

## MADONNA: REBEL WITH A CAUSE?

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Madonna and Tony Ward in *Justify My Love* (1990).

Music is one of the most universally accessible forms of artistic expression and interpretation. It has the ability to transcend language and cultural barriers. Unlike fine literature or classic paintings, one need not possess prior schooling or a high place in society to experience or appreciate even most classical music. Pop music is, by its very nature, the most accessible genre of musical aestheticism. It is produced with the tastes of society in mind and is thus devoured by the populace, whose appetite for catchy beats seems insatiable. Madonna, with a career spanning two decades of number-one selling albums, has not only been the most successful artist in satisfying the public's hunger for pop music, but—to both those who love her and those who love to hate her—the most meaningful. To fans, she signifies a refreshingly new breed of feminism; to critics, a social disease that gnaws away at the moral fiber holding society together—one that must be eradicated. Particularly through her practices of “gender bending,” Madonna has become the world's biggest and most socially significant pop icon, as well as the most controversial. She dares to

use the tools that were intended by the patriarchy for domination to defy and transgress the norms instilled by that elite class. Madonna is a rebel with a cause.

Madonna was born into the realm of American pop culture in the 1980s, alongside the launch of Music Television (MTV) in 1981. Quickly adopted into American mainstream youth culture, MTV played a significant role in launching Madonna's career through airing a series of cleverly crafted and highly controversial videos. She remained in the spotlight as she constantly morphed into new personas and pushed the limits of gender and sexuality. Even as the MTV darling's racy video for the song "Justify My Love" was banned from the very channel that made her a star, Madonna maintained—and gained even more—popularity. Her music and performances invoked a tidal wave of scholarly analysis, harsh criticism, and, in spite of her gender bending (or, as I suggest, because of it), claims by many that Madonna is a feminist for the new generation—all factors that have kept her in the limelight.

Pop music is readily accessible, both in terms of the public's understanding and interest in the music and the volume of pop music available to listeners. Combined with its infectious rhythms, attractive performers, and dazzling dance routines, it is no wonder that the public constantly yearns for more pop music. By extension, popular music can be used by the dominant (male) class to manipulate subordinate classes. Although pop music may seem benign and insignificant, the elite male-dominant class recognizes the enormous power it wields over the masses through controlling and producing pop music. According to John Fiske, cultural theorist and professor of communication arts at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, the audience (the masses) is in complete control of what is transformed into popular culture. Fiske would declare that pop music presents a mass-culture smorgasbord from which people pick and choose what is to be made into popular culture. He would also contend that the people do this according to their own sets of values. Fiske writes that "[p]opular culture is typically bound up with the products of mass culture and technology of mass culture, but its creativity consists in its way of using these products and technologies, not in producing them" (325). He generously assigns the process of culture making to the

masses, while naively failing to regard the influence that the producers of pop music (predominantly male) have over the way an image is presented or a lyric expressed. Producers of pop music are keenly aware of the power they exert over the masses and seek to exploit this knowledge to the fullest extent possible by using pop music to manipulate people's thoughts in relation to the music.

To ground his assertions, Fiske maintains that "[c]rucial to the art of making do is the selection of what to use. Roughly 80 percent of the products of mass culture are rejected by the people, [and] eight out of ten Hollywood films fail to make a profit at the box office" (326). While it is true that consumers of mass culture are able to choose what they like and reject what they dislike, they are drawing their tastes and preferences from a limited range of cultural possibilities. It is inevitable that the public rejects some elements of mass culture; this is of little concern to the producers of pop music in the long run because while the masses reject one aspect of mass culture, they must therefore choose another part of mass culture to transform into popular culture. Those doing the choosing feel that they have the freedom to decide what they want from culture, yet they select their preferences from a short list provided to them by profit-maximizing producers of mass culture, whose concern lies not in which artist the public chooses, but that the public chooses an artist from the particular list they offer. The mass production of pop music provides the atmosphere in which this goal can be accomplished.

