

“That’s Not You”: Reclaiming the “Real” in Rosie the Riveter Re-appropriations

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Abstract

The “We Can Do It!” of a female World War II war worker poster is considered an image of feminist empowerment. But its association with feminism is a largely late-20th and 21st-century development. This paper examines the image, and its modern re-appropriations, through the lens of Baudrillard’s concept of the simulacra and hyperreality. The image itself is part of the simulacra, developing meaning detached from historical facts about its origins and use during World War II. The paper specifically looks at the so-called inspiration for the original poster and a contemporary recreation of it that was later apparently adopted for use in a get-out-the-vote campaign. In both cases, the women represented pushed back at their image absorption, and the erasure of their identities within the simulacra. The paper demonstrates how the individual represented in the image struggles to maintain her own identity within the simulacra, often to mixed success.

Keywords

Rosie the Riveter, simulacra, hyperreality, image, World War II

In November 2020, a woman found a U.S.-based company using an image that looked suspiciously like her being reproduced on face masks, buttons, and other products encouraging people to vote. She was never asked if the image could be used. The woman is a contemporary

pin up, or a person (male or female) who adopts vintage fashion and make-up as part of their identity (Ryan, *Pin Up!*). In the image in question, she paid homage to the famous “We Can Do It” Rosie the Riveter poster from World War II. The twist was that Pinup Little Bit, unlike the women in the original, is a dark-skinned Latinx woman.

The products she found for sale online featured a drawing that appeared to be strongly influenced by a photograph of Little Bit as Rosie. Aside from some slight changes to the clothing it seemed identical to Little Bit’s photo in posing, skin tone, and facial expression (see *Figure 1*). Little Bit has faced issues with people adopting her photo without her permission before, often as a part of montages showing the original Rosie and subsequent reinterpretations. Little Bit’s solution in these cases has simply been to ask for credit. She’s not seeking to monetize her work, but rather wants to get proper recognition for the photographer and herself. In this case, when she approached the company asking for a credit line, they responded “that’s not you.”

Baudrillard notes that representation is intrinsically tied to the real—an inherent assumption that the sign (in this case the image) relates back to some concrete thing. But within the simulacra, the real and the sign are disassociated from each other so that the sign is “never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference to circumference” (Baudrillard 524). Or, a person can be told that an image which on the surface represents their face, expressions, and other markers, can instead be “not you.” Baudrillard defines this as the hyperreal. “In a reversal of order, in third-order simulation, the model precedes the real (e.g. the map precedes the territory)—but this doesn’t mean that there is a blurring between reality and representation; rather, there is a detachment from both of these, whereby *the reversal becomes irrelevant*” (Lane 84).



Fig. 1. Rob Neill Imagery. Pinup Little Bit as Rosie the Riveter. (2005). Courtesy Sharon Escamilla.

This paper argues that the “We Can Do It!” poster and its contemporary iterations demonstrate how an iconic image exists as part of the simulacra. The poster becomes “echoic” (Rivas-Carmona and Balsera-Fernández), a type of iconic image where power and meaning echo across different contexts. While initially created during World War II, by the late 20th-

and early 21st-centuries “Rosie” became a performance of feminist empowerment. Unlike postfeminism, this performative approach claims feminism as necessary, includes a knowing nod to racial, ethnic, and gendered queerings of the meaning of the original, *while at the same time* becoming what Toffoletti refers to as a feminist self-referring sign.

The performance shifts meaning of the image from one grounded in second wave, White-centric feminism to a more inclusive understanding. Over time, it provides evidence that the poster itself was always an inclusive feminist symbol, despite any historical evidence to the contrary. The original, its reinterpretations, and the subsequent use by a manufacturer demonstrate how the simulation can be disassociated from its referents to become the hyperreal—a state where the individual is no longer recognized as herself. The hyperreal not only supersedes the original, it renders the original moot. The individuality of the individual is erased. The image exists in a sphere in and of itself, a move that the “subject” of the image—or the individual performing a reinterpretation—can find profoundly disorienting. But within this space the individual also pushes back, attempting to reclaim the self despite this erasure.

