

**Choreographing Epiphany:
The Strategy Behind Loie Fuller's Symbolism**

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Introduction:

I first learned about dancer and choreographer Loie Fuller my sophomore year of college in a course called Western Theatrical Dance History. I was instantly intrigued by her mystique and the lack of film record of her dancing. To my surprise, a few months later while watching the newly released *Taylor Swift reputation Stadium Tour* on Netflix, I encountered Fuller again. About halfway through the concert my jaw dropped as three dancers came on stage dressed to resemble Fuller in white flowy dresses and arm extensions. They proceeded to perform Fuller-inspired choreography to accompany Taylor Swift during her song “Dress.”¹ I was both confused and intrigued by the choice to include this obscure dance history reference within Swift’s commercial music concert. As a dancer I was excited by the reference but doubted that the majority of people watching the concert would understand the icon that is Loie Fuller. I must have rewatched that clip at least five times before continuing with the film. So many questions flooded my mind—why Fuller? How did Swift learn about Fuller? What does it mean for Swift, a current star in the music industry, to perform a tribute to Fuller, an early-twentieth-century cultural dance icon? Nearly two years later, this thesis still seeks to answer that question about the connection between Fuller and Swift while more generally investigating Fuller’s legacy in twenty-first-century popular culture and how modern uses of Fuller could offer a way to examine how she operated within popular culture during her life.

Fuller is remembered as an important innovator for stage lighting, costume design, and choreography, a crucial figure in the legacy of dance and copyright law, and the first modern celebrity in terms of branding and marketing strategies. Born in 1862 outside of Chicago, Fuller began her performance career acting in theater productions which eventually led to her

¹ Dugdale, *Taylor Swift Reputation Stadium Tour*. Netflix, 2018.

choreographing and performing as a dancer.² Around 1890 Fuller first began to formulate the choreographic work which would make her famous, the “Serpentine Dance.”³ Fuller’s “Serpentine Dance” consisted of her using long poles that extend from her arms to manipulate the flowing white dress she wore which draped over her body and arm extensions. Illuminated by flashing lights and image projections, Fuller’s movement in and of the dress created abstract illusions of butterflies, flames, birds, and more.⁴ Throughout her career she performed the “Serpentine Dance” and similar productions around the world, though she primarily lived and performed in Paris and New York until her death in 1928.⁵ Her work with fabric, lighting, and movement was celebrated during her life,⁶ and scholars still regard her as influential in the fields of lighting and costume design.⁷

Fuller is also remembered for her connection to copyright law. Fuller was met with imitators throughout her career and as a result attempted to copyright her dances.⁸ Each of her attempts to copyright her choreography were denied based on the fact that her work did not tell a story. At the time one could copyright a story told through movement but not abstract movement itself.⁹ The third Fuller narrative that scholars discuss is that of the modern celebrity. Fuller was incredibly popular during her life and her dancing image was used as the muse for countless lamps, sculptures, and jewelry items.¹⁰ People of all social classes wanted to see her perform.¹¹

² Current, Richard Nelson, and Marcia Ewing Current. *Loie Fuller, Goddess of Light*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1997. 4–5, 7.

³ Current and Current, 32–33.

⁴ Garelick, Rhonda K. *Electric Salome: Loie Fuller’s Performance of Modernism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009. 4.

⁵ Current and Current, *Loie Fuller, Goddess of Light*.

⁶ Current and Current, 50–55.

⁷ Garelick, *Electric Salome: Loie Fuller’s Performance of Modernism*, 9.

⁸ Current and Current, *Loie Fuller, Goddess of Light*, 43.

⁹ Kraut, Anthea. *Choreographing Copyright: Race, Gender, and Intellectual Property Rights in American Dance*. New York, USA: Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2015. 1.

¹⁰ Current and Current, *Loie Fuller, Goddess of Light*, 54–55.

¹¹ Garelick, *Electric Salome: Loie Fuller’s Performance of Modernism*, 7.

This type of fame and celebrity served as the precursor to modern female cultural icons.¹² While each of these narratives has a different starting point, they all end together at Fuller's death. Though influential in many spheres, Fuller disappeared from public consciousness after her death.¹³ By examining how Fuller was viewed during her life in conversation with her post-death legacy, particularly within the 2010s, we see how while each of the above narratives tells an important piece of Fuller's life, separating them shrouds Fuller's desire for and actualization of agency over how her work was received in the context of her identity as a white lesbian woman.

While Fuller is seen as influential in various artistic fields, scholars have neglected the possibility of Fuller having agency over how her artistic work and commodity-image would be received by the public. In doing so, scholarship on Fuller has overlooked the connection between how she viewed herself as an author and sexualized woman and how she positioned herself as a symbol of Art Nouveau and Modernism in order to be consumed more easily by the public. Once we see how Fuller's story about her dance existed in response to the particular legal and aesthetic moment of the late 1800s to early 1900s, we can better appreciate and trouble how adaptations of the same dance have been used by modern corporate female popular music stars, Taylor Swift and Lady Gaga, to control their artistic output and the sexualization of their bodies in the legal and aesthetic moment of the 2010s. Both Swift and Gaga emphasize a specific narrative about Fuller related to their work as they re-perform her choreography. In doing so, Swift and Gaga craft Fuller into a symbol which they then use to assert control over their image and work. This irony—that Swift and Gaga attempt to assert control over their innovations by imitating Fuller, exposes how both musicians utilize Fuller in their work not to honor her as it may seem, but rather to, in very distinct ways, regulate how audiences understand their sexuality.

¹² Garelick, 6.

¹³ Garelick, 8, 244; Current and Current, *Loie Fuller, Goddess of Light*, 342.

