

# “We’re not the Ladies”: The Question of Lady in 21st Century Feminist Parlay

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## Abstract

In this article, I investigate a recently resurfaced use of *lady* in feminist language. I explore what this reappearance of lady might tell us about what Angela McRobbie calls feminism’s comeback in the Anglophone West and whether it is problematically intertwined with feminism. I focus on the contemporary use of the term *lady*, which after a period of being deemed an out of date, patronising exceptionalism, is back in use in everyday language and on social media. I ask whether the term *lady* has become diluted, rather than flattened, of its sexist connotations, and whether this new use of *lady* among feminists is an attempt to amend feminism by locating an element of femininity. I also explore what might be other positive uses of *lady*, for example, in relation to trans and non-binary people, to see whether, despite its problematic associations, it might be worth hanging onto after all.

## Key Words

Feminist theory, Sociolinguistics, Popular culture, Language and gender

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"Language is a virus."

-Laurie Anderson

## Introduction

About a decade ago, I noticed many young people in New Zealand began to use the word *gay* to mean naff, inept or "boring and uncool" (Fisher), to summarise a tiresome task or event, and as "generally disparaging" (Rudoe 27). I was not alone in being confounded at this use of *gay* as a negative colloquialism. However, despite protestations from teachers and spokespeople for LGBT groups, *gay* as a complaint about too much homework, for example, continues to circulate. This is also reminiscent, albeit in another direction, of the past difficulties surrounding the use of the term *gay* in the 1970s when gay rights' activists used it positively to describe themselves, but were charged with using an "innocent" word inappropriately (Brickell quoted in Hardie & Bowers 62). In today's usage, young people tend to dissociate their use of *gay* from queer, and are adamant that their use is context bound, although not everyone is convinced, with many arguing that the use of *gay* is "on a par with racial and gender-based slurs" (Hardie & Bowers, 62).

In addition to the disruption this third iteration of *gay* is having, it is a reminder that language is labile, always changing, and unpredictable. Although I know language is mutable, and can be volatile, it was still surprising that a few years ago I began to notice the return of the word *lady*, only instead of being old fashioned, conservative, or sexist, *lady* was deployed positively with levity and as synonymous with sassy assertiveness. Ironic or not, sometimes it is hard to tell, in the circles in which it has most appeared, *lady* seems to be treated as shorthand for a feminist in the know.

In this article, I investigate what this recycled use of *lady* might tell us about today's era of what cultural studies theorist Angela McRobbie refers to as feminism's "comeback" (4). The questions I explore relate to the renewed use of *lady* as problematically intertwined with feminism and more generally with the language of gender and sexuality today. In recent years, the topic of feminism, or at least the term, has witnessed a renewed popularity, appearing in magazines, television shows, on twitter and Instagram, as the topic for *Harry Potter* actor Hermione Granger's 2014 speech to the United Nations, and as a banner for Beyoncé's performance at the 2015 *MTV Music Awards*. While it is reassuring that the term feminism is maintaining its relevance, in line with the commodified realms in which feminism is used there is also the concern that the term has simply become a catchword that has very little to do with a critique of patriarchy. In this article, I wish to continue this line of thinking by focusing on the contemporary use of the term *lady*, which after a period of being deemed an out of date, patronising exception, is back in use in tweets, Instagram, Facebook, and pop music. I ask whether *lady* has become only diluted, rather than emptied, of its sexist connotations, and whether this new use of *lady* by young feminists is an attempt to amend feminism by reintroducing an element of femininity. My concern is whether this renewed use of *lady* is furthering an economically liberal post-feminist message that ironic sexism sells and whether its contemporary users are clear about its pejorative implications. I also consider the ways in which, even though feminism's new popularity modifies some aspects of *lady*, the term continues to carry sexist associations, or is still carrying what Regina

Rodriquez-Martin in her 2013 blogpost "The Word 'Lady'" refers to as "baggage."