While John Fiske focuses the power of culture making centrally upon individual consumers, Dick Hebdige, cultural theorist and professor at CalArts, more accurately posits the power *relations* between the elite and the populace—the producers of pop music and its consumers—as a struggle to maintain hegemony. Clearly, producers of pop music are not merely static vehicles through which the audience derives material for constructing popular culture. Hebdige asserts that producers of mass culture achieve and maintain dominance by constantly shifting and expanding their viewpoints to align with the views of the people, so that the people fail to recognize that they are being controlled. To explain this process of hegemony, Hebdige states, "The term hegemony refers to a situation in which a provisional alliance of certain social groups exert 'total social authority' over other

groups, not simply by coercion but by ‘winning and shaping consent so that the power of the dominant classes appear both legitimate and natural’” (15-16). Pop music is simply another method employed—most of the time subconsciously—by the social elite to control the bourgeoisie. The main focus of record executives is to maximize profits, but society is so historically entrenched in the codes of male dominance that the songs and artists that make the most profit are usually the ones that conform to its standards. Hegemony is therefore achieved and maintained as the pop songs that tend to enjoy top status on music charts comply with ancient male standards. These ideals have pervaded society for so long that the codes themselves exert hegemony over all layers of society, including record executives who, by producing the music, exert hegemony over the masses—a process which seems natural. For instance, Britney Spears, a pop sensation who is often touted as a younger version of Madonna, coquettishly croons to a male spectator “I’m a slave 4 U/I cannot hold it, I cannot control it,” thus reasserting the ideology of males maintaining the upper hand in relationships. Contrast this to Madonna’s perhaps most controversial hit, “Justify My Love.” Both songs express the singer’s desire for another, yet with stark differences in presentation. The video for “Justify My Love” was so raunchy and controversial that it was at first only aired on MTV after midnight, then banned entirely. It takes place in a French hotel room and features Madonna in various sexual situations running the gamut from sadomasochism and homoeroticism to multiracial group sex and androgynous lovers. Similar to “I’m a Slave 4 U,” there is a scene in which Madonna assumes a submissive position, with her then-lover Tony Ward as top to her bottom, a crucifix dangling from his neck; however, the positions quickly reverse as Madonna sings “I’m open and ready/For you to justify my love,” giving the appearance that she is in control of her sexual encounters because she urges her lover(s) to “justify” and prove to her that her love is a worthwhile commitment. This is more characteristic of an egalitarian relationship rather than Madonna being a “slave” to her lovers, or vice versa. Other differences between Madonna and her so-called contemporaries include their reception by various members of the public. Whereas both men and women admire, are indifferent, or dislike Britney Spears, whether for her looks or for

her music, Madonna's persona and music receive reactions with distinguishable boundaries among different groups of the population. Although it is unlikely that any men would deny Madonna's physical beauty, instead of emphasizing this fact as is done with stars like Britney Spears, some males express ambivalence and discomfort toward the Queen of Pop's sexuality and music. Madonna holds the widest appeal to marginal members of society, whether the group is homosexuals, transsexuals, or, in an androcentric society, women. These vast discrepancies between the reception of Madonna and that of her presupposed counterparts insinuate that differences exist in how the public interprets and uses their music, as well as the views and intentions of the artists. They suggest that certain elements of Madonna's music and persona are interpreted by marginal groups as being refreshingly different—as strikes against the norms of a male-dominated society.

While hegemony exerts a considerable influence in shaping popular culture and the way the masses feel towards certain issues, the masses are not totally powerless against the social standards of the male-dominant society that seeks to extinguish them. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White proffer transgression and the carnivalesque as terms that question and defy such authority. Transgression is broadly defined as the defiance and contradiction of social norms, and is achieved through the carnivalesque, where carnival laughter, “the ‘coarse’ and familiar speech of the marketplace provided a complex repertoire of speech patterns excluded from official discourse which could be used for parody, subversive humor, and inversion” (Stallybrass and White 8). Therefore, while the social elite does indeed affect how society thinks and feels in terms of music, the masses have a means of resisting this dominance through transgression.