I will start this analysis by investigating how and why Loie Fuller became a symbol of Art Nouveau and Modernism within her lifetime. In particular, I will examine Fuller's role in her own symbolization by way of the mythologized origin story she told about how destiny led her to unconsciously discover the "Serpentine Dance." I term this story Fuller's "epiphany myth." I argue that Fuller disseminated the epiphany myth in response to the lack of legal ownership she was awarded over her choreography and image, and as an attempt to regain cultural "ownership," or cultural control over her image and choreography against the rise of imitators. I go on to explain how the epiphany myth in conjunction with Fuller's choreography desexualizes her onstage body, thus allowing her to live offstage as a lesbian without impacting her onstage consumability. By understanding Fuller's active participation in crafting a monetizable self-image through the epiphany myth, it becomes clear that her symbolism for these art movements was strategically constructed. Fuller's symbolism for Art Nouveau and Modernism was a way of differentiating herself from other dancers and crafting a perceived uniqueness which made Fuller's performances more consumable and harder to replicate. After this, I will move to the 2010s where I will examine how and why Taylor Swift and Lady Gaga use Fuller's image and reimagine her choreography in their work. Here I will perform close readings of Swift's tribute to Fuller during her *reputation* Stadium Tour and Gaga's allusion to Fuller in the music video for her song "Applause" to show how both Swift and Gaga craft Fuller into a symbol in order to elevate their art, claim ownership over their work, and as an attempt to (re)secure agency over the sexualization of their self-image.

Part One: The Construction of Fuller as Symbol

An important starting point for my research on Fuller came from Rhonda K. Garelick's conception of radical newness from her book *Electric Salome*. Garelick explains that many critics have had the tendency to conflate Fuller's performances with her artistic process, leading them to see, "Fuller herself as arising from nowhere, floating down to earth to do away with past forms of theater or dance or to inaugurate a hundred different art forms."¹⁴ That is, critics "project radical newness" onto Fuller as they either sever her from her context and all those dancers and theater makers who came before her or they see her only as an "antidote" or "correction" to some societal ill.¹⁵ For example, Garelick explains that some critics that see Fuller as a symbol of Modernism have constructed her as the antidote to the artistic confines of traditional ballet. In doing so, these critics overemphasized Fuller as a turning point between the two movements to the point that she lost her artistic integrity to this role of newness.¹⁶ This analysis by Garelick gives us insight into one reason why Fuller becomes falsely constructed as representational for different artistic movements but it disregards any agency that Fuller may have had in orchestrating how her work would be received by critics and the public. As a result, Garelick misses the opportunity to analyze why and how this conception of Fuller's radical newness was created, at least in part, by Fuller herself.

Putting Garelick's deconstruction of radical newness into conversation with a close reading of the chapter entitled "How I Created The Serpentine Dance" from Fuller's autobiography reveals that the phenomenon of critics projecting radical newness onto Fuller was neither arbitrary or accidental. Rather, it was the result of Fuller creating and disseminating a

¹⁴ Garelick, *Electric Salome: Loie Fuller's Performance of Modernism*, 15.

¹⁵ Garelick, 12.

¹⁶ Garelick, *Electric Salome: Loie Fuller's Performance of Modernism*.

story of how destiny had brought her to create the “Serpentine Dance.” The chapter begins with a story of how Fuller came to perform the first precursor to what she would later call the “Serpentine Dance.” Fuller was acting in a play called *Quack MD* and after she had already bought her costumes, the author added a new hypnotism scene to the play.¹⁷ In this scene, Fuller would twirl around as if under the control of the doctor. She needed to find a new costume for this scene and was struggling to do so, until she rediscovered a silk skirt that some English officers had sent to her from India. She describes this moment in great detail writing, “All at once, however, I noticed at the bottom of one of my trunks a small casket . . . which I opened. Out of it I drew a light silk material, comparable to a spider's web. It was a skirt, very full and very broad at the bottom. I let the skirt dangle in my fingers, and before this little heap of fragile texture I lingered . . . The past, a past very near and yet already far away, was summoned up before me.”¹⁸ She then goes on to tell the story of how she met the English officers who sent her the skirt, generally describing it as a chance encounter that she would not have expected could lead to the rest of her career - she did not even know their names. Yet, there she stood with “[her] robe, which was *destined* to become a triumphal robe.”¹⁹ The robe was too long for her as a skirt, so she pulled it up, creating the “original serpentine dress.”²⁰

This story, both in its content and delivery, attributes the origin of Fuller’s “Serpentine Dance” to destiny. She goes through all of the moments that led to her performing in the “original serpentine dress” and describes herself as a passive figure in each one. Instead of describing herself as an active participant, Fuller attributes each step to the work of destiny as in

¹⁷ Fuller, Loie. *Fifteen Years of a Dancer's Life, with Some Account of Her Distinguished Friends*. London, 1913. 25.

¹⁸ Fuller, 26.

¹⁹ Fuller, 28. Emphasis mine.

²⁰ Fuller, 29.

the quote above. Furthermore, what's not attributed to destiny is attributed to a man: the author who introduces the hypnotism scene, the English officers who send her the skirt, and the actor who plays the doctor whose movements she copies during the hypnotism scene. This chapter specifically erases Fuller's contributions to the creation of this hypnotism scene and with that, the "Serpentine Dance." She attributes anything she did alone to destiny, and anything done with others to the men with whom she worked.

The second important part of this chapter explains the evolution of the "Serpentine Dance" after *Quack MD*. Fuller explains that one day as she was experimenting with the silk dress, "Unconsciously I realised that I was in the presence of a great discovery, on which was destined to open the path which I have since followed. Gently, almost religiously, I set the silk in motion, and I saw that I had obtained undulations of a character heretofore unknown. I had created a new dance. Why had I never thought of it before?"²¹ Similarly to before, Fuller writes this passage so that, to her reader, her past self feels like a passive figure in her own creative process. This discovery happens *to* Fuller, not *by* her. The rhetorical question at the end of the passage is particularly revelatory in terms of how Fuller wants people reading her memoir to view the origin of the "Serpentine Dance." Fuller sets up her reader to feel intimately connected to this epiphany moment that she has in the passage, signaled by the phrase, "I had created a new dance," since it is written as if the discovery is a deeply personal and religious moment for Fuller. Further, the romantic way that Fuller writes this passage makes this moment feel like an epiphany. It seems as though the inspiration for these choreographies came to Fuller suddenly and inexplicably, as the work of destiny. Despite Fuller having just explained that she had already performed a variation of this dance and it had been well received to the point that she

²¹ Fuller, 33.

wanted to try to perform it on her own outside of the context of *Quack MD*, in this beautifully mystical scene, Fuller describes herself miraculously and unconsciously crafting this genius, new choreography.