Historically, *lady* has been used as the polite term for woman. In this way, the term *lady* designates *woman* as impolite, and seems to operate as a light, playful stand-in for *woman* when *woman* is too grave, too stiff, too heavy, and overly serious or burdensome. After a period of backlash against feminism and with the arrival of post-feminism, which is less a critical position than a celebration of "the end of history" for women's struggles, *lady* might be a signal towards a compromised position. This is in line with Stephanie Genz's description of post-feminism as "the third way" rather than "wave," thus directly associating it with Tony Blair and Bill Clinton's third way politics that steered government policy towards economic deregulation and freer financial markets as *the* way, eventually, to better standards of living for all. I question the assumption that *lady* is no longer harmful to women's social status but that, on the contrary, it is helpful to feminism because it makes feminism more attractive to many young women who might think the patriarchal residue needs only a few technocratic tweaks here and there to disappear. I ask first whether *lady* has been successfully rehabilitated from its associations with sexism by looking at the process of what linguistic anthropology calls "indexical bleaching" (Squires 43). I also discuss the connection between the term *lady* and social and economic class categories, and then the relationship between class and normative images of gendered bodies, to suggest that *lady* symbolises a type of disembodied femininity. Finally, my research material comes primarily from anecdotes, blogposts, examples of popular culture, especially music and television, and the work of feminist art collectives. As for method, I approach the appearances of *lady* and its vagaries through socio-linguistic studies of everyday speech acts, and through feminist philosophy, leaning chiefly on its attention to identity and to language.

### "Hey, lovely lady"

Sometime in 2014, while living in New Zealand, I noticed the word *lady* turning up in my correspondence and conversations which made me also notice an increase using of *lady* and *ladies* among the members of feminist, feminist imbued and women-centred associations and organisations, typically in the writing from businesses and art collectives run by young woman mostly under thirty-five(ish) such as *The Ladies Network* art collective, the online magazine *The Hairpin* (now closed) and Friedman's blog *Lady Journos*. It seemed that *lady* had become popular (again). The groups and individuals I noticed were predominantly middle class and tertiary educated, working in academia, journalism, and the arts, while the use of *lady* was mostly encountered on social media, such as Instagram, websites, and blogs.

In the dictionary, *lady* is defined as a polite or informal way of referring to a woman, and it is also a modifier, for example "lady doctor." Outside the dictionary, *lady* is defined in more diverse ways. For example, avant-garde composer and writer Pauline Oliveros calls the word "cute and condescending" whereas journalist Anne Friedman thinks a feminist use of *lady* is "tongue-in-cheek" used by those in the know. When I was first addressed as "lady" in text messages from friends, for example, with "hey, lovely lady" or "hey, rad lady," I was surprised and curious. I also felt a little apprehensive, partly because those speakers used *lady* as seemingly detached from past associations with sexist and patronising language, as if they were oblivious to its historical and cultural "baggage," and partly because it

seemed to deny the word *woman*, even if grammatically it was not replacing it. Most of all, though, I felt misrecognised: Who were they talking to? Who was being addressed?

According to the twentieth-century philosopher Louis Althusser, the idea of being addressed concerns being socially hailed or interpellated. In Althusser's theory, this hailing is the process by which we are called into subjecthood so that prior to the naming, the subject does not exist. In what he calls "my little theoretical theatre," Althusser studies the "mechanism" of the recognition of people as subjects, which in another sense also means ourselves as subjected to ideology or our ahistorical socio-political state (174). To the sound of "Hey, you there" we turn. Nine times out of ten, explains Althusser, the one being addressed will turn around. We *know* it is us being called because we recognise we belong as a subject, and by subject he means integral or constitutive of ideology, or the socio-political conventions that support the ruling ideas or the ideas of the ruling classes. Althusser goes on to explain that there is no chronological succession because the hailing or interpellation happens always already; we are always already subjects of ideology. In other words, ideology, well, you're soaking in it.

