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Britney Spears's 1999 song “Baby One More Time” involves a narrative in which the female narrator complains about her loneliness, which is occasioned by her lover's failure to page her. In Spears’s “Stronger,” produced a year later, a playful allusion is made to the earlier song with the assertion that the narrator is “stronger than yesterday,” no longer dependent on the presence of her lover for her sense of self. This “stronger” stance is replicated in a number of contemporary Top 40 songs sung by women vocalists and groups, including Britney Spears, Pink, All Saints, 3LW, Destiny's Child, TLC, Jennifer Lopez, and Christina Aguilera, and is informed by a discursive strand which I will refer to as “antiromance,” realized in song lyrics and the performative and textual strategies of music videos. The young audiences implied by these texts are engaged in processes of identity-formation involving interactions between self and others in social environments marked for gender, ethnicity, and class. Musical texts serve as demarcation signs between groups and subgroups within youth culture at the same time that they construct meanings about individual agency and identity, and my reading of antiromance texts focuses on how they position young audiences in regard to gendered identities.

I do not want to imply that the texts I consider constitute a univocal body of songs. They are diverse and often contradictory, coexisting with pop songs located firmly within conventional paradigms of romance; indeed, almost all singers perform both antiromance and romantic songs. To various extents, antiromance songs contest the naturalized ideologies which cluster around western traditions of romantic love, namely those built on patriarchal binaries which distinguish the feminine from the masculine, such as that men are active and women passive; that men are rational and women emotional; that men ini-
tiate and end relationships while women wait and suffer. At one end of the anti-
romance spectrum are songs such as Jennifer Lopez's "Love Don't Cost a
Thing" and Christina Aguilera's "Genie in a Bottle," which fold back into ro-
mane while claiming for women a right to sexual pleasure. At the other end of
the spectrum are texts which deploy strategies of parody, black humor, and
slapstick: For instance, in Sunshine Anderson's video version of the song
"Heard It All Before," the female protagonist produces a remote control and
"shuts down" her former lover; and in Pink's "There You Go," the protagonist
grabs the attention of her boyfriend by driving a motorcycle through the win-
dow of the room where he sits absorbed in his PlayStation. My sources include
lyrics and music videos performed by various female singers and a televised
concert by Britney Spears, described in the introduction to this 2001 concert as a
"sexy nineteen-year-old pop music teen queen."

The "teen queen" genre of pop music is directed particularly at a female au-
dience, from the prepubescent girls who constitute most of the audience at the
Britney Spears concert, to the adolescents and young adults implied by the
Destiny's Child song "Independent Women," which features in the soundtrack
of the film Charlie's Angels. The musicologist David Brackett observes that to
discuss pop music only in relation to "the music itself"—the sounds, their pro-
duction, their relations to one another, their effects—is to ignore the fact that
"musical meaning is socially constructed—even the type of musical meaning
that seems to derive from internal musical relationships" (xii). The pop songs
which I discuss are produced within the globalized economies of the pop music
and media industries. Their linguistic and performative features are shaped by
the genres and styles of popular music, which tend toward the replication of
cultural ideologies of romantic love; at the same time, they are informed by
meanings consonant with feminist principles concerning female agency,
though in ambiguous and ambivalent ways.

Notions of authorship are notoriously slippery in regard to pop music, since,
as David Hesmondhalgh notes, the production of popular music is inescapably
"multitextual" (208). The songs performed by teen queens are typically attrib-
uted to a list of songwriters, occasionally including the singers; for instance, Be-
yoncé Knowles of Destiny's Child is listed along with Samuel J. Barnes, Jean
Claude Olivier, and Cory Rooney as one of the writers of the song "In-
dependent Women." While the "I" of the song is performatively appropriated by the
female singer, questions of style and delivery are negotiated within production
processes typically controlled by men: A survey of the CD covers of teen queen
albums shows that their songs tend to be written, produced, and recorded by
men. Additionally, television programs on the making of teen queen video clips
show that the producers, choreographers, and designers of these videos are pre-
dominantly male. Teen queen songs are thus developed in contexts where
women are performers and backing vocalists and men cultural producers. It
would be rash to assume that the woman singer is merely a tabula rasa on
which male producers inscribe their versions of the feminine; nevertheless, the
singer's identification with the "I" of lyrics is highly unstable, just as the gender ideologies of antiromance songs are informed by a range of discursive strands.