The story of epiphany told in this passage is what I call Fuller's "epiphany myth." The myth itself is the story above about Fuller dancing in her bedroom, but the term as a whole more specifically speaks to the artificial construction of the myth. Fuller's emphasis on the role of destiny in the origin story of the "Serpentine Dance" made invisible both the dance styles that influenced her choreography such as skirt dancing, Indian forms of dance, balletic forms, and even her own creative, intellectual, and bodily labor.²² The term "epiphany myth" conveys the role Fuller took in constructing herself as radically new as a tool for becoming consumable on stage and gaining authorship over her work.

"White Womanhood and Early Campaigns for Choreographic Copyright" by Anthea Kraut is a crucial text for theorizing why Fuller crafts this myth. Kraut analyses Fuller's legal battles for copyright over her choreography through the framework of critical race theory and commodity aesthetics. Specifically, Kraut uses the framework of whiteness as property set forth by critical race theorists in order to examine Fuller's desires to claim legal ownership over her choreography in the context of her identity as a white woman. For Kraut, "[Fuller's] embrace of copyright suggests that race and gender influenced more than the representational conventions and discursive strategies of early white modern dancers; these same axes of difference also critically shaped dancers' efforts to position themselves as propertied subjects, entitled not only to wear the mantle of artist but also to own the products of their intellectual and bodily labor."²³ This means that Fuller continued to work towards obtaining ownership over her choreography in

²² Kraut, *Choreographing Copyright*, 46.

²³ Kraut, *Choreographing Copyright*.

order to combat the gender-based denial of authorship over her work that she was promised as a white person. Following Kraut, we see that it is indeed this search for ownership and control over her work and image that is at the center of Fuller's decisions, including and especially the creation and dissemination of the epiphany myth.

In this way, Fuller's legal battles for copyright to her choreography serve as important foreground to Fuller's creation and dissemination of the epiphany myth and other non-legal strides towards gaining control over her choreography and image. Fuller sought copyright claim to her choreographies because, over the course of her career, Fuller's dances and likeness were replicated by theater managers and other dancers without credit, monetary compensation, or permission.²⁴ This led to a series of lawsuits filed both by and against Fuller. Through these legal proceedings, Fuller hoped to obtain copyright claim to her choreography. Fuller lost every case.²⁵ To further complicate these legal battles, Kraut positions Fuller's desire for legal ownership over her work as a microcosm of Fuller's desire for recognized authorship and control over her work and image.

In this sense, Fuller's epiphany myth can be seen as a reaction to her failure to gain the authorship over her work that she believed she intrinsically deserved by way of copyright. When Fuller did not receive claim to her work through the legal system, the next place where she attempted to achieve an, albeit more figurative, ownership was popular culture. She sought next to be recognized in the public sphere as unique in order to differentiate herself and her work from impersonators. The creation and dissemination of the epiphany myth is one critical way in which Fuller attempts to achieve non-legal ownership over her work and image.

²⁴ Current and Current, *Loie Fuller, Goddess of Light*, 41–44.

²⁵ Kraut, *Choreographing Copyright*, 76. Later in her life Fuller did have some success in securing patents for her stage design and lighting technologies.

In her discussion of Fuller's legal battles, Kraut outlines a helpful logic around how Fuller sought to protect herself from mass commodification through the legal system. I will build upon this logic to set up a framework as a way to analyze Fuller's epiphany myth and formulate a better understanding of first, how the epiphany myth relates to non-legal ownership over her work and second, how successful the epiphany myth was in affording Fuller ownership and control over the dissemination of her work and image. Kraut explains her version of this process as a precursor to her discussion of Fuller's legal battles and copyright claims. She states, "I approach Loie Fuller's attempt to regulate the circulation of her "Serpentine Dance" as an effort to protect herself from mass commodification, replete with racialized implications, and to claim for herself the right of self-possession, which, because of the public nature of her livelihood, was always under threat."²⁶ Expanding upon Kraut's logic, I propose a three-step framework for gaining non-legal ownership over one's work and image by way of controlling one's commodity-image:

- 1) Regulate circulation of commodity-image
- 2) Protect commodity-image from mass commodification
- 3) Claim self-possession

Fuller's construction of the epiphany myth is a strong attempt at this process of regulating, protecting, and claiming, but fails each step of the way to actualize her self-possession and therein achieve non-legal ownership over her work and commodity-image. First, Fuller attempts to regulate her commodity-image within the epiphany myth by controlling the narrative surrounding the creation of her work. Fuller does this to make it appear as though she is

²⁶ Kraut, *Choreographing Copyright*, 48.

the only person capable of performing these dances. While this does work to create a narrative of necessary uniqueness, due to the number of imitators already profiting off of her image, Fuller fails to regulate her commodity-image. This is because Fuller, in this attempt, separates her commodity-image and performances from her creative, physical, and intellectual labor that went into creating her work. In Fuller's autobiography, this is exemplified by the passive language she uses to describe her relationship to the creation of the "Serpentine Dance." The second step in this process is protecting herself from mass-commodification. Fuller attempts this by separating her work from the dance traditions that came before and inspired her, instead opting to attribute her "genius" to something superhuman and thereby irreplicable by the common skirt dancer. This once again fails as evidenced by the sheer volume of Fuller impersonators that performed her commodity-image throughout her career. Finally, Fuller attempts to claim self-possession through the epiphany myth by equating her aforementioned naturalized superiority with individuality as a way of differentiating herself from her peers and imitators. Fuller expressed this sentiment in her autobiography by explaining, "Another dancer will obtain more delicate effects, with more graceful motions, but they will not be the same. To be the same they must be created in the same spirit. One thing original, though up to a certain point it is not so good as an imitation, is in reality worth much more."²⁷ Since the first two steps failed, Fuller did not have much of a chance of achieving this third step, though in particular this attempt fails because she has no ability to claim self-possession within a narrative that attributes her success to outside sources and removes her physical body and mind from her commodity-image.