Since she is a pop artist and pop music is seen as a trivial form of aestheticism, Madonna's music is parallel to the carnivalesque, belonging to the lower social strata in the musical caste system. Stallybrass and White remind us that “[w]hat is *socially* peripheral is so frequently *symbolically* central” (5). Rather than being insignificant, Madonna's music caters to those who will be most influenced by her music and use it in their own quests for identity. Madonna is socially relevant to pop music and

the understanding of how popular culture functions in that she refuses to submit to the norms of male superiority. She uses pop music—ironically, the very weapon the elite male culture uses to dominate lower social strata—to transgress those standards. Madonna most successfully transgresses the cultural codes set by a male-dominant society through gender bending: pushing the boundaries of gender and sexuality in such a way that she deconstructs and then reconstructs gender roles according to her own beliefs. For many women (as well as male feminists), Madonna represents a new breed of feminism, one in which women are free to be in charge of their own sexuality rather than submitting to the norms instilled by a patriarchal society. This new feminism also frees open-minded men of the often suffocating, aggressive, and hyper-masculine roles that most males are expected to assume.

The time period in which Madonna entered the music scene had huge implications for her success, and had social and political implications for the institution of gender and sexuality at the time. Pamela Robertson discusses the social and political conditions in American society at the time of Madonna's arrival:

The status and need for feminism in the early 1980s especially was foggy. The label "post feminist" suggested a belief . . . especially in younger women, that there was no longer a need for feminist politics . . . . As a female superstar, Madonna challenged a lot of the established positions of academic and activist feminism and functioned on both sides of the "post feminist" debate as a touchstone for the rearticulation of a host of feminist issues including pornography, fashion, and makeup.

(125)

One may infer from the above statement that through her music Madonna purposely represents an ardent feminism, but according to a statement made by Madonna herself, this is not the case: "I don't think about the work I do in terms of feminism. I certainly feel I give women strength and hope, particularly young women. So in that respect I feel my behavior is feminist, or my art is feminist. But I'm not militant about it, nor do I exactly premeditate it" (Gilmore 37). With this statement, Madonna sits ambiguously on both sides of the fence in terms of her actions,

maintaining and heightening her fame and power in society by seeming to appease or at the very least intrigue both feminists and nonfeminists alike. With this statement, she tells a population disinterested in feminist politics that it was not her intention to be regarded in such a way, avoiding complications—at least for the time being—that could have gotten in the way of this group enjoying her music. At the same time, she inspires those who do see her work as feminist by sending them a sort of hidden message that they interpret as purely feminist. The fact that Madonna seemingly wavered in her degree of association with the feminist movement also indicates that other outside forces—including the state of the feminist movement at that time and the audience's perception of Madonna—greatly influenced her association with feminism.

The audience took Madonna's representations in her music to signify a new type of feminism, making her texts part of their popular culture. Although the audience does not have complete power in determining what is popular culture (its opinions are always affected to a certain degree by the producers of pop music), they determine what their popular culture is and at the same time achieve transgression by integrating texts that are important to them into their own popular culture. Fiske maintains that "Popular selection, then, is performed not by universal aesthetic criteria, but by socially located criteria of relevance" (327), implying that people interpret and use different texts according to their own individual sets of values and what they deem relevant. Many women saw in Madonna's music and performances a struggle that paralleled their own quests for identity, and thus incorporated Madonna into their popular culture.

The populace's opinions of Madonna are determined not only by each individual's set of moral codes, but are also dependent on the social and political climate of the time. The social and political structure from the 1980s to the present has allowed a springboard from which female interpreters could read Madonna's texts in a meaningful way that gives them a sense of identity and empowerment. Madonna's role in popular culture is aptly described by Karlene Faith, who remarks, "Through her varied and constantly changing creative personas, Madonna both reflects and helps to reinvent social values and body-centered cultural trends

which are commercially constructed in the context of the United States, and which are distributed as an ideology throughout the world” (32). Madonna’s texts do not contain a message specifically produced with feminist undertones; instead, her music and masquerades express her independence from any categorization. Nonetheless, some readers of her texts, particularly those seeking to revitalize a waning feminist movement in the postmodern era, interpret the varied representations in her music and image as being feminist and socially significant. Clearly, the audience and the products of popular culture (Madonna) both engage in the process of shaping popular culture.