The Original Rosie: From “First” to “Second” Order Simulation

Little Bit is just one of a number of famous and not-so-famous women (and men) who have adopted the pose of the female war worker to perform gender, agency, and identity. In the original, the woman wears a denim shirt with a round white patch on the collar (see *Figure 2*). She looks at the viewer with a solemn expression on her face. Her hair is covered by a red scarf with white polka dots, which is tied in a bow at the top of her head. A single brown curl grazes her forehead and a few stray tendrils escape the scarf at the nape of her neck and the right side of her face. She is clearly White. Her brown eyes are framed by a thick fringe of long eyelashes, with smokey shadow covering her lids. No eyeliner is visible. Her eyebrows

are sharply tweezed, her cheeks are dusted with blush, and her lips and nails are graced with a neutral coral hue. She wears no jewelry. Her left hand rolls up her shirtsleeve, while her right is raised in a fist. The words “We Can Do It” appear in white over a dark blue background in a comic-like thought bubble. The background of the rest of the image is bright yellow.

The poster itself is steeped in legend. James Kimble notes: “Cultural knowledge insists rather convincingly that the poster was famous on the 1940s home front, that it was instrumental in recruiting women into the munitions factories, and that it was an official government product” (247). This “knowledge” is grounded in historical fact: The Office of War Information coordinated wartime propaganda efforts to improve morale during the war (Braverman). This includes images directed toward women, including military recruitment posters (Ryan, “Don’t Miss”), advertisements (Yesil), and magazine illustrations like the powerful and muscular woman war worker by Norman Rockwell that appeared on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1943. The campaign placed posters in a variety of public places (Ellis) and was designed to demonstrate American strength and garner support for the war effort (National Archives).

However, there’s no evidence this poster actually was publicly distributed during the war by anyone outside of the factory floor or that the government had any direct hand in its creation. Rather, the poster was made by J. Howard Miller for a *specific* short-term campaign for the Westinghouse Electric Company in 1943. At the bottom of the poster, there is information about who produced the image (the War Production Co-ordinating Committee) and instructions to “Post Feb. 15 to Feb. 28,” along with a Westinghouse emblem. The official sounding “War Production Co-ordinating Committee” was actually an *internal* unit within the Westinghouse corporation with a goal “to increase production, to decrease absenteeism, and to

avoid strikes” (Kimble and Olson 544). The poster was never used for external recruiting and instead was “was meant for display on the factory floor” (Kimble and Olson 547).



Fig. 2. Howard Miller. “We Can Do It!” (1943). Poster produced for Westinghouse, 22 X 17 in. Courtesy of the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

Similarly legend-imbued is the identity of the woman represented in the poster. In the mid-1980s, as the poster was gaining currency in popular culture, Geraldine Hoff Doyle thought she recognized herself in both the poster and in an image it may have been based on, a photograph of a factory worker at a lathe. She first saw the photo in a copy of *Modern Maturity* magazine in 1984; a decade later, she saw the poster on the cover of *Smithsonian* magazine and claimed both represented her, saying “I know what I looked like” (Kimble 253). After she died in 2010, her daughter told the *New York Times*, “[t]he arched eyebrows, the beautiful lips, the shape of her face—that’s her” (Williams A26).

This would seem to definitively settle the notion of identity: A woman recognized herself in both a photograph and a poster, ergo she must be the woman in both images. Kimble calls this the woosle effect, or a process where flawed data gets misused and ends up creating a new “truth” (Kimble 246). The photo Doyle saw in 1984 was published without a location or date listed. The only evidence that she was the woman in it came from Doyle herself. In actuality, according to a caption attached to the original image, the photo was of Naomi Parker Fraley. It was taken at the Alameda Naval Air Station in March 1942, when Doyle was still in high school and lived in Michigan (Kimble 263). While it’s impossible to verify if Miller *specifically* used the Fraley image as inspiration, it was a part of the national publicity about women war workers. However, the documentation about the creation of the poster is “fragmentary” (Kimble 256).