Although Fuller failed to fully achieve non-legal ownership over her work and image as evidenced by the continuation of Fuller imitators throughout her career, these attempts to

²⁷ Fuller, *Fifteen Years of a Dancer's Life, with Some Account of Her Distinguished Friends*, 34.

regulate her image, protect from mass commodification, and claim self-possession still impacted how the public viewed Fuller and her work. Especially in relation to gaining cultural control over her sexualized self-image, these attempts moved Fuller closer to her goal of authorship. Fuller's use of the epiphany myth in this capacity was facilitated by what Felicia McCarren terms as Fuller's "dual personas."²⁸ This term comes from McCarren's book *Dance Pathologies*. In the chapter, "The 'Symptomatic Act,'" McCarren analyses Stéphane Mallarmé's reviews of Fuller through the framework of psychoanalysis in order to investigate Fuller's subjectivity.

McCarren's analysis centers around what she terms, Fuller's "dual personas."²⁹ McCarren explains that Fuller's subjectivity "hinges on her movement between an onstage and an offstage persona, and her dance allows that doubleness to multiply."³⁰ In order to maintain control over her commodity-image and make both personas consumable, Fuller must separate the mystical, asexual, "fairy of light" that is her onstage persona from that of the plump, awkward producer and choreographer offstage persona. In relation to her epiphany myth, these dual personas made it possible for her onstage persona to live up to her mythology without hindrance by Fuller's offstage persona.

Another crucial divide between Fuller's dual personas was her sexuality. While Fuller lived as a lesbian offstage, onstage her body became so abstracted by fabric, light, and color that she became an asexual superhuman figure. Through Fuller's sexuality we can see how her on and offstage personas worked together in harmony. Fuller's performances were most consumable when her offstage persona did not need to compare to the public's standards of her onstage persona. The effectiveness of this divide can be seen within contemporary journalism on Fuller's

²⁸ McCarren, Felicia M. *Dance Pathologies: Performance, Poetics, Medicine*. Writing Science. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1998.

²⁹ McCarren, *Dance Pathologies*.

³⁰ McCarren, 155.

personal life. Journalists held onto Fuller's desexualized onstage self even when they wrote about her life off stage. Garelick explains, "Contemporary journalists tended to describe her personal life as "chaste," and "correct," writing often of her relationship with her mother and rarely even mentioning her live-in female companion of over twenty years, Gabrielle Bloch, a Jewish-French banking heiress who dressed only in men's suits."³¹ The creation of Fuller's dual personas through her choreography allowed her to exist as a lesbian and live with Bloch without her queerness impacting the way the public received her. Moreover, it was precisely this bodily abstraction and transformation from off to onstage persona through her choreography that made Fuller's performances so mystifying and well received by the public.

Though these dual personas were a helpful tool for creating and maintaining the epiphany myth as well as making Fuller's performances and onstage persona more consumable by the masses, they also pushed her into a precarious subject position. In order to make and sell art successfully, Fuller had to disappear into nothingness and at the same time be everything and anything except herself. In order to survive, Fuller had to destroy her human (offstage) self each night and work to make what she became even more mystical during the day. Fuller did not have legal ownership over her work and only partially had or cultural control over her commodity-image. Simultaneously, she once occupied multiple subject positions with the objective of transforming into an ever-changing magical object on stage. Through this complexity, Fuller as a public and artistic figure became a symbol. That is, the combination of these various subjectivities launched her into a cultural position that I can best define as a symbol.

In her life, Fuller became a symbol of the Art Nouveau movement as well as Modernism. These two artistic movements swept Fuller up as a living representation of their belief systems

³¹ Garelick, *Electric Salome: Loie Fuller's Performance of Modernism*, 4.

and as well as aesthetic muse for their artwork. Following Garelick, we see that Fuller's place of symbolism within Modernism was more a reflection of the "radical newness" that critics projected onto Fuller than it was a reflection of her actual relationship with the art movement. Garelick explains, "Fuller's dances seem to have offered audiences a metaphoric screen on which to project their own unconscious fantasies."³² This conception explains first how Fuller was made into a symbol of Modernism during her life, and also explains how Fuller is able to be remade as a symbol of other things in other contexts by other people. By deconstructing the epiphany myth, it becomes apparent that, more so than was publicized by either Fuller or the Modernists who treated her as a muse, Fuller fits into a history of dance and theatre makers. This artificially constructed break from tradition helped to construct the narrative that Fuller was a symbol of Modernism. The major caveat within this, though, is that this symbolism is tethered to Fuller's performances. In terms of McCarren's theorization of Fuller, only her onstage persona becomes symbolic and is able to be made and remade as such. In this way, Fuller's onstage persona became a symbol in response to the precarious subject position that her failed attempts at gaining ownership over her very specific type of artwork caused her offstage persona to occupy.

Fuller strategically used her own transformational potential to position herself as more closely related to Art Nouveau and Modernism than skirt dancing, a dance genre associated with the burlesque and vaudeville scenes of the late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, and other styles of dance that she, without this strategic symbolism, would have been associated with. While the epiphany myth did not fully position Fuller as the author of her work, it helped Fuller actualize a monetizable self-image in two ways. Fuller's epiphany myth served both to future separate her queerness and sexual body from her onstage performances, thus making her

³² Garelick, 15.

work more consumable, and to align herself with Art Nouveau and Modernism. By understanding Fuller's active participation in crafting a commodity-image for "La Loïe," with the "La" signaling that this was the genuine Loie Fuller, not an imitator,³³ through the epiphany myth which connected Fuller and these art movements through their shared ideologies of newness, it becomes clear that her symbolism for Art Nouveau and Modernism was purposely constructed as a way of differentiating herself from other styles of dance, a uniqueness which in turn made Fuller's performances more consumable and harder to replicate.

Part Two: Fuller's Post-Death Symbolism and Reappearance in the 2010s

While there seems to be a scholarly consensus that Fuller largely disappeared from cultural relevance after her death, within the past ten years her image and choreographic style have enjoyed a resurgence in popular culture.³⁴ More specifically, Fuller has been honored, referenced, and her work restaged by female popular music stars Taylor Swift and Lady Gaga. Both Swift and Gaga use Fuller's image and choreography to represent new and different things both from one another as well as from what Fuller represented in her life. Swift uses Fuller to represent the fight for artists' rights over their work while Gaga uses Fuller to position herself within a tradition of critically acclaimed art. Fuller's constructed sense of radical newness that Garelick describes is crucial to both the means by which these stars utilize Fuller and what Fuller comes to represent for them and their audiences. In this way, Fuller is made to symbolize things that are reflective of what Swift and Gaga are concerned with in the moment they re-perform

³³ Current and Current, *Loie Fuller, Goddess of Light*, 51.