Pamela Robertson describes Madonna’s technique of gender bending to parody and transgress the limits of gender as being a form of “feminist camp,” which she defines as “image and culture making processes through which women have traditionally been given access” (9). In the tradition of a patriarchal society, feminist camp would include a woman assuming roles in which she is portrayed as weak and defenseless, and dependent upon a man to complete her existence. Feminist camp is equivalent to the method of gender bending that Madonna employs to achieve transgression. Barbara Babcock explains that symbolic inversion is used to challenge the norms of a dominant social class: “‘Symbolic inversion’ may be broadly defined as any act of expressive behavior which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative way to commonly held cultural codes, literary or artistic, religious, social, and political” (Stallybrass and White 17). Madonna is certainly privy to symbolic inversion—through her use of feminist camp, she presents herself in sadomasochistic and misogynistic roles that at first seem to assert the masculine advantage in a patriarchal society, but then redirects interpreters’ attention through pushing limits of femininity (defined by the patriarchy) in ways that parody and defy such norms. Madonna’s videos, above anything else, present her as being in control rather than being controlled. In a statement made on *Nightline* in 1990, in response to Forrest Sawyer’s questioning of her borderline misogynistic videos, Madonna said “No—there wasn’t a man that put chains on me. I was chained to my desires. There wasn’t a man standing there making me do it. I do everything on my own volition. I’m in charge.” Although critics of Madonna’s music



claim that she is setting back the feminist movement by blatantly portraying misogynistic and sadomasochistic images in her music videos, Hebdige would counter that these critics fall prey to the deception in Madonna's music and belong to the "silent majority" whose response to subcultures he analyzes: "Its transformations go 'against nature' . . . they are gestures, movements towards a speech which offends the 'silent majority,' which challenges the principle of unity and cohesion, which contradicts the myth of consensus" (18). Hebdige would say that critics of Madonna's music, so caught up in the norms of a male-dominated society, fail to see that Madonna's music actually parodies such norms rather than asserts them. Social conditions require that Madonna seemingly submit to these norms first before mocking them. Unfortunately, as Hebdige fails to see, we are all to some extent mired in such standards so that even Madonna herself may seem guilty at times of submitting to the codes of male dominance instead of parodying them.

The contradictions in Madonna's music travel down a slippery slope. At the same time that she attempts to parody societal norms, it can easily be interpreted that she conforms to those norms. Like Britney Spears, for instance, she is sexual and beautiful, and her image accounts for much of her success. She is more known for her public controversies and flagrant displays than she is for her voice. Clearly, a plain-looking woman who voiced the same messages would not have the same influence upon society. In this way, Madonna conforms to the male standards of society—her success is largely due to her image rather than the *direct* message she conveys. Moreover, pushing the boundaries of sexuality and gender by conveying images of sadomasochism and misogyny is difficult to see as an effective way of demystifying gender roles: portraying violence towards women and representing such an influential woman (who stated, in her 1990 *Nightline* interview with Forrest Sawyer, that she draws the line at "violence and humiliation and degradation") taking pleasure in pain might just convince impressionable minds to believe that such practices are acceptable. Questioning Madonna's technique of using S/M as a means of subversion, Faith writes: "The infinite varieties of feminism all share in common an active challenge to sex/gender inequities and power abuses . . . games of power which signify pain

and oppression are hard to grasp as sexual liberation; why would women who critique power abuses wish to dominate men or one another?" (57). Madonna's use of sadomasochism and misogyny to deconstruct gender roles can sometimes backfire and be seen as conforming to those very norms of oppression. If this is so, the full explanation for Madonna's association with feminism is still unaccounted for.