This lack of detail is problematic if one is trying to ascertain a single historical “truth,” i.e. is the woman in the image Doyle or Fraley? This of course is why Kimble is talking about woosles—he’s concerned with understanding the provenance of the image and using it to clarify the historical record. Facts matter. There is an attempt to associate the sign (the image)

with the real (the photographic inspiration). But viewed through a Baudrillardian lens, the question is less important. The history of its creation—if it was created because Miller saw a specific image and married the face to a different body, if he created it to be a composite of multiple photographs, or if the image sprung from his imagination—is irrelevant because the image itself is a simulation. What matters here is the *level* of simulation. The Miller illustration isn't a direct representation of the real, instead it “blurs the boundaries between reality and representation” (Lane 84). Because there is no record tying the poster to specific referents, the “We Can Do It!” poster becomes a “second order” of simulation, part of the simulacra.

This blurring of lines—between the real and the simulation—becomes discomfiting when the individual is inserted into the space. If “the real is no longer what it used to be” (Baudrillard 525), does that mean that the person herself is similarly not who or what she thinks she is? Can a photograph of an individual, which clearly links the sign to the real, be similarly claimed by someone else as also being “her”? Can an element that is firmly entrenched in the simulacra be reinterpreted to be a reflection of reality? Before she died in 2018, Fraley expressed this discomfort. She was attempting to correct the historical record and identify the lathe worker photograph as her, while at the same time accepting its assumed connection to the Miller poster. As Kimble observed, Fraley “was none too pleased to find that her identity was under dispute . . . The fact that someone else’s name had intervened, even becoming accepted public knowledge, had been a constant source of distress for her” (Kimble 268). She, like Doyle, was pushing against the simulacra and trying to assert that profound reality existed. She did this with the support of popular culture, which worked under the assumption that there must be a *single* model for the woman in the poster. *People* magazine identified Fraley as “the Real Rosie” and said she was the “likely inspiration” for the poster.

“It feels good,” Fraley told the magazine of this reaffirmation of her claim. “I didn’t want fame or fortune. I did want my own identity” (Dunlop 90).

Rosie Re-appropriations: “Third Order” Simulations

Even though “We Can Do It!” poster “is an image so powerful and iconic that it might be difficult to believe that it was virtually unknown” during much of the twentieth century (Kimble and Olson 537), by the 21st century it is practically omnipresent. Here’s singer Christina Aguilera, in a 1940s-themed music video for the song *Candyman* dancing at a soda fountain with a slew of other Rosies in a midriff-baring red shirt and blue jeans, with a bandana tied in her bleached-blond hair. Here’s Beyoncé on Instagram posting her own version of the Miller “We Can Do It!” poster; it’s gotten more than 1.4 million likes to date. The actress Alexis Bledel took to the pages of *Glamour* for her Rosie homage, wearing high-waisted pants, a denim shirt and a multi-colored scarf covering her hair. Reality stars Kris and Kendall Jenner, the singers Pink and Kelly Rowland, and professional wrestler Rhonda Rousey have similarly adopted the Miller poster clothing and pose. The “We Can Do It!” interpretation of Rosie appears as an action figure, as illustrations of male celebrities like Michael Jordan and Matt Lauer, and, in 2020, as wearing a mask and hospital scrubs to honor healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even former first lady Michelle Obama was seen in a Rosie-style pose, wearing a purple shirt and saying “Yes, We Can.”

These images not only draw from our historical “knowledge” (mimicking Rosie's clothing, make-up, and pose), but also upon the star image of the women (and men) portraying her. We can’t separate the image of Kendall Jenner, for instance, from our knowledge that she is a prominent fashion model and Instagram influencer, or the Obama illustration from her political celebrity and role as former First Lady of the United States. But they are also an

intentional performance, reinterpreting the original sign with a message targeted to a specific audience that builds upon that very star image.