And yet, while I am indeed soaking in it, in accumulated gender norms, I also have a sense sometimes of living outside of it. How can I be both? If I am hailed as *lady*, and so yes, turn around when a passer-by calls "hey, lady, you dropped something," or less dramatically, when I understand it is me a parent is referring to when they say to a child "mind the lady," how can I also feel unseen or bypassed as if I am in two places at once, one accepting, the other resistant? As it turns out, I was not alone in this sense of being addressed as if to one side, as if there has not been decades of feminist work which investigates the sexist language of patriarchy.

Althusser says to gain knowledge about the recognition of ideology, we have to work out the mechanisms while we are within it. I turn now to the contemporary philosopher Judith Butler to help with this. Butler invites us to think about the "moment" someone says "yes, it is me, but I am not the one you think I am" ("Difference"). If there is any possible resistance to this automatic event of subjecthood, from where we are already soaking in ideology, it appears as and in misrecognition. The use of *lady* provides a good example of such misrecognition, which Butler also makes into something of a joke: "In certain parts of the world there is no way to sit down and eat without hearing "Ladies, a table?" "Do you want a table ladies?" "Do I still eat or do I go hungry?" Do I fail to recognise that someone wants to interpellate me as her, this lady?" Butler concludes, "even if the interpellation is wrong it is still directed at me" ("Difference"). As Butler describes it, and as I experience it, lady is a joke because it is wrong but still used uncritically. Butler tells another two jokes, one about being misrecognised in the women's bathroom and one about a hotel porter who says "Mister" then "Madame" and then ends up stumbling between the two addresses "Ah, Mister Madame, Mister Madame." To be clear, the joke is not on the one who is misrecognised but on the one doing the misrecognising. In the first anecdote, it seems ridiculous not to be able to eat because people do not know what to call you, because they call you something out of date. The waiter, the porter, and the woman in the toilets are each out of date while Butler is on time, perhaps ahead of time having left behind older, sexist names. For the second anecdote, Butler admits the problem of educational and class differences when she confesses to becoming impatient with the confused porter. I will return to the subject of *lady* and class but for now I want to emphasise the experience of being in two or more positions at once, in the past (pre 1970s

feminist analysis) when *lady* was employed fluidly in diverse situations and in the present (post-feminist) now that *lady* has begun to circulate more freely again.

### Lady, the Second Coming

The site *Google Trends* tracks the changing usage of words since 2008. Although I initially felt vindicated when I noticed that the use of *lady* increases rapidly from this point, I soon discovered from the data that this was almost entirely connected to the American pop singer Lady Gaga, with a statistical spike hitting around 2009 around when she started to become very famous (a second source is linked to US consumer saving guru site Crazy Coupon Lady). Nonetheless, while those using *lady* are not necessarily Lady Gaga's music fans, her name seems to have contributed greatly to the rise. The debate over whether or not Gaga is a feminist is ongoing in the media, with journalists such as Kira Cochrane using her name as exemplary of the ambivalence that many have towards feminism and what is expected of women: "Lady" with its suggestions of gentility, sweetness, high breeding; "Gaga" with its intimations of infantility, madness, antic spirit." While *Google Trends* tracks language use from 2008, the data for *Google Books NGram Viewer* go back to 1500. The data on *woman*, *women*, *lady* and *ladies* from 1900 to 2008 show a considerable rise in the usage of *woman* and *women* from 1960 and a gradual but slight decline in the use of *lady* and *ladies* until 2000, when the use begins to rise slowly and gradually. The rise in the use of *woman* and *women* relates directly to feminist writing and the time when women's studies was developing rapidly, while the small rise in *lady* comes at about the time Lady Gaga became famous. (Michel). It seems that *lady* has become what linguistic anthropologist Debra Spitulnik calls a "public word," a word or phrase that changes in meaning as it circulates through mass media. In her article on the phrase, "Lady pond," a term for "women as objects of desire," Laura Squires traces the use of words generated in the mass media beyond the worlds of immediate users in the know (42). She puts forward three circles of influence: adoption, when a language form from the mass media is taken up by consumers; circulation or the use of the language by adopters of the form; and diffusion, which is the process whereby other speakers also use the adopted language despite not being privy to the circumstances of its initial expression (43). In line with this, Squires offers the term "indexical bleaching" to discuss language that moves "from mass media sources to their audience and beyond" (43).

