

I'm just a rock star/I'm just a guy: gender and interactional non-compliance in Lady Gaga/Jo Calderone's public personae
Mary-Caitlyn Valentinsson, PhD
Appalachian State University

Introduction

[Slide 1] Hello, and thank you for watching my virtual presentation at IGALA 11, titled: I'm just a rock star/I'm just a guy: gender and interactional non-compliance in Lady Gaga/Jo Calderone's public personae. My name is Mary-Caitlyn Valentinsson and I am a Visiting Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Appalachian State University. You can find these slides, as well as the text I will be reading from to follow along, at the links in the bottom right hand corner of this title slide. Feel free to pause this presentation and pull those up before we start. Let's begin!

At the 2011 MTV Video Music Awards, American pop star Lady Gaga was nominated for 4 awards. The star herself, however, was noticeably absent—instead, she sent “Jo Calderone”, an Italian-American mechanic, to perform and give interviews in her place. While fans and the media agreed that Calderone was “simply” Lady Gaga in drag, bids for interaction by members of the press that failed to address Calderone *as* Calderone were treated as problematic. (And don't worry, I'll play a clip later on). Artistic experimentation with gender has been a part of Lady Gaga's celebrity persona since early in her career (Halberstam 2012), as has dramatic re-invention of her public style. So, in some ways, this performative move was not entirely surprising. It did, however, garner confusion from reporters, celebrity attendees, and fans for the insistence with which Calderone committed to his role as an Italian-American mechanic from New Jersey. One feature of Calderone's performance that mirrored, rather than differed, from Lady Gaga's “usual” style (if she can be said to have one), was the adoption of an

antagonistic interactional approach to reporters covering the event (Valentinsson 2018). It is this linguistic style I seek to discuss in this paper, specifically by developing the idea of “interactional non-compliance” as a collection of tactics that destabilize gendered expectations of female public figures. Taking Jo Calderone as a case study, I illustrate how his use of interactional non-compliance contributed to the construction of his public persona at this event, situating his use of interactional non-compliance with particular forms of racialized and classed masculinity. I also show how this linguistic style was not simply an innovation of Calderone’s, or a direct fallout of a “male” performance, but rather a key part of the celebrity persona of Lady Gaga more generally. Through this analysis, I aim more broadly to interrogate notions of transgression and subversion as they relate to gendered linguistic performance in mediatized contexts. But let me first begin by giving a quick background on Lady Gaga’s interactional style as a pop star, and the emergence of Jo Calderone in particular.

Lady Gaga/Jo Calderone

[Slide 2] As many scholars of celebrity and pop culture have noted, part of what initially garnered Lady Gaga attention as a pop star in the first place was her avant-garde aesthetic that centered a transgressive, sometimes violent, and occasionally whimsical approach to gender and sexual identity performance (Halberstam 2012, Sorice 2013), incorporating notions of the bizarre and the monstrous (Rossolatos 2014). On the surface, this was most apparent in her outfits, performances, and the lyrics of her music, but this aesthetic was also evident in the way that Gaga constructed her celebrity persona in interviews and in interactions with fans.

In earlier work on this topic (Valentinsson 2018), I argued that her use of antagonistic rhetorical strategies with media institutions was part of a larger project of self-authentication. By rejecting journalists’ claims about her persona, performance, or artistry, Gaga demonstrated a *disalignment* with exclusionary media institutions. This, along with rhetorical strategies that

constructed an *alignment* with her fans, allowed Gaga to assert herself as an “ordinary” (Ferris 2004) person, in spite of highly “extra-ordinary” celebrity style. Other sociolinguistic work (Esposito 2017) has illustrated how the use of creaky voice further contributes to this authentication work, particularly in constructing a fan-aligned persona (10). Research on Lady Gaga’s ardent fan community (Dilling-Hansen 2015; Carter 2018; Valentinsson 2018) has illustrated that the reception and uptake of this “authentic” persona is positively received by her audience—and further, that her experimental approach to issues of gender and sexuality in pop performance are an expected part of new music and other forms of artistry that she produces.

