within feminism, “the kind of women who are slated mercilessly for being their authentic, delicate selves” (Del Rey, 2020, as cited in, Yasssne1, 2026). In her post, Del Rey expressed frustration towards critics who condemned her work for romanticizing emotional and sexual abuse. In defense, she named several other female artists, all of whom are women of colour (primarily Black women) who she critiqued for “wearing no clothes, fucking, cheating” within their performances (Del Rey, 2020, as cited in, Yasssne1, 2026). As writer and civil rights activist James Baldwin describes, such constructions of victimhood and disavowal of responsibility constitute a “willed innocence of whiteness” that relies on a collective memory of white moral purity and fragility to disavow the impacts of structural racism (Ioanide, 2014). As Bruyneel (2021) describes in his analysis of Baldwin’s writings, collective settler memory is not an epistemological issue, but rather a defence mechanism towards “a threat white people sense will be posed to their individual and collective identities, power, and status if they act upon what they know” (p. 30).

In a 2017 interview, Del Rey acknowledged “it would feel weird...now,” to use the American Flag on stage during her first post-Donald Trump presidency tour (Frank, 2017). Despite this acknowledgement, and her financial contributions to various Native American foundations in response to backlash from her Instagram post (Del Rey, 2020, as cited in, Yasssne1, 2026, slide 3), nothing has stopped Del Rey from continuing to profit from a discography steeped in settler colonial fantasies, while continuing to condemn the bodies of Black women as reflexively lascivious. In a song on her subsequent album *Lust for Life*, titled “When the World Was at War, We Kept Dancing,” Del Rey sings,

Is it the end of an era? /Is it the end of America? /.../It's only the beginning/If we hold on to hope/We'll have a happy ending/When the world was at war before/We just kept dancing (Del Rey, 2017).

The distinct reference to the “end of an era,” implies the existence of another era, a pre-Trump era that was somehow a safer or better version of America. Regardless of when this era supposedly began, the nature of settler colonialism as a transitive, multidimensional system, rather than a single event, highlights the continuous violence perpetuated in all eras of settler contact (Byrd, 2011). Del Rey’s desire to dance as the world burns around her, to return to a nonexistent version of America that nurtures and blankets her as her white womanhood does, reiterates a continuous contribution to false settler narrative and memory (see Fig 4.).

**Figure 4:**

*Lana Del Rey with eyes closed as she is embraced by her nation’s flag, “Ride” video (2012).*



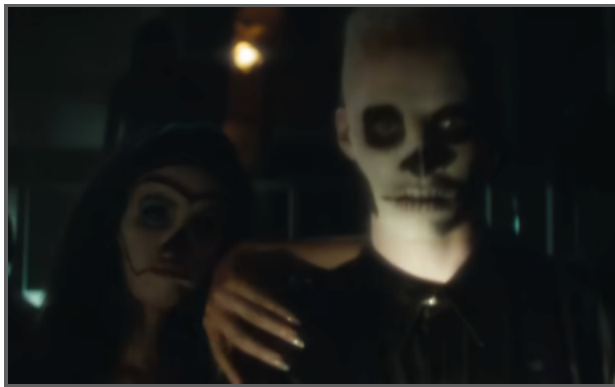
Despite perhaps some level of feminist resistance in her work, Del Rey evidently grounds her expression of femininity in a hypocritical expression of meritocracy. In both “National Anthem” and “Off to the Races,” money represents to Del Rey the “anthem of success” (Del Rey 2012b). She positions herself as both an empowered wild child and a submissive figure to her older male lovers, who she asks, “tell me you own me, give me them coins” (Del Rey, 2012c). Throughout her early albums, Lana Del Rey asserts her sexuality freely, even in potentially dangerous situations, cultivating an aesthetic based on confronting the so-called perverse and grotesque sides of sexual desire (Usmar, 2014). In stark contrast, women of colour are criticized

and shamed for doing the same, framed by Del Rey herself as being too sexual, or representing a more degrading sexuality than that of her white fragility.

This dynamic is pervasive not just in her lyrics but also in her music videos. In “Ride”, Del Rey frames her body against the vast, conquerable landscape of Nevada, alluding to a sexual or prostitution-based relationship with the bikers she travels among (Del Rey, 2012g). In her short film, *Tropico*, Lana dons a teardrop tattoo and *calavera* makeup appropriating the clothing and culture closely associated with Mexican-American *Chicana* culture. She uses the visual aesthetic to bolster her exotic and free sexuality as she dances on a pole (see Fig. 5 & 6) (Del Rey, 2013). Just as Del Rey positions racialized and white sexuality within a binary of purity and degradation, the settler-colonial power structures and memory she perpetuates, frames Indigenous women through a binary of “‘unrapeable’ (or ‘highly rapeable’)” (Simpson 2016, as cited in Bruyneel, p.37). As Lana Del Rey espouses in “Born to Die”, “this is what makes us girls,” “we don’t stick together ‘because we put our love first” (Del Rey, 2011). This “love” for men, as we can see through “National Anthem” and “Ride,” is interchangeable with the rocky relationship Del Rey has with America itself, a settler-colonial vehicle she will evidently protect and defend at any cost.