I am suggesting that the use of media language is only the use of "media language" if it retains its indexical link to the media source and is recognized as such in its usage. If it ceases to retain this link, it ceases to be "media language," and becomes instead just "language." I call this process, whereby a feature retains its semantic meaning and pragmatic force but loses its social meaning, *indexical bleaching*. [...] indexical bleaching happens through repetition in use, and the outcome is a feature that ceases to carry the marked indexical meaning that once accrued to it (though it may, of course, acquire other indexical meanings along the way). As a result, the range of contexts and speakers for whom the feature is deemed usable is broadened. Indexical bleaching happens through moments of decontextualization and recontextualization." (44)

The notion of “indexical bleaching” works well for the currently adopted use of *lady* given that some of the uses that I discuss seem to divest it of its earlier socio-cultural meanings as rooted in gendered social relations and class structure. In addition to the bleaching of names such as *lady*, I want to use the term recycled for *lady* and for *gay*, which have both been recycled twice now. For *lady*, though, the third iteration is very different from the first, which slid the polite genteel meaning down the class hierarchy. In particular, *lady* appears imbued with vestigial sexist problems hence the space for irony. Irony needs two parts, and in this case the irony needs history.

### The Classism and Sexism of Lady

As a child, I was taught that using *woman* for strangers was disrespectful and I ought to “to mind the lady” in a crowd or “tell the nice lady what flavour you want” in an ice cream parlour. As the socio-linguist Robyn Lackoff noted in 1973, at the time when I learning to use *lady*,

The more demeaning the job, the more the person holding it (if female of course) is likely to be described as a lady. Thus “cleaning lady” is at least as common as cleaning women and likewise sales lady rather than saleswoman however one says, normally, if anyone says anything at all, and I think we still do, “woman doctor.” (166)

To say “lady doctor” is, writes Lakoff, “to be very condescending,” but there is no such dichotomy for men. “Garbage man or salesman is the only possibility, never garbage gentleman.” In addition to the asymmetry of *lady* and *gentleman*, *gentleman* is a specified type of man, a particular type of man, while *lady* is often an unmarked term, by which she means *lady* is used to refer to any female (166).

Historically, the term *lady* was initially connected with class, being used for the nobility and the landed gentry. However, it underwent a process known by socio-linguists as “semantic derogation.” *Lady* was democratized and its use shifted from the name exclusively for members of the aristocracy and royalty (and in Christianity for the mother of God, Mary, Our Lady) to becoming adopted, as the sociolinguist Debra Cameron explains, by the growing middle class in the UK and Europe during the industrial revolution when the mercantile class, now on par financially with the upper classes, began mimicking their betters. In the twentieth century, *lady* became used readily by and about the working class, for instance, the laundry lady or the cleaning lady. So *lady* is also a euphemism, and as Lakoff (1973) points out used in place of *woman* because *woman* has too many negative connotations. In terms of class, “woman” was regarded as carrying a lot of “baggage.”

The politeness associated with the use of *lady* can be exemplified in a few anecdotes about class especially because class is historically the overriding social force connected to *lady*. *Still the Enemy Within* is a documentary from 2014 about the miner’s strikes of 1984 and 1985 in Margaret Thatcher’s Britain. One of the stories juxtaposes footage of Thatcher, who was dubbed “the Iron lady” (by a Soviet journalist but she took the name on), with images of the steely resolve of “Women against Pit Closures,” namely the miner’s wives, family members and friends, whose political campaigning against the UK government effectively redefined their gendered roles. The wives and family of the miners refer to themselves as women throughout the documentary with one exception; they call themselves “ladies”

when they go head to head with Thatcher in her refusal to concede anything in her plans to liberalise the economy, despite unemployment having risen to 2 million by late 1980, up 500,000 in less than a year. For continuing with her policies despite having an economy that was in recession, Thatcher famously received a five-minute standing ovation for the speech that included the phrase "This lady's not for turning." Thus, although when interviewed, the miner's wives call themselves women, in these moments of direct confrontation, when they go head on with another lady, they match her social authority by using the term that appears to express it.