Madonna is only one of the many musical artists who have pushed the boundaries of sexuality and gender through their music—Michael Jackson, RuPaul, and Prince have employed similar techniques in presenting themselves in terms of their music, and have been as equally successful as Madonna. What makes Madonna unique is that among these artists and countless others only she is universally ascribed a socially significant role. Of this phenomenon Robertson writes that "Madonna has sometimes been compared to performance rock stars, especially David Bowie, because of her shifting images and play with gender roles. Gender bending in performance rock, was, however, primarily a masculine privilege" (124). The fact that men were granted more freedom to push the boundaries of sexuality is critical in examining why Madonna has been crowned a new-age feminist due to her gender bending. Since it was more socially acceptable for men to cross the limits of gender, Michael Jackson and Prince's music was received with almost a sense of humor, and not integrated into pop culture as socially significant work. On the other hand, Madonna was the first woman to have done so. In comparison to her male counterparts, she did not do so simply for profit (although she amassed a large fortune through her music and memorabilia), as her male counterparts seem to have done, but rather to express a socially significant message, one that declared that she was in charge of her own destiny rather than submissive to male standards of propriety. The audience who sees Madonna as an ardent feminist thus identifies with the individualism and autonomy in her career—her belief that if a man can do it, so can she—as being inspiration to spark their own struggles against suffocating gender roles. As Susan McClary indicates, "Her spirited, self-confident statements in interviews tend to lend support to the interpretations of female fans" (149-50). That Madonna chooses to express herself through gender bending,

rather than the actual effects of gender bending itself, is what so many women identify with as avant-garde feminism.

Madonna also stands alone among pop artists in that to this day she remains the sole performer to hold a position of such social significance for so many people. She is both the bellwether and the indicator of social and political trends. Other musicians following Madonna (and, arguably, preceding her) may have come close to selling as many albums, dressing as provocatively—even similarly pushing the limits of propriety and sexuality—but they in no way match Madonna’s functional importance in society. Steven Anderson recognizes that “[o]nce a flesh-and-blood superstar, she’s now a metaphysic unto herself . . . . The only aspect left to consider is Madonna’s resonance in the minds of the public, for whom—like it or not—she’s become a repository for all our ideas about fame, money, sex, feminism, pop culture, even death” (67-8). Madonna’s notoriety as a pop icon is due in part to her unwillingness to maintain a static image. Her continually changing persona has given society the impression of Madonna as being a work-in-progress, and has allowed her to deal with a myriad of issues in her music. In doing so, she has left no stone unturned. It is for this reason that society finds itself relating Madonna to a number of ubiquitous social and political issues. Her shrewd business skills and control of her career give her the opportunity to deal with a variety of issues, portraying them in a way that she sees fit. At the same time, women associate with Madonna’s incredible sense of autonomy.

With the release of her fourteenth album *American Life* in April of 2003, it seems unlikely that Madonna will be willing to step down from her reign as Queen of Pop anytime soon. Acting as a reliable source of meaningful texts which the public can use to transgress societal norms for over two decades, it hardly seems logical that the public would want to overthrow Madonna and select a new source for achieving transgression. The public would be hard-pressed to find another artist who could so wholly intrigue and inspire it as Madonna does. Although society may readily buy another star’s albums and memorabilia in volumes comparable to the amount of Madonna merchandise it consumes, it would not as readily pass on Madonna’s longstanding social importance. Madonna herself plays a major role in ensuring that her legacy as

an important social icon and pop artist lives on. In short, Madonna attempts to ensure, and to a large extent succeeds in ensuring, that she will be the only Madonna.