[Slide 3] Thus, there was already a popular perception of Lady Gaga as an artist whose work was specifically situated in gender transgression when Jo Calderone emerged. In an interview with V Magazine (#74 Winter 2011), Gaga described Calderone as a co-invention with British fashion photographer and longtime collaborator Nick Knight. She said: “How can we remodel the model? In a culture that attempts to quantify beauty with a visual paradigm and almost mathematical standard, how can we fuck with the malleable minds of onlookers and shift the world’s perspective on what’s beautiful? I asked myself this question. And the answer? Drag.” Framing the emergence of Jo Calderone in terms of drag is not at all surprising, given how Gaga’s work has long been situated in and alongside queer dance/music scenes in New York City (cf. Barrett 2017). The development of this character then led to a men’s fashion shoot with Vogue Hommes Japan in which the model was credited as Jo Calderone, who the editorial team described as a new-found model from New Jersey (Jo Calderone, n.d.). A Twitter account was also established for Calderone, and though it is not verified, the fact that Lady Gaga’s official Twitter account follows @Jo_Calderone has been taken as evidence that this account is legitimate. Gaga and Knight further developed the character by including him in the music video

for Lady Gaga's single "You and I"; it was this version of the character that appeared at the 2011 MTV VMAs to perform this same song.

Interactional Non-Compliance

[Slide 4] Aside from their physical resemblance, Jo Calderone's appearance at the 2011 MTV Video Music Awards was familiar to fans of Lady Gaga in part due to the rhetorical strategies he used to engage members of the press, as well as in his interactions with other celebrities during on-stage events and his musical performance. This collection of strategies, which I deem "interactional non-compliance", includes rhetorical moves such as the use of interruption (Zimmerman and West 1975), face-threatening acts (Brown and Levinson 1978), references to taboo topics, use of taboo language, and contiguous dispreferred responses (Sacks 1987) more generally. In a basic discourse analytic sense, these strategies may be deemed "non-compliant" in the sense that they disrupt listener expectations of preference organization given a particular speaking figure, and with respect to a particular discursive genre. Here, the fact that the media interview genre in which we investigate Jo Calderone is so highly regimented (Clayman and Heritage 2002, Jurker 1986) gives Calderone tremendous opportunity for disruption and transgression. Importantly, these non-compliant rhetorical moves are coupled with a visual self-presentation that is similarly non-compliant with respect to (celebrity) gender norms. While Lady Gaga's use of such non-compliant interactional tactics *as* Lady Gaga often presented interactional challenges to interviewers (Valentinsson 2018), the use of such strategies rarely produced a failure to "read" Lady Gaga as a celebrity figure. When used by Jo Calderone, the very same strategies led to confusion and failures in the interpretation of Calderone by reporters at the event, other celebrity attendees, and in post-hoc reporting.

[Slide 5] I will start by playing a clip from a backstage interview conducted at the 2011 VMA's, with Calderone positioned against an MTV backdrop, getting photographed, and

responding to questions from several reporters. A full transcript is available in the Appendix of this paper, that you can find at the link on this slide, and I'll show excerpts of the transcript on the slides through the rest of this talk. I also include a link to this recording for you to refer back to.

[Slide 6] To begin with, I note two cases of interruption in this interview. First, in line 6 Calderone interrupts a line of questioning from one reporter to comment on the brightness of the lights in this interview area. The press pool reacts by laughing, and the interviewer is allowed to continue their questioning moments later. While this does not stand out to me as a particularly aggressive form of “non-compliance”, it does speak to a broader engagement with the “non-celebrity” status/persona of Jo Calderone. One might presume that, were Lady Gaga herself giving this interview, she would be used to such bright staging lights and not feel the need to comment on them. (As an aside, the notion of Jo Calderone seeking out an actual and metaphorical “spotlight” at Lady Gaga’s direction and/or for himself was a recurring theme throughout his performance at this event—so there is some poetic resonance here as well, though that is beyond the scope of this paper).

In lines 26-27, Calderone *reacts* to an interruption of one of his answers with a face threatening act. In response to Calderone’s mention of his Sicilian heritage, a member of the press interjects with “a guido!” (line 25)—a term which is considered by some to be a derogatory label for Italian-Americans. Lines 26-27 demonstrate interactional non-compliance in Calderone’s outright and overt rejection of this interruption. Rather than politely laughing this interruption off, Calderone criticizes the member of the press, questioning whether they are prejudiced against Italians and asking what “the fuck’s the matter with [them]”? This rejoinder threatens the positive face of this member of the press, thereby positioning himself, that is,

Calderone, as an antagonist outsider to the celebrity-media relationship rather than a willing, collaborative participant, as other celebrities might. Threats to the positive face of journalists is also a tactic that Lady Gaga-as-Lady Gaga used regularly in early career interviews as a strategy for constructing a sense of authentic disalignment with establishment media types (Valentinsson 2018).