Pop songs are consumed by listeners who sing along with them and memorize them; but this does not mean that the song is constituted by the words; indeed, it is often claimed that for their consumers the words of a pop song are far less significant than melody and voice quality (Mills 151). Another set of signifying practices is constituted by the visual and performative strategies mobilized in the video clip genre, which has developed, from its beginnings as a way of merely promoting a song, into what Simon Frith describes as "a source of income in itself, perhaps a more important source of income, indeed, than the music it is supposedly selling" (97). The actions performed by singers in music videos are imitated by listeners; as the final credits roll in the Britney Spears concert, the camera lingers on the faces and bodies of young girls as they perform Spears's movements.

At the center of all these signifying practices is the figure of the teen queen herself, produced through Web sites, fan clubs, magazines, and promotional material as an identity at once transparently readable and immeasurably remote. For instance, the Britney Spears concert is followed by Spears speaking directly from the screen about her life in a small town in Louisiana and then by a series of interviews featuring her mother, her first dance instructor, her teachers, her dentist, and her friends, concluding with Spears's longing for home which connects her persona with that of Dorothy in The Wizard of Oz, and thus lays claim both to a middle-American demographic and to a global culture permeated by American cultural products. Spears's production as a combination of teen queen and small-town girl is symbolized by the juxtaposition of images in the concert video and the promotional material which follows it. In the concert, for instance, her stature as diva is represented spatially, when she is lifted by crane to a point far above her audience, and when, in another sequence, she stands on top of a giant staircase. In contrast, the downplayed intimacy of the interview sequence is presented as a series of family photographs and home videos. Both representations of Spears are, of course, media constructs, designed to attract female audiences and to ensure their loyalty to the teen queen, who must be both like and unlike her subjects—a girl like them, with similar interests and aspirations; and a pop star who is the object of identificatory fantasies.

The character constructed through first-person narration in the lyrics of "Stronger" seems to be a young woman both sexually experienced (since the song implies a previous romantic relationship) and resistant to the power of romantic love over identity-formation, a woman who is not to be defined by a male partner. Like many antiromance songs, "Stronger" is sung to a male addressee, a former partner, and the lyrics insist that the narrator is not the property of any male with whom she is romantically involved. The language of the song engages its female listeners in a drama in which they are positioned to
align themselves with the narrator as she admonishes her former partner and asserts her status as an independent woman. The discursive features of “Stronger” accord with Richard Middleton’s model of words/music relationships in popular music, where he identifies three categories: “Affect,” in which words and melody merge as “intoned feeling”; “story,” where the words determine rhythm and harmonies to produce narrative; and “gesture,” in which the voice is deployed more or less as an instrument (quoted in Brackett 30). In “Stronger,” the words/music relationship hovers between affect and story. The verses, sung toward the lower register of Spears’s voice, allude to a story briefly sketched, and specifically to the narrator’s determination to escape from a relationship represented as controlling and limiting, while the chorus falls more clearly within the category of “affect,” giving the impression of an emotional and buoyant mood, its rhythm accentuating the word stronger, and its vocal range suggesting an expansiveness not present in the limited (and lower) vocal line of the verses.

But such a formalist account of music and words goes only so far in identifying the meanings produced by the song. When the performative aspects of “Stronger” are considered—Spears’s production of the teen queen persona, her actions, and the settings in which they occur—more complex significations can be observed. The video version begins with several elements of story: A setting, which includes a scene at a party; three characters—the protagonist (the Spears character), a young man and another young woman; and a series of events involving the protagonist’s discovery of a liaison between the other two characters, her argument with the man, and her departure from the party. At one point, Spears strides across a room, followed by the man, who trips over a piece of furniture and scrambles to his feet. Shortly after this, he attempts to pursue her as she leaves but is unable to evade the clutching hand of the other woman. In both cases, the effect is to emphasize the powerfulness and active physicality of the Spears character and the bumbling ineptitude of the young man, in a parodic inversion of stereotypes of romance—the decisive, action-oriented male and the fluttering, emotional female. In the sequence which follows, the Spears character drives alone in the dark through a storm; the car slewes around, and Spears is seen standing in the rain; next, through the rapid editing characteristic of music videos, she is shown spinning acrobatically on top of a pile of metal chairs (an allusion to a similar move in a Janet Jackson video), dancing as she holds a walking stick (like a Fred Astaire without top hat and tails), then back at the scene of the dark road, where she walks toward viewers across a bridge.