³⁴ Garelick, *Electric Salome: Loie Fuller's Performance of Modernism*, 224.

Fuller's choreography. Both Swift and Gaga use Fuller's image and choreography, as well as her method of onstage bodily abstraction, in order to further the creation of a sexual self-image that is most marketable to and consumable by each of Swift and Gaga's unique audiences.

One key example of Fuller's reappearance in pop-culture is Swift's tribute to Fuller during her 2018 *reputation* Stadium Tour. Following Garelick's deconstruction of Fuller's "radical newness," we can view this performance in two distinct ways. Either Swift (and her team) fall into a similar trap that Garelick identifies within scholarship and criticism on Fuller by viewing Fuller as an "antidote" to the societal ill of artists not owning their work or Swift (and her team) utilize Fuller's ability to be seen as a projection of what the viewer wishes to see coupled with her post-death invisibility in order to further Swift's own beliefs and agenda around artist's (starting with Swift herself) having ownership over their work.

Each night of her 2018 *reputation* Stadium Tour, Swift performed her song "Dress" as a tribute to Fuller. For this performance, Swift was accompanied by three of her backup dancers who served, for this song, as Fuller imitators. This modern dance reperformance dramatically contrasted the rest of the tour throughout which Swift performed songs off of her then new album, *reputation*, along with many of her past hits and a few deep cuts with more expected commercial choreography. Swift toured the album throughout 2018 across the United States and several other countries. The final night of the US leg of the tour was filmed and turned into a Netflix Special. The tour was choreographed by Tyce Diorio, Swift's longtime choreographer who is well known in the commercial dance world for his choreography on the television show *So You Think You Can Dance*. With the exception of "Dress," which was performed with Fuller imitators, and Swift's acoustic songs, which she performed alone with her guitar, the vast majority of the show featured intricate and entertaining dancing by Swift and her sixteen backup

dancers. Diorio's choreography served to captivate and excite the audience by accentuating the musical accents of Swift's pop tracks as well as illustrate, often with mimetic gestures, the lyrics Swift sang. On the whole, Diorio's choreography for this show seems to fluctuate between and combine three general ways of moving which I will call fun, sexy, and precise. Fun refers to the moments in Diorio's choreography that are aimed primarily at engaging the audience and creating a high-energy environment in the stadium. This also includes the character and personality driven moments of choreography such as that of the final song of the show, a mash up of "This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things" and "We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together."³⁵ In this number, the dancers engage with each other, Swift, and the audience in a natural and friendly way, almost as if they were at a party. While they clap, laugh, point, and pose, Swift and the dancers look like they are having fun on stage. The next way of moving that Diorio employs in his choreography for this tour I've termed as "sexy." By this, I mean the moments in Diorio's choreography, including hip circles, body rolls, and other similar movements, that operate off of a strong-to-soft movement quality. These moments are often paired with eye-contact with fellow dancers or the audience. While Diorio's choreography is not overtly sexual, describing this way of moving as sexy serves to point to the important maturity of the choreography and way it's performed in a way that similar adjectives such as sassy and spunky fail to capture. The third mode of Diorio's choreography I've termed as "precise." This category points to the intricately choreographed sections of the show. This choreography is distinguishable by being fast, accented, performed in unison, and most clearly recognizable as what someone who is not familiar with dance may think of as dance choreography. Diorio

³⁵ Dugdale, *Taylor Swift Reputation Stadium Tour*.

combines these three ways of moving to create a show that is both continuously engaging and cohesive with evident roots in jazz and hip hop.

Again, the one notable departure from this genre occurs during Swift's performance of her song, "Dress." For this song, Swift was accompanied by three dancers clothed in Fuller-style white dresses, performing choreography inspired by Fuller. As the song concludes, a message appears on the screen that reads, "In honor of Loie Fuller (1862-1928) pioneer in the arts, dance, and design and who fought for artists to own their work."³⁶ It is in this moment that Swift and her team engage with Fuller in the way that Garelick warns against. In both the choreography and explanation, Fuller is treated as a one-dimensional figure whose purpose is to accentuate Swift. In the choreography, Swift herself does not embody Fuller's choreography, nor does she explicitly acknowledge the imitators with whom she shares the stage. Instead, the dancers swirl around Swift, decorating her performance and creating an exciting experience for the audience. As for the text, Swift and her team position Fuller as one-dimensional in that the only interesting detail about her that is shared is that she "fought for artists to own their work." Even this statement is vague. As they explain Fuller here, she is an elusive figure that relates to the audience only through her ability to set the stage for Swift's performance and fight for ownership over her work. Regardless of how intentional the decision was to shape Fuller as a symbol of the fight for "artists to own their work," this usage reshapes both Fuller and Swift's legacies around authorship and ownership of their art.

If we examine Swift's tribute to Fuller as a utilization of Fuller's ability to be made symbolic, the aim of the performance becomes less to honor Fuller as a choreographer who "fought for artists to own their work," and more to perform "Dress" about artists' rights *instead*

³⁶ Dugdale, *Taylor Swift Reputation Stadium Tour*.

of the song's subject material. Fuller's sexual body has long been removed from and made invisible by her onstage performances, both as a way to make her performances more marketable while she was alive and by scholars who examine her only as a symbol. Furthermore, as Kraut explains, "If Fuller's choice of career made her vulnerable to the sexualized gaze, she took explicit measures to counteract the eroticization of her body, as dance scholars writing about Fuller almost uniformly underscore."³⁷ In this context, the use of an adaptation of Fuller's choreography as tour choreography which becomes the only visual representation fans get of this song (there is no music video, no lyric video, and no live performances of "Dress" outside of the tour) for one of Swift's most queer-coded and sexual songs similarly works to diffuse the sexuality of the song. As Swift sings, "Carve your name into my bedpost/ 'Cause I don't want you like a best friend/ Only bought this dress so you could take it off/ Take it off/ Ah-ah-ah-ah," the camera pans to one of her background dancers swinging her arms to swirl the fabric of her Fuller-style dress around her while the blue, purple, and pink lights flooded the white fabric.³⁸ As the song continues, the three dancers continue dancing in the style of Fuller's choreography, creating a spectacle that distracts from the lyrics of Swift's song. Rather than highlighting the feelings of longing for a secret lover that Swift sings about, this choreographic choice ignores and obscures the sexual and queer-coded lyrics and instead brings attention only to the title of the song, "Dress." While "Dress" is Swift's most overtly sexual song on *reputation*, it is certainly not the only sexual song on the album or the only one performed during the show. In contrast to these other songs such as, "I Did Something Bad," and "Gorgeous," for which Swift, together with her backup dancers, performed Diorio's more typical, sexy, fun choreography that serves to further illustrate the narrative that Swift is singing about, by making "Dress" an ode to Fuller, the

³⁷ Kraut, *Choreographing Copyright*, 50.