## Class, Body and Gender

However, the difference between a woman and a lady is not only about politeness, social status and respectability, it is also directly connected to the physical body. A friend of mine was reprimanded at medical school when doing rounds in a teaching hospital in the late 1980s when he referred to a patient as a 57-year-old woman. His professor told him he must use lady, that woman was offensive, by which they meant that it reduced the patient to being a body. In this example, the problem of class and lady connects clearly to the female body. Lady was used here as a polite form to raise the dignity of the patient, who was there as a body.

It seems clear the word woman is linked to the body much more than to *lady*. For example, a search of the uses of *lady* and *woman* on British and American English language data bases such as *English Corpora* and *Corpus of Contemporary American English*, showed that the topics most connected to woman were violence, pregnancy, men, cancer, gender, victim, husband, marriage and birth while those associated with *lady* include queen, gentleman, dress, song, lovely, lord, daughter, wife, sister, marry and church (*The Iweb Corpus*). Where *woman* and *women* are linked to science, politics and law (woman is a citizen and a legal subject), *lady* and *ladies* are connected to entertainment (leading lady), politics "the First Lady" and "the Iron Lady" (Margret Thatcher), language about strangers, "the lady at the counter," "the plight of this lady," "she's a tough Texas lady" or "a very nice lady," and finally, *lady* appears in phrases of character types such as "cat lady," "school lunch lady," and "bag lady."

We can gain a further sense of the social and cultural differences between *woman* and *lady* in the short fill-in-the-blanks quiz from socio-linguist Debbie Cameron's blog post "Call Me Woman."

For each of the example sentences below, decide whether it's better to fill the blank with 'woman/women' or 'lady/ladies'.

1. She was a perfect \_\_\_\_ about it.
2. The church flowers were arranged by the \_\_\_\_ of the congregation.
3. Esther thought of her grandmother as a strong and capable \_\_\_\_.
4. Some \_\_\_\_ reported that they experienced multiple orgasms.
5. In Victorian times, it was common for \_\_\_\_ to die in childbirth.
6. A \_\_\_\_ was raped in the city center last night

Cameron explains that these examples give no information about the social status of the people referred to, but that she would still expect English-speakers to have a tacit preference for either "lady"

or “woman.”

Example (1) is straightforward: “a perfect lady” is another of those idioms where you can’t just substitute “woman.” (You can say “a perfect woman,” but it means something different.) In example (2), either “ladies” or “women” would be possible, but since the sentence is about a stereotypically feminine activity, flower arranging, you may have preferred “ladies.” In (3), the blank could potentially be filled by either “lady” or “woman,” but in this case, I’m betting you picked “woman.” And in (4), (5) and (6) I suspect you chose “woman” without hesitation.

The difference between “ladies” and “women” in these examples is the difference between femininity and embodied femaleness, explains Cameron. She makes it clear lady is used for “coy expressions like ‘lady garden,’ which are designed to sanitize references to the female body, but when the reference is to something like rape, which cannot easily be sanitized, its effect is incongruous and jarring.”

In a scene from the American television series *Girls*, a show about middle class white women in New York, Jessa, Hannah and Shoshanna are discussing Hannah’s love life problems and so Shoshanna reads from a fictitious self-help book *Listen Ladies: A Tough Love Approach to the Tough Game of Love*, and is interrupted by Hannah who asks,

“But here’s my question, who are the ladies?”

Shoshanna: “Obvi we’re the ladies!”

Jessa: “I’m not the ladies.”

Shoshanna: “Yup you’re the ladies.”

Jessa, adamant: “I’m not the ladies.”

Shoshanna, correcting her: “Yes, you are, you’re the ladies.”

Jessa, annoyed: “You’re being unfair, you can’t force me to be a lady.”