Throughout this collage of images, the Spears character is masculinized, represented in contexts which evoke stereotypes of masculinity: The car she drives and the walking stick she holds constitute displacements of the male phallus; in the party scene she seems to be associated with a (possibly) violent incident in which her rival falls or is pushed from a chair; she walks and drives alone in the dark, apparently oblivious of danger. Simultaneously, her sexual-
ized body is the object of specular attention, always central to the scenes, dance sequences, and narrative fragments of the video and, in the final moments of the video, subjected to the dismembering effect by which the camera focuses on components of her body: Face, breasts, midriff, legs.

It is exactly this blending of the masculinized and sexualized body of the teen queen that complicates the question of how antiromance texts position female audiences. Feminist film criticism offers some suggestions about how to approach the visual components of antiromance texts, since while the social functions of music videos are quite different from those of film, their production is informed by cinematic references and strategies within an entertainment scene where musical and film performances increasingly converge (Tasker 181–87), and their production and reception raise issues about female audiences and popular genres similar to those which arise in film criticism. As Christine Gledhill observes, “the theoretical convergence of psychoanalysis and cinema has been problematic for feminism in that it has been theorized largely from the perspective of masculinity and its constructions” (166–67), so that female spectatorship is represented within paradigms which suggest “colonized, alienated or masochistic positions of identification” (168). An added problem is the tendency for the notion of the “female spectator” to elide distinctions between the spectator constructed by the text—and identified through strategies of deconstruction—and the actual female audience; specifically, in this discussion, the girls and young women who sing along to pop songs, imitate the moves performed in videos, and attend concerts.

Gledhill suggests that the notion of negotiation allows for a model of meaning production in which “meaning is neither imposed, nor passively imbibed, but arises out of a struggle or negotiation between competing frames of reference, motivation and experience” (169). Central to this model of negotiation is Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, which refers to the shifting play of political, social, and ideological forces, reliant for their potency not on force but on persuasion. The operations of negotiation in meaning production can be examined in relation to institutions, texts, and audiences, while allowing space for “the subjectivities, identities and pleasures” (173) which shape and are shaped by the social practices involved in the reception of texts by their audiences.

The institutional forces most evident in the production of Spears as teen queen are the global economies of record and television companies, for whom the singer and her persona are commodities capable of attracting an audience which will purchase music and watch music videos—the latter interspersed on MTV with advertisements deploying many of the same strategies as the videos, thus further blurring the line between the singer and her commodification. As I have noted, pop music is centrally concerned with the figure of the teen queen and with conventional versions of romantic love, which are at odds with feminist values circulating, even if in diluted forms, within western culture. The antiromance meanings which inform “Stronger” can thus be seen to relate to a negotiation between institutional and cultural purposes and agendas and to un-
resolved contradictions surrounding versions of the feminine. In regard to textual negotiations, there are obvious tensions between lyrics which construct the female protagonist as autonomous and agential and visual representations which show her as a "bad" girl, seductively clothed and sexually available. As she stands in front of her car, her rain-soaked clothes clinging to her body, the Spears character summons up countless similar cinematic images in which the bodies of women are objectified by a masculine gaze. Yet immediately following this textual moment, she is seen performing acrobatic feats in which her body is encoded as strong and in control. The textual meanings produced by the video are very far from fixed, but it is certain that they cannot be contained within the patriarchal binary which opposes the passive "good" girl to the active "bad" one.