³⁸ Dugdale, *Taylor Swift Reputation Stadium Tour*.

choreography draws attention away from the song itself and onto other aspects of Swift's career, namely, her advocacy for artists owning and getting paid fairly their own work. In this way, Swift's use of Fuller in this performance serves a two-fold purpose.

First, this ode to Fuller reflects Swift's battles for control over her work and image both legally and culturally, positioning Fuller as a symbol of the larger struggle for authorship. The fight for artists to own their work is something Swift has spoken out about throughout her career and was especially relevant to her at the time of the *reputation* Stadium Tour. *Reputation* was Swift's sixth and final album made under her contract with Big Machine Label Group (BMLG), the record label she had been with since her debut album. Under the contract that Swift signed in 2005, BMLG secured the master rights to Swift's music, meaning that they own the rights to the specific recordings of her music that appear on her first six albums. Swift secured publishing rights to her music which include the lyrics and each song's copyright. Her 2005 contract was to last for six albums meaning that after *reputation* was released and her tour concluded, Swift's contract with BMLG was over. In negotiations for a second contract with BMLG, securing ownership over her masters was at the top of Swift's agenda.³⁹ BMLG agreed, with the caveat that Swift would have to produce six more records under BMLG and with each new record, she would be awarded the rights to one of her old masters.⁴⁰ In response, Swift turned down the contract. She later explained, "I walked away because I knew once I signed that contract, Scott Borchetta would sell the label, thereby selling me and my future. I had to make the excruciating choice to leave behind my past."⁴¹ On November 19th, 2018 Swift announced that she had signed to Republic Records and Universal Music Group (UMG) with a new contract that, unlike

³⁹ taylorswift. Tumblr, "My New Home 🎵" November 19, 2018; taylorswift. Tumblr, "For years I begged ..." June 30, 2019.

⁴⁰ Borchetta, Scott. "So, It's Time For Some Truth...." Big Machine Label Group, June 30, 2019.

⁴¹ taylorswift, "For years I begged ..."

her contract with BMLG, stated that Swift would “own all of [her] master recordings” that she makes with them.⁴² She posted this announcement, which explained her decision to leave BMLG and move to UMG, just a few days before the final night of the *reputation* Stadium Tour on November 21st of the same year. This announcement also came a little over a month before the filmed version was released on Netflix on December 31st, 2018. Given this timeline, Swift’s desire to own her masters and conclusion of her contract with BMLG must be considered as a backdrop for the conception of the Fuller tribute during “Dress.”

Swift’s ownership over her masters was not the only contract detail announced in the post that relates to the fight for artists to own their work; Swift also explained that she had negotiated for “any share of [UMG’s] Spotify sales result in a distribution of money to their artists.”⁴³ This means that all UMG artists would be more fairly compensated for what they create. This is not the first time that Swift leveraged her success and power to help other artists be more fairly compensated for their music. In 2015, Swift wrote an open letter to Apple that resulted in them paying artists for the first three months of Apple Music, something that would not have happened without Swift’s influence.⁴⁴ In the world of streaming services like Apple Music and Spotify, being compensated well for what artists make is another aspect of “owning their work” that can be seen as a backdrop to Swift’s Fuller tribute and interest in Fuller. These events show how the fight for artists to own their work is something that Swift has dedicated a lot to and a cause that had very high and personal stakes for her when creating the *reputation* Stadium Tour.

Thinking about Swift’s desire for ownership over her work through the same framework that I did Fuller’s, *reputation* (both the album and tour) can be seen more clearly as a move to

⁴² taylorswift, “My New Home 🎵”

⁴³ taylorswift, “For years I begged ...”

⁴⁴ McIntyre, Hugh. “Taylor Swift’s Letter To Apple: Stern, Polite, And Necessary.” Forbes. Swift’s original Tumblr post was deleted in 2017 along with the rest of her social media posts.

(re)gain non-legal ownership over her work and image. Beyond the legal and monetary aspects of ownership discussed in the previous paragraphs that foreground Swift's tribute to Fuller, there is also a non-legal aspect of ownership that we must consider: control over her image. The connection between ownership and Swift's loss of control over her image becomes more visible in conversation with the Fuller tribute. One key event that foregrounded *reputation* and took the control over Swift's image away from her was the release of Kanye West's song "Famous," corresponding music video, and the following controversy. West and Swift have had long standing animosity, starting when West interrupted Swift during her acceptance speech at the 2008 Video Music Awards. Their feud came to a head in 2016 when West released "Famous." The three most important areas of controversy surrounding the song are the line, "I feel like me and Taylor might still have sex / Why? I made that bitch famous,"⁴⁵ the music video which consists of a wax figure orgy of famous people including Swift,⁴⁶ and the backlash Swift received online after she voiced her opposition to being included in West's song and video in these ways. In terms of control over her commodity-image, the line removes Swift's fame and success from her own hands and artistic endeavors. As for the music video, West literally strips Swift of control over her body and sexuality. Finally, by creating a narrative around the video that made it seem as though Swift had approved the initial two aspects of the song, West turned the public against Swift and painted her as a cunning, devious, dramatic woman who would lie about anything that did not go her way. #TaylorSwiftIsOverParty was trending worldwide after West's wife, Kim Kardashian, released a video on Snapchat of a phone call between Swift and West that was edited to make it appear as though Swift agreed fully to the lyrics of the song. In colloquial terms, West with the help of Kardashian, stripped Swift of her control over her public

⁴⁵ West, Kanye. "Famous." Track 4 on *The Life of Pablo*. GOOD Music and Def Jam Recordings, 2016, Spotify.