In the Beyoncé photograph, from 2014, an African American woman grafts her racialized identity onto a White cultural touchstone (see: <https://www.instagram.com/p/qwWCsgPw7N/>). Instead of a polka-dotted scarf, Beyoncé uses a red paisley bandana to cover her hair. The resulting bow at top is much larger than the one in the poster. Her hair is otherwise uncovered and flows loose to the middle of her back. The pop singer's eyes are almost closed, with the irises impossible to see. The image also plays on our own knowledge of Beyoncé as star. On her left hand, her wedding ring is clearly visible; Beyoncé is married to rapper Jay-Z and at the time the image was created, had one child, Blue Ivy. The paisley bandana's color and the way it is tied on her head echoes one of her costumes from the retro-themed 2010 music video "Why Don't You Love Me." But key markers of the Rosie image—the raised fist, the denim shirt, the muted makeup, the yellow background, the "We Can Do It" thought bubble—are all fairly similar to the original poster.

These recurring images demonstrate the wozzle effect that is the "We Can Do It!" poster colliding with the simulacra. The recreations are detached from the actual role of the poster during World War II; there's no evidence the poster appeared in popular media before a *Washington Post Magazine* article in 1982 (Kimble and Olson 536). They are instead based on late-20th century reinterpretations of the image. These mediated revisions, over a period of four decades, transform it into an echoic representation of feminism (Rivas-Carmona and Balsera-Fernández) which is "empowering symbol for women" (Kimble and Olson, 537). The echoic nature of these homages ignores the provenance of the poster and its limited role within the war effort. Instead, they refer to each other, bolstered by sketchy secondary sourcing in

blogs or social media. This demonstrates what Kimble calls “the ongoing rhetorical power of the woozle effect in the electronic age” (247). But they also demonstrate how the image has moved from the “second order” to the “third order” of simulation.

Baudrillard marks this order as masking the absence of reality (524). He uses the example of the Disneyland theme park: the park is, obviously, a fantasy world (with one area of the park literally called Fantasyland). But its existence conceals that America itself is a part of simulation. “Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real . . . It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle” (Baudrillard 529). These “We Can Do It!” recreations become a part of the hyperreal. The actual history of the image doesn’t matter, e.g. the fact that the poster was not widespread propaganda during World War II, that it wasn’t used to motivate women to work, and that it wasn’t created by the federal government. Instead, the cultural knowledge generated post-1980 about the image supersedes this historical data and renders it irrelevant. Here, the images refer to each other (or are echoic) and reinforce the knowledge that this is “Rosie”: a historic symbol of female empowerment.

This new representation not only supersedes the image’s actual role in history, it also transforms our knowledge of the World War II era. Rosie becomes, to borrow from Butler, a performance, “an object of belief” (520). Each performance of Rosie reinforces our cultural knowledge of her meaning within the third order simulation.

The Simulacra, Hyperreality and Performativity

Little Bit’s version of Rosie is part of this performance. It was created in 2005, predating the Beyoncé homage. It is an early image for the pin up, created in the first year or two of her

aesthetic explorations, well before she modeled for any vintage fashion companies or won any pin up contests. Little Bit's Rosie wears a denim shirt and raises a fist in front of a yellow backdrop, but other elements clearly mark the image as "hers" (see *Figure 1*). There is no visible bow in the polka-dotted scarf, and instead of a single curl, a mass of curls grazes her forehead. Unlike the Miller or Beyoncé images, where the women turn their faces toward the viewer, Little Bit's head is slightly tilted, leaving the left side of her face nearly in profile. Her eyes are framed by thick lashes and heavy shadow, outlined in black cat-eyeliner. Her cheeks, lips, and fingernails are red. Her lips are full. The words "We can do it" are not a thought bubble, but a banner across the top of the image. Little Bit is a darker-skinned Latinx woman, but her facial markers (the shape of her nose and lips, the texture of her hair) echo the Eurocentric beauty standards found in the original poster.