The third level of media analysis suggested by Gledhill's model focuses on reception, which she describes as "the most radical moment of negotiation, because the most variable and unpredictable" (173), complicated by the fact that the audiences of antiromance songs are sometimes individual but often are groups engaged in the diverse social practices of friendship groups and video and film audiences. It is outside the scope of this discussion to consider the "real" audiences of antiromance songs; nevertheless, it is important that textual analysis should take into account the contexts in which reception occurs. Spears's concert performance of "Stronger" is, for instance, quite different from the video version, and although it is impossible to know from viewing the concert what meanings the song has for those who attend, it is clear that setting and audience are influential in determining modes and styles of performance. The concert version dampens down the "bad girl" interpretation of the song, relying rather on Spears's ensemble work with a group of male dancers. Here the Spears character is produced as a blend of pop diva and lead participant in an exercise class. The hints of violence and danger present in the video version are reduced to muted and playful moves; for instance, at one point Spears points at one of the dancers, who simulates a fall; and at another, two of the dancers briefly hold her as she appears to fall. The concert version includes an allusion to the video when a screen behind the dancers shows Spears running along a dark street, but the predominant representation is of the teen queen surrounded by adoring males. This safer, bouncier version seems calculated to appeal to the young audience at the concert, its antiromance lyrics effectively negated by a choreography which produces Spears as romantic love object.

In her essay "Women's Genres: Melodrama, Soap Opera and Theory," Annette Kuhn considers how to theorize the interplay between text and context; in particular, how notions of spectator-text relations might distinguish between the subject positions implied by texts and the actual audiences who consume women's genres of popular production. She invokes Charlotte Brunsdon's formulation of a distinction between "subject positions proposed by texts and a 'social subject' who may or may not take up these positions" (153). As Kuhn notes, Brunsdon's treatment of this distinction maintains a privileging of con-
text, in that “spectator-text relations are ... regarded virtually as an effect of socio-cultural contexts” (153). Christine Gledhill’s notion of negotiations between individual and cultural meanings can usefully be aligned with Kuhn’s invocation of discourse theory. For if, as Kuhn suggests, “both spectators and social audience may ... be regarded as discursive constructs,” the interplay between texts and their audiences can be seen within the context of a network of negotiations between discursive formations, with “certain discourses possessing greater constitutive authority at specific moments than others” (154). Such a view of popular cultural texts allows for reading strategies which go beyond simplistic oppositions between texts which are complicit with the domination of capitalism and those which resist dominant ideologies, recognizing the “contradictory nature of cultural products, [which] can be the site of both hegemonic and counterhegemonic ideological production depending on the context of their reception or production” (Best 19).

A pervasive theme in antiromance lyrics, and one which overlaps with the commodification of music and singers in the global industry of popular music, is a concern with connections between romance and commodification. Pink’s “Most Girls,” from Can’t Take Me Home, draws on hip-hop inflexions to construct a persona indifferent to romantic conventions which measure love by gifts of flowers or jewels, like the “fly girl” whose version of romance is focused on the diamond ring she is given. The persona distinguishes herself from women whose dreams are bounded by their desire for material gain, enumerating the signs of her independence: Her job, her car, her rent payments. Female autonomy is thus defined as financial autonomy, a move which leaves space for a version of love uncontaminated by the obligation which a woman might have for a man who gives her material goods. Similarly, the TLC song “Silly Ho” describes the narrator as a woman who has never relied on her partner to buy her what she wants. Indeed, the narrator describes how she has bought her own rings, so overturning the conventional associations of rings with romance. Such a position of autonomy is compared with the sexual obligation incurred by the “silly ho” who will do whatever is required by her man.

Financial transactions such as buying clothes, paying telephone bills, maintaining vehicles, and keeping up rent payments figure prominently in the lyrics of the group Destiny’s Child, notably in their hit single “Independent Women,” where these transactions figure exchanges of an emotional and relational kind. Thus, the woman who “fronts” or brags about the money she receives from her partner is seen to represent herself as the recipient of male patronage; it would be far better, the lyric suggests, for her to brag about her own money and, by implication, about an autonomous selfhood. To be an independent woman, then, is a matter not merely of paying one’s way but of being an equal partner in relational terms, one who pays her way.