[Slide 7] Calderone also demonstrates interactional non-compliance through his use of dispreferred responses to questions, particularly ones that implicitly reject the premise of the question. This is most plainly evident in lines 18-24, when Calderone responds to the question “who is Jo and how long will Jo be with us?” with a dead pan “I’m gonna be here about 5 more minutes.” The question itself is redolent of portrayals of mistrustful lines of questioning by doctors in psychiatric contexts, suggesting that this journalist sees Calderone as merely an artistic caricature or affectation. Calderone, however, rejects this implication, choosing instead to respond to a more literal interpretation of the question. A similar strategy is evident in the first question in this press exchange—lines 1-4—where the journalist’s question presupposes that “Jo” and “Gaga” are the same person, but Calderone’s response differentiates between them by describing himself using the first-person singular pronoun and Gaga using a third-person singular pronoun.

[Slide 8] Finally, Calderone engages in interactional non-compliance by using taboo language and describing sexual activities and desires openly. With respect to taboo language, the lemma “fuck” appears 3 times in his performance monologue, 9 times during this interview, and once during the VMA awards presentation, when Calderone presented the 2011 Michael Jackson Video Vanguard award to pop icon Britney Spears. Throughout the event, Calderone also frequently described masturbation and referenced sexual encounters with Gaga and other pop

stars. During the speech he gave before presenting this award to Spears, he described how he “used to hang posters of her on [his] wall and touch [himself] while [he] was laying in bed”. Calderone and Spears also shared a moment on stage in which they approached each other as if about to kiss, though Spears eventually backed off. This is the event that the press member asks about in the question-answer sequence in lines 5-11—and in response, Calderone again references masturbation and a potential future sexual encounter with Spears. **I consider this engagement with taboo language and sexual topics to contribute to an overall style of interactional non-compliance not simply because of their taboo nature—as sexually suggestive performances are commonplace on MTV programs—but Calderone’s explicit engagement in such topics and language, even when the network censors their use, goes beyond the usual level of suggestion.**

In employing all of these tactics, Calderone demonstrates an aggressive refusal to align with institutional expectations of interaction and language use among female pop stars. Taking these tactics as more than just a performance, in fact, illustrates how interactional non-compliance functions as a broader strategy in Lady Gaga’s celebrity style. The use of taboo language to discuss risqué topics; interrupting interviewer questioning and threatening the face of members of the press; as well as refusing to produce preferred responses to contiguous question-answer pairs are all strategies *Gaga-as-Gaga* has used to construct her celebrity persona. Here then, we can read Calderone as every bit an ‘authentic’ performance of Lady Gaga as *Gaga-as-herself* is.

Legitimizing the “rock star” and the “guy”

[Slide 9] I want to turn now to briefly discuss the discursive strategies used by Calderone to legitimize his identity as Jo Calderone, and how they parallel strategies used by *Gaga-as-Gaga*

to legitimize her celebrity persona. In a 2009 interview, Gaga-as-Gaga used an adverbial *just* construction (Tagliamonte 2005) to justify her use of sexual imagery in her music—which had moments prior been called into question by the interviewer. An excerpt from this transcript, drawn from Valentinsson 2018, is shown at the top of the slide.

21 you see if I was a guy (.) and I was sitting with a cigarette in my hand
22 grabbing my crotch and talking about how hh. I make music cause I
23 love fast cars and fucking girls (.) you'd call me a rock star (.) but when I
24 do it in my music and in my videos (.) because I'm a female (.) because I
25 make pop music (.) you are judgmental (.) and you say that it is uh um hh.
26 distracting (.) I'm just a rock star

(Valentinsson 2018, 733)

The phrase in line 26 “I’m *just* a rock star” legitimizes any engagement with taboo or risqué topics as a natural fall-out of the identity category “rock star”. Gaga’s initial framing of this problem in lines 21-23 hinged on “rock star” as a gendered category. She specifically posits that this gendering of “rock star” as “male” does not hold up. Gaga argues in this interview that her gender is irrelevant to her choice to reference sexually explicit themes in her music—what is relevant is her identity as a rock star.

This is the same strategy employed by Calderone when he is questioned by reporters about “who” Jo is. “I’m just a guy”, he says, in line 24 of the excerpt shown on the bottom of the slide. But of course, this assertion of self is not only about his “guy-ness”—it is uttered alongside claims to his geographical upbringing (New Jersey), his ethnic heritage (Sicilian, or Italian—*not* guido), and his professional background (neither singer nor dancer nor actor—by implication, someone free of artistic artifice!). It is a claim to being a particular kind of guy, one who might be culturally expected to swear, explicitly discuss his sexual behavior, and otherwise engage with members of the press as a “rock star” would (despite not being one himself). Thus, Calderone’s assertion that he is “just a guy” serves not only to legitimize his persona in this context, but also functions as a reinforcement of particular kinds of (racialized, classed, and

otherwise culturally-situated) gendered performances. The adverbial “just” phrase both recreates and reinforces the gender of the “rock star” and the (regular, average) “guy”.