Butler defines performativity as a series of reinforcing acts. Through performance we reinforce or transform meaning (in Butler's case gender norms). In her image Little Bit both performs the 21st-century expectations of Rosie as a feminist icon, and also transforms them. In so doing, she helps to shift the meaning of the simulacra that is Rosie. Rosie now is no longer only an icon of White feminism, but one of a more inclusive feminism. Of course, Little Bit is not the only woman of color to "claim" Rosie. Nonetheless, her performative act helps to reinforce the expanded meaning of Rosie, especially when considered alongside later acts by Beyoncé and other African American or Latinx women like Aguilera and Rowland.

The face mask and button created by David Hays for Creative Action Network (CAN) are similarly operating within this sphere, both referring to and diverging from all of the Rosies who came before (see: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CHNxNU2BdMV/> or <https://www.instagram.com/p/CEmY9c-ANN7/>). Rosie is wearing a light blue and white

polka-dotted halter top, with the word “VOTE” behind her in white across a light blue background that echoes the color of the top. This Rosie is not only more sexualized (through the more revealing clothing), but is also advocating participation in the democratic process. The arm is raised in the familiar fist. But unlike the original “We Can Do It!” poster, the Hays ’ Rosie features a face in semi-profile. A tangle of curls peeks out from a red and white polka-dotted scarf on the woman’s forehead, the rest of her hair is completely covered by the fabric. Her full lips are bright red, and her eyes are framed by a distinct cat-eyeliner. Her skin is not light but an olive hue.

In other words, this version of Rosie features key visual markers that seem identical to those found in the image of Little Bit. Little Bit attempted to assert that the image was indeed inspired by her, sending the company her original image and asking that the manufacturer tag her in social media posts as being the inspiration. CAN refused, and before deleting its comments from Instagram, said: “This design is based on Rosie the Riveter who has been a muse to hundreds of artists. We stand by our artist and our design. The design is not based on you.” A representative from the company later told Little Bit that the image was inspired by Beyoncé. Her friends then rushed in to help prove that Little Bit was, in fact, the Rosie in the drawing. One, Wenzdai Figueroa, argued that the drawing was a “trace” or an image created by manipulating the photograph in Photoshop. She then used layering in Photoshop to create a GIF (see: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CHQdw76FMzA/?igshid=ivy6risxwpsz>) demonstrating the similarities between the two images.

Baudrillard (2001) calls this “the hysteria of production and reproduction of the real” (536) that is found within the hyperreal. This is a sphere that is not bound by “reality” but instead is grounded fully within the simulation itself. “It is measured as such in terms of its

performativity—how well does it work or operate?” (Lane 84). But there is a tension here. The individual, in this case Little Bit, is tying her performance to a specific sign; it is existing within her understanding of a fixed semiotic system. But within the simulacra, the semiotic system is in constant flux, with multiple Rosies speaking to and referring to each other.

This results in an erasure of individuality within the hyperreal, and a complication as to what constitutes a feminist act. Instead, feminism is reduced to a simple concept (feminism = female emancipation) that is “is everywhere and nowhere,” effectively erasing any nuances and resulting in “our collective inability to coherently define or confidently determine the parameters of feminism within a political and cultural economy that has become virtualized” (Toffoletti 110). Little Bit’s performative and political move is not only no longer “hers,” but it is not even identifiable. This allows the Hays/CAM Rosie to intentionally obfuscate Little Bit’s contributions and exist fully within a pseudo-feminist Rosie simulacra, where it refers to other Rosies. Meanwhile, like the “original” Rosies Doyle and Fraley, Little Bit and her friends are disoriented. They are demanding that representation not be caught up in the möbius strip that is the simulacra, but rather be firmly attached to the referent, which is itself, of course, an appropriation.

You’re Not Seeing What You Think You’re Seeing: The “Fourth Order” Simulation

This is a decidedly postmodern situation: a person emulating a historical character is asked to believe that an apparent drawing of her emulating said historical character is not, in fact, her. Within the postmodern, “the hyperreal produces a society of surfaces, performativity and a fragmentation or fracturing of rationality” (Lane 89). Little Bit and her friends push back against this fracturing of rationality, while at the same time participating in its fracturing through her Rosie homage. They’re not staking their claim based on issues of copyright or

intellectual property, but rather on their understanding of the existence of a verifiable reality. In their minds, it is obvious that the image is a trace of Little Bit's version of Rosie, and it is inconceivable that Hays or CAN would be unable to recognize that.