⁴⁶ Linnetz, Eli and Kanye West. *Kanye West - Famous*, 2016.

image and taught the public to view her as a “snake.” In this way, *reputation* was an important way for Swift to regain control over her commodity-image and cultural ownership over her work and during the *reputation* Stadium Tour, she used Fuller to continue this work.

The second purpose of this tribute is to make irrelevant Swift’s sexuality as she performs this highly sexual and queer-coded song. By pairing this ode to Fuller with “Dress,” Fuller becomes both a symbol and method of closeted queerness. I do not mean to suggest that this performance states anything of substance about Swift’s actual sexuality. Swift has shown a lot of support for the LGBTQ+ community in recent years, positioning herself as an ally but not queer herself, though she has historically avoided conversations about her sexuality. There are many fan theories that suggest otherwise that I will not go into here as I do not wish to speculate on her identity but rather examine what her music and staging communicates in relation to Fuller. The lyrics for “Dress” are queer coded throughout the song, but there are a few stand out lines. Most clearly, the line “I don’t want you like a best friend,”⁴⁷ speaks to the friends-to-lovers trope that is associated with queer women. Additionally, the song begins with the lines, “Our secret moments in a crowded room / They got no idea about me and you.”⁴⁸ These lines paint a scene of secrecy and lust, a yearning to be with someone who the rest of the world assumes is your best friend and nothing more. This again points to the friends-to-lovers trope as well as the history of gay couples presenting as friends or roommates in order to survive in a heteronormative society. Along similar lines, later in her performance of “Dress,” Swift sings, “Everyone thinks that they know us / But they know nothing about / All of this silence and patience, pining and anticipation / My hands are shaking from holding back from you.”⁴⁹ The explicit differentiation between the

⁴⁷ Dugdale, *Taylor Swift Reputation Stadium Tour*.

⁴⁸ Dugdale.

⁴⁹ Dugdale.

public's knowledge of her and her lover's relationship and the actual sexual manifestation of their relationship that only they know about further emphasizes her earlier sentiment of yearning to be openly with a secret lover who is disguised to "everyone" as her best friend. The genderless "you" who Swift sings "Dress" to also contributes to the queer-coding of this song especially in comparison to the "he" pronouns used in most of her other songs that have similarly queer feelings.

Similar to how Fuller positions her body to be read as asexual onstage through her choreography regardless of her offstage sexuality, Swift, by performing "Dress" with Fuller impersonators, desexualizes the song. In the very same way that Fuller maintained two different personas in order to make herself appear most consumable onstage as some asexual, mystical being, separated from her physical body, Swift and her team used Fuller's choreography and image to make invisible the queer sexual bodies that Swift sings about in "Dress."

Another recent popular culture moment where Fuller appears is Lady Gaga's music video for her song "Applause." In this music video Gaga embodies abstract versions of various iconic moments popular culture and art history including famous works of art like "The Birth of Venus" by Sandro Botticelli and Claude Monet's "Water Lilies," cultural moments such as Janet Jackson's topless *Rolling Stones* cover, and most crucially Fuller's "Serpentine Dance."⁵⁰ Some moments such as "The Birth of Venus" are embodied more literally but most references, including the ones to Fuller, are heavily abstracted. In Gaga's reference to Fuller's "Serpentine Dance," she swings a white sheet of fabric around her body in a few short moments in the music video and in other moments, an inflated Fuller style dress serves as a signifier of Fuller's dancing body without Gaga physically reenacting her movement. Unlike Swift, Gaga does not state who

⁵⁰ Matadin, Vinoodh, and Inez van Lamsweerde. *Lady Gaga - Applause (Official Music Video)*, 2013.

and what she is referencing within the video. Because of this, Gaga's (re)performance of Fuller's choreography is more of a restaging or a reference than a tribute.

Furthermore, in comparison to Diorio's restaging of Fuller's choreography for Swift's tour, Gaga's restaging, choreographed by Richard Jackson, more significantly diverges from videos and descriptions of Fuller's original choreography. This divergence aligns with Gaga's description of her creative process in that the restaging was meant to be abstract and infused with other inspiration. The short clips that reference Fuller call upon the images of black and white photographs of Fuller more so than they do videos or descriptions of Fuller's choreography or imitations of it. Specifically for the inflated dress, this is true since the gown is relatively still in comparison to how Fuller used fabric in her choreography. Additionally, Gaga is not illuminated by colorful lights, a key tenet of Fuller's performances. Gaga uses these abstractions of Fuller's choreography and image in combination with the other things she references to both prove herself as well versed in popular culture and art history and push the narrative that she is a creative, unique, and relevant high artist. In the same way that Fuller tells the epiphany myth in order to align her artistic outputs with Modernism and Art Nouveau, in this video Gaga attempts to assert her position as a high artist rather than just a popular music singer by aligning herself with these well-known artistic and cultural moments.

This desire to be seen as an artist has been at the forefront of Gaga's career since she entered the public eye. It can be seen in the extravagant and unexpected costumes that Gaga would wear to red carpet events at the beginning of her career such as the infamous meat dress she wore at the 2010 MTV Video Music Awards,⁵¹ and the egg-shaped vessel that she arrived in at the 2011 Grammy Awards⁵². Each of these red carpet looks served to shock and awe the

⁵¹ Alexander, Ella. "Getting Political," June 3, 2011.

⁵² CNN, *GRAMMY-LADY GAGA EGG*, 2016.

public. In doing this, Gaga presents her work having already asserted that she is an artist. In comparison to Swift who comes to use Fuller to assert her ownership over her work and claim control over her image from a place of lacking that ownership and control, Gaga creates “Applause” already having asserted, through these red carpet looks, this claim that she is an artist and influential popular culture icon. Through this music video, Gaga attempts to prove it as her shock value expires and she transitions away from wearing these elaborate ensembles for public appearances.