People are forever scanning mass culture to find relevant struggles to incorporate into their popular culture. Men and women alike can relate to Madonna's free-spirited exploration to find her identity and to make meanings for herself through whatever mediums are available to her (for example, her use of S/M). They thus incorporate Madonna's texts into their popular culture. As she tears through the seams of gender and sexuality, Madonna takes on forever-changing masquerades so that virtually anyone struggling to find himself or herself is able to identify with at least one of her personas. In addition, as in her view of her music as a feminist text, or the androgyny of many of her dancers, Madonna's ambiguity coupled with keen business skills help her to maintain her top status as a cultural icon. For example, she draws intrigue to herself as she seems simultaneously to appease and to mock Britney Spears. Madonna has been recently spotted donning an "I Love Britney" tee shirt, which was reciprocated by Britney wearing Madonna fan gear and gushing that she wanted to do a duet with her idol. By appearing to support Britney Spears, despite that as a fresh young star Britney poses a potential threat to Madonna's career, Madonna keeps the crowd wondering whether her actions are heartfelt or mocking, drawing attention to herself while at the same time appeasing Britney. It does not matter so much what her true opinion is; so long as she has the audience's attention focused on guessing her beliefs and intentions, Madonna achieves her goal of remaining in the spotlight. This strategy is similar to the one employed when Madonna declared that her music was not intentionally feminist—her actions speak loudest to those struggling to transgress cultural norms. Those mired in codes of patriarchy will likely see her actions as heartfelt, accepting them at face value without any effort to discover how she truly feels. Those struggling to defy cultural standards will interpret this as blatant mockery of Britney and the cultural norms that she stands for, and thus will be provided with another text with which to transgress social conventions. Britney, flattered by praise from her idol, is then seen by the socially marginalized as conforming to the codes set for her by Madonna, instead of exploring her own

identity. The public, on a constant quest for meaningful struggles to relate to, will overlook Britney Spears as a resource for their own struggles. Madonna, with all her various incarnations, will then be the sole provider of texts that hold meaning to the public, at least in the realm of female pop artists.

Likewise, it seems that any attempt to emulate Madonna's style and various personas will not receive the same public response as was given when Madonna introduced them. For example, exploring issues of sadomasochism, or giving the impression that "white girls can curse," would today be interpreted as either trite or vulgar, depending on the viewer. While Madonna has paved the way and opened doors for female musicians, her specific footsteps are not easily followed. If she is not careful, a young performer displaying multiple images and addressing various issues runs the risk of contradicting herself and thus diluting her credibility in the eyes of the public. For example, many pop artists wish to be seen as sexy and seductive as well as the innocent girl-next-door with high morals. Trying to maintain both personas at once may lead to the artist wavering uncertainly between the two poles of the dichotomy, lacking credibility in either role. As such, the audience will not incorporate these elements into popular culture. Although Madonna chases through various personas, and the persona itself may be fleeting, she presents a complete image of whatever role she is playing, often exaggerated and dripping in excess, so that those struggling for their identity can truly relate to her. Moreover, she never looks back on past masquerades as she constantly searches for new roles to fill. Once again, Madonna's prescience, keen business sense, and willingness to address an array of social and political issues set the stage for her to become the ultimate pop icon, and at the same time ensured that no other artist could take her place.

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**COMMENTARY**  
**NEHA BAGCHI**

Madonna has been one of the most interesting, influential, and controversial icons in music history. Pham writes a fluid and engaging analysis of Madonna's music and the influence it has had on its listeners and on female empowerment. Pham ties together the opinions and analyses of several experts, including cultural

theorists John Fiske and Dick Hebdige. Broadly speaking, people tend to overlook how much influence the icons of popular culture have on society, as well as how these icons represent the direction in which society is moving. We tend to trivialize popular culture, labeling it shallow and ephemeral, with no substantial impact on society. It is all too easy to forget that the word “popular” is related to the word “people”—that which is popular is literally “of the people.” Therefore, pop culture is a mirror of society as much as elevated literature and cutting-edge technological research is, and perhaps even more so. Pham acknowledges this by exploring the impact that Madonna, the indisputable Queen of Pop, has had on society.