But it is important to note that, as with Doyle, the "perceptual link" between the two images "came from [the woman] herself" (Kimble 255). Little Bit and her friends believed that the woosle of perceptual proof was enough, especially since they were able to "prove" their claims through a type of forensic documentation. The gif demonstrated the similarities between the facial expression and body position of the drawing and the photograph. The photograph they believed inspired the drawing itself was created long before the Beyoncé image. The frustration was intensified on social media by a perception that while some companies (the manufacturer of the button, a distributor) did validate Little Bit's claims and gave her credit, neither Hays nor CAN offered similar validation.

Meanwhile, the manufacturer has stepped into the distinct language of the postmodern and the simulacra. Despite visual markers connecting the drawing to the photo of Little Bit, within the simulacra, it is not based upon her at all. The image is either based loosely upon the Miller poster or upon the Beyoncé Instagram post—whose "We Can Do It!" interpretation looks only vaguely like the original poster and nothing at all like the drawing reproduced on the buttons and face masks. Toffoletti notes that the simulacra not only subsumes the original, but the traces of its uniqueness completely vanish: "The acceleration and proliferation of signs makes no logical connections, follows no discernible order, and results in no knowable or final outcome" (113). In the case of Little Bit, her performance itself—through the distinct markers she brought to her interpretation of the Miller poster—disappear within the swirl of simulation.

The original debate as to who was the woman in the lathe photo and if she was the inspiration for the Miller photo, and the latter dispute between Little Bit and Hays/CAN over the source of inspiration of a drawing, illustrate the push/pull between the real and the simulacra when confronted by the individual. As Baudrillard notes, the hyperreal drives society into a search for the real, through image production and reproduction. We want to know definitively who was the source for an iconic poster, or that an image in a marketing campaign that resembles an individual is in fact her. But hyperreality has also become “the dominant way of experiencing and understanding the world” (Lane 84), and leads to a condition where “the hyperrealism of simulation is expressed everywhere by the real's striking resemblance to itself” (Baudrillard 536). Here, feminism, and its reduction within the simulacra into only superficial emancipation, erases not only the complexities and necessities of feminist advocacy, but also the subversiveness of the performance that is Little Bit’s Rosie.

So does that mean that the individual’s attempts to resist the hyperreal are futile? If the original is moot and the hyperreal is the dominant condition of postmodernity, it would seem to indicate that the women discussed here—Doyle, Fraley, and Little Bit—are simply tilting at proverbial windmills.

Perhaps not. In a way, their success may be tied to how cemented the image itself is within the simulacra and its own ties to “reality.” In this case, both photographs are able to exist as a “second order” simulation (blurred boundaries between reality and representation). We know the images are representations and not physical women. Still, Fraley received recognition that the photo was, in fact, of her, and Little Bit’s identity as the woman in the 2005 photograph of the Latinx Rosie is unchallenged. In both cases, the image has a clear referent (the real woman who was the subject of the photograph).

Although in “profound reality” (Baudrillard’s term for the physical world) this relationship between sign and referent is important, within the hyperreal it is deprioritized. This deprioritization comes when the images move from the private space of the individual, and enter into a more public sphere. At that point, they become part of the larger state of hyperreality (production and reproduction of the real) surrounding Rosie the Riveter. The photographs are now a part of the never-ending, self-referential nature of the simulacra. This is the same spot where both illustrations—the Miller poster and the Hays/CAN VOTE image—are firmly entrenched. They are at home within the hyperreal, a part of the pure simulacrum. In these images, it is more difficult for the individual to assert ownership—or subvert the essentialist (surface) message of feminism. The images instead actively work to retain their place in the simulacra, resisting ties to reality and instead drawing the individual into a space where she can be told with certainty that she is not herself.

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