Furthermore, Gaga uses these symbols of high art and influential popular culture to clarify the message of her song, “Applause.” As she sings, “I live for the applause,” Gaga embodies a variety of figures that society has previously deemed worthy of “applause” for their artistry. In doing this, Gaga clarifies that she lives off of applause generated by those who appreciate her music as art, not those who consume her work only for its shock value. In doing so, Gaga shifts the meaning of the song from her desire for fame to her appreciation of the meaningful relationship she has with her fans.

Another important context for this video is the rumor that circulated in 2011 that Gaga is transgender and her response, or lack thereof. In an interview with *60 minutes* from 2011, Gaga was asked why she did not respond to these rumors or shut them down. She responded, “Why the hell am I going to waste my time and give a press conference about whether or not I have a penis? My fans don’t care and neither do I.”⁵³ By embodying all of these different figures and images, some with designated identities but most without, in “Applause” Gaga tries to assert with in her art, as opposed to through an interview, that her sex, gender, and sexuality are

⁵³ CBS News, *Lady Gaga & The Art of Fame*, 2011.

irrelevant to the quality and artistry of her work. Not only this, but that her art is relevant beyond these confines.

Specifically looking at Gaga's embodiment of Fuller in "Applause," we see how Gaga used this abstraction of gender and sexuality to elevate the artistry of her work and in doing so, make it most consumable. Cisheteronormativity is not the limiting factor for Gaga as it is with Swift. Instead, in order to be most consumable, by impersonating Fuller Gaga seeks to create a similar mysticism around herself and her art, just as Fuller creates for herself through the epiphany myth. One important part of Gaga's mystical commodity-image is her ambiguous queerness. That is, in a similar way that Fuller becomes an asexual magical being on stage through the use of illusion, lighting, and fabric, Gaga impersonates Fuller to become her own magical superhuman figure. However, rather than discard her sexuality completely, Gaga includes her sexual body as an important part of her art and with that, portrays an ambiguous queerness that is most marketable to her audience.

As I explained in regard to Swift, I do not mean to suggest that this performance communicates anything about Gaga's actual sexuality. Gaga identifies as bisexual and is an activist for LGBTQ rights. Instead, I am analyzing how Gaga uses Fuller to claim control over her commodity-image and portray a sexual self-image that is most marketable within the time period she created the video. Gaga uses Fuller's method of metamorphosis, something that in an interview with *Good Morning America* Gaga explained she was interested in for the "Applause" music video,⁵⁴ as a means of projecting a version of her queerness that is nonspecific and artistic with this music video in order to further prove her place as a high artist. In the aforementioned interview with *Good Morning America*, Gaga explains her "obsession" with "transforming as

⁵⁴ ABC News. *Lady Gaga Interview 2013: Singer on New Album ARTPOP and "Obsession" With "Transforming as Magic,"* 2013.

magic.”⁵⁵ Gaga understood, intuitively if not more concretely, that Fuller utilized metamorphosis onstage and harnessed Fuller’s transformational potential to craft a heightened sense of artistic and cultural importance for herself.

While Swift and Gaga use Fuller’s image and choreography in different ways - Swift emphasizes Fuller’s work to gain the rights to her dances as a projection of the lack of ownership Swift had over her music and image during her tribute to Fuller in which she performs “Dress” accompanied by three dancers who perform a restaged commercialized version of Fuller’s choreography; Gaga uses Fuller as a reference in and inspiration for her music video, “Applause” in which Gaga herself embodies an abstract version of Fuller’s image and choreography as a way of elevating her artistic image and crafting an equally marketable sexual self-image - they both use Fuller to further their own agenda and craft commodity-images that contain sexual subjectivities which are most marketable for each woman.

Conclusion:

Each of the artists that I have discussed, Loie Fuller, Taylor Swift, and Lady Gaga, use Fuller’s choreography and image as well as techniques of creating different personas in order to control their commodity-image generally and specifically how the public views their sexual self-image. In crafting this presentation of their sexual self-image, each artist created the persona who they believed would allow their art to be most consumable by the public based on the legal, aesthetic, and political atmosphere that they were creating in. Fuller aligned herself with Art

⁵⁵ ABC News.

Nouveau and Modernism with the epiphany myth in order to separate herself from imitators, gain cultural ownership over her work, and secure control over her commodity-image, especially in relation to her queerness and sexualization. To do so, Fuller removed her queerness and sexual body from her work, thereby controlling how the public sees her as a sexual subject by not allowing them to see her as sexual at all.

For Fuller, this asexual presentation made her performances of the “Serpentine Dance” most consumable. Swift aligns herself with Fuller in order to assert control over her work and to distract from her sexual body in this specifically queer-coded moment. Rather than removing this queerness by separating herself from any aspect of sexuality as Fuller does, Swift controls how the public views her as a sexual subject by ensuring that she is viewed as heterosexual. For Swift, straightness is what is most marketable. Finally, Gaga aligns herself with Fuller and others in order to assert her place as an artist and icon and to prove herself as more than a defined sex or sexuality. As Gaga transforms her body into different important figures, she both embodies and neglects her bisexuality as a way of simultaneously asserting the unimportance of her specific sexuality while claiming queerness for its artistic qualities. For Gaga, nonspecific queerness is the most consumable form of sexual subjectivity.

For all three, because femininity and female sexuality is so defined by its relationship to men and male pleasure, their attempts to make audiences view their sexual bodies in ways that make their work most consumable, and with that most lucrative, is inherently queer since it is a use of female sexuality that serves to best suit these women rather than the men around them. Thus, Fuller, Swift, and Gaga subvert the heteropatriarchal structures of ownership that each fight against in other more direct ways.

Fuller's legacy in twenty-first-century popular culture is defined by which pieces of Fuller's career and life big artists like Swift and Gaga emphasize when they restage Fuller's choreography and image. These emphases are projected onto Fuller based on what is relevant to the modern artist's (e.g. Swift and Gaga) career and life at that moment. In other words, what Fuller means today is as much, if not more so, a reflection of the current cultural moment as it is related to what Fuller focused on, accomplished, and created during her life. This split of Fuller's legacy in popular culture from a more accurate conception of her life and career is facilitated by Fuller's disappearance from popular culture after her death and the lack of video record of Fuller dancing her choreography.

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