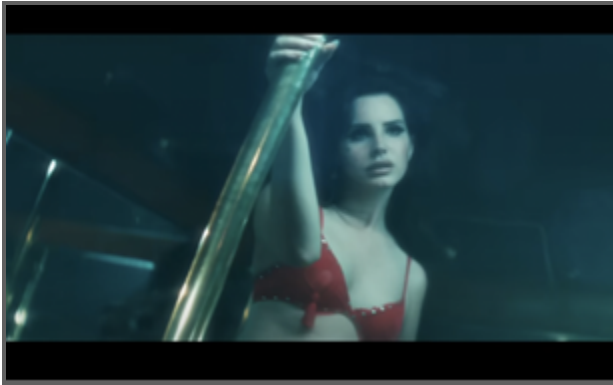
**Figure 5:**

*Lana Del Rey dons calavera makeup in the “Tropico” short film (2013).*



**Figure 6:**

*Del Rey dances in a club, “Tropico” short film (2013).*



Del Rey thus romanticizes her sexual freedom in ways unavailable to women and people of colour. This is especially significant considering the settler context of her work. In “Off to the Races,” Lana Del Rey describes a love affair that has turned her so crazy she is “facing time at Rikers Island,” (Del Rey, 2012c), an American prison where Black and Indigenous men make up 66% of incarcerated adults ages 18–25 (Chester et al., 2022). Furthermore, her perpetuation of settler-colonial imaginaries and tropes further contributes to the framing of Indigenous women, who are victim of murder and sexual assault within North America at a disproportionately high rate, and described as inherently sexually available, disposable, and criminal (Scully, 2005). In Canada alone, Indigenous women are three times more likely to be victims of sexual assault than non-Indigenous women (Department of Justice Canada, 2017). Sexual violence takes a unique role in both the structure and process of settler colonialism and settler memory, rendering both “land and native women...as objects of use, extraction, violation and exchange” (Bruyneel, p. 37). While the ultimate message of *Born to Die* is perhaps Del Rey’s disillusionment with this American fantasy, her ability to remain illusioned in the first place points to a certain level of privilege and safety within its white-supremacist-coded aesthetics (Oakeby, 2024). As Black feminist Audre Lorde highlights in a 1984 interview with James Baldwin, “nobody was dreaming of me, nobody was even studying me except as something to wipe out” (Lorde, 1984, cited in Bruyneel 2021, p. 132). Lorde highlights how Black women have never been allowed the privilege of believing in the American Dream, so much as it was never a “believer in her because it was built upon Black women’s othering, denigration, and disappearance” (Bruyneel 2021, p. 132). Del Rey’s appropriation of systems and aesthetics of sexual violence, as well as her overt denigration of sexuality when expressed by racialized women, points to the continuation of a

settler aesthetic and logic grounded in the domination of the land, body, and labour of women of colour.

### **Conclusion:**

Through her aestheticization of a false memory of America predicated upon open landscapes in her music videos for “Ride,” and as well as the weaponization of white feminine identity through the “National Anthem,” and “Tropico” music videos, Del Rey participates in a cultural memory that erases Indigenous and racialized histories, while profiting from the exploitation and appropriation of marginalized identities. While analysis has questioned whether it is the persona of Lana Del Rey, rather than the real person, who yearns for an unreachable version of the American dream, Del Rey’s ability to reject and accept these competing ideologies as they suit her brand that which she heavily profits from, highlight her use of American landscapes, time periods, and racialized women as resources to be used as discarded. Del Rey’s portrayal of various romantic and sexual relationships mapped onto and across settler colonial hierarchies further highlights the inextricable role of heteropatriarchy in the construction of settler colonial memory and dominance. Considering Lana Del Rey’s rising popularity since the foundation of her discography through *Born to Die*, her discursive influence as both a celebrity and creator of culture cannot be underestimated. While Del Rey represents just one piece within a broader culture that disavows, erases, and intentionally misremembers America’s ongoing structure as a settler colonial state, she is a reminder of our need to rethink the constant passive narratives of anti-Indigeneity and anti-Blackness laid out for our effortless consumption.

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