Pham states that Madonna is comparable to Michael Jackson, the King of Pop. Pham does not compare Madonna’s music to his, which would have been an interesting juxtaposition—the King and Queen of Pop, side by side. Is it only gender bending that they have in common or does their music have shared elements? Michael Jackson does not focus on changing stereotypes of gender and gender-roles. His songs, such as “Stop Trippin’,” “Will You Be There,” and “They Don’t Really Care About Us,” focus on stereotypes of people in general and advocate that society needs to be more tolerant of all kinds of people. Madonna’s music, on the other hand, has strong currents of female empowerment. “Express Yourself,” for example, begins with “Come on girls/Do you believe in love?/‘Cause I got something to say about it . . . don’t go for second best.” If Madonna and Jackson are the Queen and King of Pop, they must have more in common than gender bending, and an analysis of what they have in common that makes them pop royalty would have made intriguing reading.

Pham demonstrates Madonna’s powerful message of female empowerment and shows how that message is as relevant today as it was when her music was first released. Pham also shows that today’s pop stars, such as Britney Spears, cannot hold a candle to the Queen of Pop. Furthermore, Pham shows how Madonna uses the very elements that hold male-centric society together to create upheaval within that society. Her music videos are charged with sexuality and frequently play on typical male fantasies, but they have a twist: Madonna demands that her love be justified, so to speak. Recent pop icon Britney Spears caters to male fantasies, but

there is no twist, as is apparent in the lyrics to her song “Slave 4 U.” The Madonna-Britney dynamic is an intriguing angle to explore, but Pham does not go too deeply into it—probably because, as Pham points out, Madonna herself has not made her opinion on Britney completely clear.

While Pham’s opinion of Madonna is made more or less clear throughout the paper, she seems most comfortable expressing it somewhat obliquely by quoting expert analyses that express similar opinions. The tone of this paper would have been more assertive had she spent a little more time on her own analysis, using expert opinions as support rather than as a primary focus. Furthermore, while Pham cites sources effectively to prove her points, she does not engage those sources in dialogue. Doing so would have kept the paper more tightly focused, especially since she cites a number of sources. This, together with the lack of a network among those sources, somewhat dilutes Pham’s argument.

On the whole, however, the paper is very well researched and written by an author who is clearly involved with and passionate about her topic and thesis.

## **RESPONSE**

### **DUYEN PHAM**

Madonna is an infinitely complex character, and her polymorphous identities make it such that comparisons to equally vast numbers of artists and issues may abound. Although the primary focus of my paper was to elucidate the roles that Madonna and her audiences play in creating popular culture, comparisons between the King and Queen of Pop would have been very interesting.

While the messages conveyed in their music may differ—Michael Jackson advocated tolerance for all people while Madonna pushed female empowerment—both artists effectively used the resources and captured audiences that were most readily available to them. Michael Jackson, born African American, shocked the world in 1987 when he suddenly became “white” after a procedure that lightened his once cocoa skin. With the controversy



surrounding this move, it is no surprise that Jackson chose to address issues of racial equality. Being a man (albeit one whose masculinity is at times challenged), Jackson would be less relevant as a role model from which females could derive inspiration. On the other hand, Madonna's bold, independent style and mode of performance sent reverberations around a world that had up to that point been entrenched in a largely male-produced music industry. Her femininity and sexuality being the most readily available sources for expression, Madonna's music thus displayed themes of female empowerment. In order to be effective cultural icons, artists cannot rely on their music alone—they must have the “whole package.” Thus, an artist's image, as much as his or her music, is vital to his or her success in the public arena. The similarities between the King and Queen of Pop exist on levels other than their music; for instance, they are comparable in their ability to transform their current situations into meaningful texts for public exploration.

More than simply that Madonna has not given a concrete opinion of Britney Spears (she seldom does this), I did not discuss the Madonna-Britney Spears dynamic, in the true spirit of allowing the audience to piece together its popular culture from the bits and pieces offered to it by artists. The audience's interpretation of how Madonna truly sees Britney is yet another important culture-shaping process that will reflect Madonna's own dealing with the issue as well as each individual's view of the subject matter, and will have implications on trends of the past, present, and future.