The Destiny’s Child single “Bills, Bills, Bills” traces the disintegration of a relationship through a series of scenarios relating to financial transactions. The persona, addressing her estranged lover, reminds him how the reciprocity of
their early relationship changes when he asks to use her car, drives it, and fails to fill it with fuel before returning it to her. The deterioration of the relationship is further identified with his propensity for going on shopping sprees to the mall, using her mobile phone, and then, when it is time to pay the telephone bill, disavowing any responsibility. The bridge between verses and chorus throughout the song complicates this narrative of relational breakdown, introducing episodes of introspection when the persona laments her inability to make a break with her feckless lover and wonders why she has not found a partner who will support her through times of financial and emotional difficulty. Here two versions of the feminine clash: The independent woman who pays her way and maintains her selfhood within a romantic and sexual relationship and the victim of romance who tolerates her partner’s weakness and subordinates her autonomy to her need. These textual negotiations identify anti-romance as a site of struggle between women’s internalization of cultural discourses which persuade them that they need and desire to be dominated and narratives which celebrate female agency. If the song concludes with an emphatic declaration that their relationship is over, the repetition of the bridging sequence also enforces the sense that gender identity is achieved not once and for all, but in Judith Butler’s terms, through “sustained social performances” (141).

The video clip of the song “Survivor” affords a telling example of a conjuncture of textual and cultural discourses. The song’s lyrics, like those of “Independent Women” and “Bills, Bills, Bills,” draw upon metaphors of financial exchange to assert female independence. The addressee of the song is a male partner from whom she has separated, and the female persona formulates her “survival”—that is, her capacity to withstand the cultural imperatives which promote romantic love as the ideal relational mode—in relation to a set of expectations which are contradicted one by one: Instead of being weak without her partner she is strong; instead of being poverty-stricken she is rich; and instead of being sad she is happy. These expectations, attributed to the departed lover, inscribe a masculine discourse of threats and warnings, while the persona’s claims—that she is stronger, richer, and happier without her partner—assert female agency and anticipate a future in which she will continue not merely to survive but to thrive.

The “Survivor” video clip, drawing on the imagery of the “reality” television series of the same name, deploys the setting of a tropical island and sketches an analepsis involving shipwreck and escape in a lifeboat. At the beginning of the video, the three singers emerge from the sea or crawl across the sand, dressed in clothing artfully designed to refer to the fantasy of shipwreck while drawing on the eroticism of female bodies partially concealed. The act of looking is central to this video—the three women gaze about them, while male characters are glimpsed observing the women as they explore the island. More than this, the camera assumes the role of voyeur, pursuing the women as they run and focusing on parts of their bodies exposed by strategically placed rips and holes in
their clothing. At one point a male figure is seen on the top of a bluff; at another the camera looks down on the women as they climb up the steep face of a cliff, and these points of view suggest surveillance and control. The lover absent from the song is reinscribed through the male presence of the camera, and thus what is unequivocal in the lyrics—the persona’s proclamation of her self-sufficiency—is rendered contingent and uncertain. At the same time, the women’s actions as they explore the island are plotted onto stereotypes of male explorers for whom the land is a feminine space to be penetrated by masculine desire. The sense of female transgression and of the appropriation of masculine discourses by the women is especially noticeable in a scene in which one of the women threatens an unseen intruder with a spear; a moment later another of the women places her hand in front of the camera as if to block its gaze.

The island scene cuts abruptly to a cityscape set against a dramatic sky, then back and forth between island and city. The city is coded as a masculine space, its sharp outlines and hard surfaces sharply distinguished from the verdant, luxurious appearance of the island. In cutting between cityscape and island, the video treats the island setting not as fantasy so much as a metaphor for the quotidian world of the city, so that the notion of women as survivors is strengthened rather than undercut by the island sequences. Nevertheless, the presence of the camera and its lingering gaze on bodies and parts of bodies is a powerful discursive strategy which works against the notion of female self-determination by suggesting a panoptic surveillance. It is perhaps a sign of the video clip’s function as commodity that it so strenuously reasserts the power of the male gaze in the face of lyrics which clearly promote female autonomy.