Shoshanna, exasperated: “I’m not forcing you to be a lady. Okay, I’m a lady, she’s a lady, you’re a lady. We’re the ladies!”

Much of what I am talking about in this article can be drawn from this short scene in which different relations to feminism cleverly appear in each of the three characters: Shoshanna is the conservative one keeping hold of the use of lady because it spells femininity and femininity is a conservative ideal of femininity that wants ladylike qualities to be honoured and regarded as strong. From this position, one gets tougher against ill treatment by men in a surprisingly feisty way. Jessa, who protests “I’m not the ladies,” is the artistic one and the most creative and free thinking, declaring her sexual preferences might run to pretending to be a cow with udders. Hannah, the protagonist of the show and burgeoning author, is the most ambivalent, wry, and critical. It is she who asks who are the ladies? There is a fourth position though, a missing character of sorts, who uses lady not because of a conservative ideal of femininity that wants ladylike qualities to be honoured but because it is becoming cool again, a current alternative to simple serious uses of woman, especially in feminism.



## *Lady* in Feminism

By far, the clearest line of defence for the use of "lady" among feminist or women-centered groups of artists, curators and business people who use the term, is that "lady" (and "ladies") are ironic. In an essay for *The New Republic*, Ann Friedman argues "the word 'lady' has become core vocabulary of feminism in the age of irony." Friedman explains that sometimes young women just want to be light and that *lady* works well to be friendly without "launching a feminist tirade." Friedman claims *lady* brings lightness to a heavy emotional feminism and that *Lady* is part of feminism in an age of gender irony and comes with a slippery meaning that "encapsulates the fundamental mutability of modern feminism." Where woman is "overly serious," "weighty," "old" and "stolid," *lady* for and in feminism as "slippery," "light," "young" and "fluid." Having lifted lady out of its past associations, this newer use is also mimicry of lady as it appears across a range of iterations such as "Grandma's lavender-scented powder" and raunchy rap lyrics. These cultural referents are necessary for irony to work because irony needs the difference and the distance or else it cannot do its job.

To circulate freely *lady* needs irony, but it also needs to get along with woman, and in some instances this comradeship seems to close the gap irony needs. Around the time I was being called "hey lady" in personal texts, I began noticing "lady" and "ladies" appearing in the art scene in artist collectives such as "the Ladies network," who post work by women artists they call "ladies we love," and who "celebrate inclusivity and diversity." One of the founders, curator Lara Vrkic, says the network "is much more about creating a network of women who enjoy art and the conversation around it." What is most curious about this and other similar explanations for adopting or readopting *lady* is its interchangeability with *woman*. Another example of the mixture of woman and *lady* comes from an online magazine collective inspired by the show *Girls* called "Obviweretheladies." Although the collective includes *ladies* in its name, they describe themselves and what they do by using *women*. "We value feminism as it relates to all women including but not limited to: young, old, white, women of color, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and/or gender non-conforming." They go on to explain their name Obviweretheladies is designed to make "ladies" an all-inclusive term. This inclusivity is redolent of the umbrella term Queer which aimed to be an open invitation. "At Obvi, and within OWTL, we strive to be this kind of community. We don't need to agree on everything, but we do have to see the struggles that undoubtedly connect us. We believe that differences aside (but recognized), we are stronger together." For Obviweretheladies, *ladies* shelters a larger community because unlike most formal feminist alliances it does not need to maintain the second wave emphasis and approval of the term women.

*Lady* is capacious then, as well as flexible, and thus offers alternatives for feminist dialogue and language, but in addition to its lability, fluidity, looseness, lightness and humour, *lady* also functions as an index of the irksome politics of alterity, namely woman. Through this secondary position, *lady* seems to place the term woman, itself often theorized as secondary, at the center of its pool of gendered language options and in so doing treats it as a stable category, which it never has been. The term woman has been under scrutiny and contested at least since the 1940s when Simone de Beauvoir argued woman is not a neutral being but the secondary term to man, his other, and that gender or being gendered, at least for women, is a cultural process: "One is not born a woman but becomes one"