Conclusions

[Slide 10] Jo Calderone has not appeared in Lady Gaga’s work—or elsewhere—since this 2011 MTV VMA performance. Reaction cam footage of celebrities in the audience of Calderone’s performance revealed shocked, confused, and bored faces, as these photos illustrate. After his initial performance, many expressed skepticism about the effectiveness of his character as an artistic performance (with some examples of news headlines and articles excerpted on this slide). In many ways it seemed that Jo Calderone was not readable as a celebrity figure, despite his interactional style mirroring in many key ways the style Lady Gaga used, particularly in her interactions with members of the press. I argue that this may be due in part to the limited and restricted nature of gender transgression in mediatized contexts. While female celebrities’—in particular “rock stars”—may be able to get away with the use of tactics of interactional non-compliance in performative contexts, ultimately, they must still make some sort of appeal to mainstream or more “standard” gendered norms in order to be “readable” as public figures. Perhaps Calderone was not “readable” in this sense because his non-compliance with these norms was not merely linguistic (as Gaga’s is), but also visual and physical. Interactional non-compliance, then, should be understood as a strategy that can expand the possibilities for gender performance, but not a tool that can transgress these cultural categories altogether.

[Slide 11] With that, I’d like to thank you for viewing this presentation—feel free to reach out to me via email or Twitter if you’d like to discuss this project further. Enjoy the rest of this virtual IGALA!

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APPENDIX: Transcript

- 1) MP1: are you able to: express (.) yourself more as Jo tonight are you able to sort of convey the
- 2) message of gaga just wondering: uh: #00:00:09-8#
- 3) JC: well she's just really fuckin pissed at me right now (.) and uh she said fuck you if you (.) really love
- 4) me you'll go (.) instead of me and you'll get in that spotlight (.) so I did #00:00:25-3#
- 5) MP2: hey Jo: it's [unintelligible name] from AOL music I wanted to know after: you:-- #00:00:33-0#
- 6) JC: it's fuckin bright in here #00:00:33-7#
- 7) MP2: [laughter] after you to:ld Britney Spears about your: fantasies about her is there any chance that
- 8) you guys might be getting together? #00:00:41-4#
- 9) JC: [chuckles] I don't--well maybe if she wants me you know (.) she's fuckin hot (.) i don't know you
- 10) know as--gaga's my girl but you know Britney's fuckin you know she's (.) she's fuckin Britney Spears
- 11) (.) didn't you jerk off to Britney when you were a kid #00:01:06-3#
- 12) MP3: yeah! #00:01:06-3#
- 13) MP4: oh yeah #00:01:05-7#
- 14) MP5: oh yeah #00:01:06-1#
- 15) MPs: [laughter] #00:01:08-9#
- 16) MP6: seriously? #00:01:07-9#
- 17) MP7: [not really] #00:01:08-6#
- 18) MP8: hi uh [unintelligible name] (.) [unintelligible name repeated] from USA today #00:01:12-2#
- 19) JC: yeah-- #00:01:13-5#
- 20) MP8:--uh who is Jo: and how long will Jo be with us #00:01:17-3#
- 21) JC: (.) I'm gonna be here about five more minutes #00:01:19-8#
- 22) MPs: [laughter] #00:01:20-8#
- 23) JC: (.) and uh (.) I'm from new jersey (.) my family's from uh palermo sicily (.) and i'm uh: (.) not a
- 24) singer (.) or a (.) mo:del or an actor or anything I'm just uh I'm a guy #00:01:39-5#
- 25) MP9: a guido! #00:01:39-5#
- 26) JC: no i'm not a fuckin guido what do you what do you fuck you don't like italians? the fuck's the
- 27) matter with you? i'm just a guy you know (.) and uh (.) i just wanted to show my girl how much i love
- 28) her that's all #00:01:56-5#
- 29) MP10: thank you

Transcription conventions

JC – Jo Calderone

MP- Member of Press

(.) - untimed pause

[xxx] – paralinguistic feature or unintelligible word

m:odel –lengthening

? – question intonation

— restart