Toward the end of “Survivor,” the persona lists the ways in which she will resist the temptations of retaliation and revenge: She will not criticize her former partner on the radio, gossip about his family, compromise her Christian principles, or insult him on the Internet. The image of the three women in “Survivor” holding hands as they run toward the rescue helicopter and running together through the sand is echoed in the video versions of many anti-romance songs, sometimes in situations where women are represented as protecting themselves from attack. In their focus on the female body subjected to extremes of emotion or sensation, these texts relate to the field of melodrama, which according to Linda Williams’s formulation includes pornography, horror, and the women’s film or “weepie” (269). In its location within popular music and as a genre designed for female consumption, the antiromance song evades the extremes of bodily excess manifested in pornography and horror, but in its foregrounding of the spectacular female body and its susceptibility to the possibilities of attack it alludes to these more extreme genres.

These allusions are rendered explicit in the video version of the song “All Hooked Up,” by All Saints, which plays with signifiers of danger and sexuality within a broadly parodic frame. The four women in the group are seen at the beginning of the video in an ambiguously coded setting whose rich, dark furnishings and dim lighting evoke brothel scenes within cinematic genres such as
the western, where they typically incorporate clichés relating to the whore with the heart of gold. The song, in first person address to a male addressee, incorporates spoken male voices which interject against the melodic line. These vocal interventions into the song are cognate with interventions of a physical sort as four dimly glimpsed men enter the building and hide in various places: behind a curtain, in a cupboard, behind an armchair, behind a vent. Each of the women is viewed through the eyes of these intruders, with the camera playing on what the men see. Thus, the man hiding behind a vent sees through its slats a midriff, breasts, buttocks, observed in a way which isolates body parts from bodies. As this narration of surveillance and danger builds up, each of the women is viewed separately, occupying a distinct space within the setting and with the camera lingering on sensuous details through shots such as those of hands running over rich fabrics or embossed wall coverings; in another instance, one of the women tracing the contours of her breasts. As the song proceeds, each of the women engages in a moment of physical action when she uncovers the man who is observing her and ejects him. The four men, having been tossed to the floor and thrown through walls, are seen clambering to their feet and escaping, although one is caught as though in the stocks, his head through a hole in the wall. This strenuous activity, which is accompanied by scenes of lamps breaking and walls crumbling, is made strange by the contrast between the women’s faces, which do not lose their composure, and the panic and alarm shown by the intruders.

The excessiveness of the physical action, allied with camera shots which disclose the fact that the male figures tossed about are in fact dummies, foregrounds the constructedness of the narrative, and, by implication, of gendered identities. Thus, the setting, with its rich furnishings and fabrics, is dissociated from the stereotypes of cinematic brothel scenes and reinterpreted as a space where women exercise autonomy and power; the woman’s hands moving over her breasts signify her pleasure in her body as much as the erotic charge afforded the viewer. In writing of horror films such as *Halloween*, which feature female characters initially victimized but ultimately powerful, Carol Clover argues that viewers are positioned to engage in cross-gender identification, siding first with the male killer and then with the androgynous “Final Girl” who is triumphant at the end. The video of “All Hooked Up” incorporates a parodic take on this cinematic genre: The women are anything but androgynous; the male attackers are incompetent and cowardly; and in any case the male figures tossed about are dummies and not “real” men. The viewers of the video are never invited to align themselves with the male intruders, but at the same time its textual reflexivity precludes a full-blown identification with the women characters. Rather, its playfulness invites a distanced and amused response to the narrative, interrogating representational practices as much as gender ideologies.

The antiromance songs and videos which I have discussed support Frith and Savage’s claim that popular culture engages with questions of value and meaning as “an expressive tool for people otherwise excluded from the public voice”
(15). Specifically, they position young audiences engaged in processes of identity formation. Many of these texts produce strong arguments for female autonomy, at the same time that they themselves constitute commodities within the global economies of record and media companies. They are thus simultaneously progressive and complicit with global capitalism; at once sites of resistance and dependent on the maintenance of structures of power. Self-conscious texts such as the video version of “All Hooked Up” make explicit what is observable across the gamut of antiromance: The play of ideas about gender identities and about relations between men and women, realized in lyrics and visual forms characterized by complexity, ambiguity, and inconclusiveness.

NOTE

1. I do not mean to imply that teen queens such as Britney Spears do not have male followings. A scan of teen queen Web sites suggests that male interests relate to specularity rather than to music, whereas female audiences respond to a “package” comprising music, lyrics, and presentation.

WORKS CITED