(34). In academic, mostly mainstream feminist philosophy and sociology, woman the category continues to be a site of contestation, what the theorist Denise Riley calls a “troublesome term” that has always been constructed in relation to other categories (35). The word *woman* is unreliable, and part of a “volatile collectivity” that “can’t provide an ontological foundation,” but feminism needs the instability of woman, argues Riley, otherwise it would have no life. (35) Other philosophers such as Julia Kristeva and Monique Wittig have been influential in their discussions about the confounding nature of the category woman, respectively describing woman as “absurd” and woman as a descriptor of heterosexual relations. One working in materialist feminism, the other in psychoanalysis, these writers demonstrate the feminist consensus of second wave French feminist theory. Additionally, in America, Butler concedes in *Gender Trouble* that while doing away with woman as a category of alterity makes sense, first woman must gain stability, a position in the symbolic, and a stake in the discourse of identity that is not secondary. It seems this cultural logic will not work for *lady* though because it needs to operate, at least today, on the surface if it is to remain useful as both free from the past or older uses, and yet crucially joined to these if only to free itself.

## Conclusion

I do not want to argue that the fortunes of *lady* are dependent on those of feminism but rather that something of feminism’s fortune seems dependent on the changes in the use and meanings of *lady*. Where feminism of the 1970s and 1980s sought to control the language of gender, such as by experimenting with the wimmin, wombyn, and wommin, lady is already extra and so in a sense freer, although as I show it continues to be compared to woman. The idea that the term lady is sexist and old fashioned and at odds with feminist principles is too enclosed as there is no single feminism. Similarly, the idea that language is always undergoing change, and the use of lady is supposed to be self-reflective, and to operate within a degree of ambiguity and uncertainty is being defended by trans and non-binary positions. This is a challenge to the idea of woman as the exclusive and exhaustive embodiment of the feminine. When that happens, and calls have been made to use other terms instead of woman and women, such as Jacob Tobia’s suggestion of “women and *femmes*,” the word *lady* becomes distinctly useful and seems less exclusionary than woman. In this sense, lady can possibly be used by anyone who does not consider woman a natural and neutral term.

It appears as though today’s feminism is in the middle of wanting to become imperceptible and wanting to identify with women, much as Friedman describes young feminists today quoting Britney Spears’s lyrics about being no longer a girl but not yet a woman. In its recent use, *lady* is recuperated from its uncool, old-fashioned and sexist affiliations and like other terms such as *dyke* and *slut* used for politicised identities and campaigns such as the international Slutwalk marches.<sup>1)</sup> Like these terms, *lady* is used in new ways to represent groups of people for which woman alone does not work. Similarly, terms such as ladyboys demonstrate *lady* is a flexible signifier of femininity in a pool of terms and associations that want to keep femininity, to soak in it, and perhaps to release it from a heavier feminism. Nonetheless, within certain feminisms *lady* still has its own heaviness, which is often disguised by the position of tertiary educated entrepreneurs refusing all but self-direction, self-determination and the sexualised entrepreneurship of the self that Genz describes as “postfeminism’s female sexual agent who

becomes the 'entrepreneur' of her own image, buying into standardized femininities while also seeking to resignify their meanings" (Genz 1). These are the children of the "girls can do anything" campaigns of the 1980s that is now in 2019 a perfume by Zadig & Voltaire.<sup>2)</sup> On reflection then, if the heaviness of feminism lies in the expectation to be everything again, not to be in the middle so much as to be both, to be feminine and feminist, light and heavy, then maybe the appeal of lady suggests that this is too great a weight.

### Notes

- 1) Slutwalk is the name given to a campaign against courtroom victim blaming in cases of rape and sexual assault. The campaign coalesces in a march or a slut walk, and is held in cities across the world. The first Slutwalk was held in Canada as a response to a Canadian police officer's 2011 media speech blaming women's appearance for their assault.
- 2) The 1990's "Girls can do anything" campaigns targeted schoolgirls across UK, US, NZ, Australia aiming to encourage them to take maths and science.

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