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Sexy (No No No): the Cool and the Hot in Female Popular Song

Tears of a Cowgirl

In her article on women's advice books, Arlie Hochschild identifies a "cooling" of the modern female self, as intimate life is commercialised and taken over by the metaphors and reality of market forces ("Commercial Spirit"). For her, this represents an "abduction of feminism", just as the protestant ethic escaped the bounds of religious Calvinism and engendered capitalism (22-3). Hochschild illustrates this cooling with an example from Dowling's *The Cinderella Complex*, where a Chicago woman experiences a "magnified moment" of feeling, as she contemplates her independence having left first her husband (at home), and then her married lover (back at the hotel), while she goes skiing in the mountains on her own:

I remember sitting by myself on the Greyhound bus, looking out the window... I felt so good, so secure in the knowledge that I could be myself, do what I want – *and also be loved* – I started to cry (Dowling 237, cited in Hochschild, "Commercial Spirit" 20).

For Hochschild, this image is that of the "postmodern cowgirl", who "devotes herself to the ascetic practices of emotional control, and expects to give and receive surprisingly little love from other human beings" (22). This is the "managed heart" of late capitalism (Hochschild, *Managed Heart*), a world where women have learned to "disinvest" from love, and to control the desire which Dowling elsewhere expresses as that "to be safe, warm and taken care of", in other words, "the dreaded 'Cinderella complex' which ... is 'the chief force holding women down today'" (Dowling 32, cited in Hochschild, "Commercial Spirit" 21).

Hochschild notes that there is no audience for this epiphanic moment. The Chicago woman's drama

doesn't take place between herself and her husband, but between her desire to be attached and her desire to be independent ... She comes alive focusing inward – figuring out a troubled boundary between herself and anyone else ...

Her exertion is private and internal, against her very dependency on others (20).

Hochschild contrasts this cool, modern self with the warmth of that advocated in Morgan's "traditional" women's advice manual (*The Total Woman*), where the self "tries to have fun, likes to act and feel exuberantly playful in the confines of a unitary patriarchal world" (Hochschild, "Commercial Spirit" 21).

In this article I argue that Hochschild's work on gender and the sociology of the emotions provides a fruitful lens through which to examine popular music, and that popular music in turn provides an exemplar of what Hochschild calls the "emotional dictionary" of modern, intimate life ("Sociology"). However, I take issue with various aspects of Hochschild's argument across a range of her work. The first of these is her singling out of "advice manuals" (more frequently referred to in Europe as "self-help books") in her critique of the "commercialisation of intimacy." The market for self-help books has undoubtedly grown, but how big is this market, and in comparison to what? Hochschild is anyway unclear about whether she is criticising the commodity form taken by these books and the self-help industry more generally, or whether she is more concerned about the application of metaphors from economics to personal life.

I would argue that self-help books are embedded in and circulate within a much wider, *non-commercial* network of social care and public discussion, ranging from the semi-formal, twelve-step movement, to the informal friendships of women, which even and perhaps especially for the "postmodern cowgirl" continue to have their importance. Such books are frequently exchanged and lent between friends and among groups, and so cannot be reduced to the sum of their commercial sales. Furthermore, some, including Anthony Giddens, have seen the self-help movement as a democratisation, one which takes the power out of the hands of psychological and medical experts, previously only accessible through lucrative private markets, and puts it firmly into the hands of the users ("Modernity", "Transformation").

A much bigger and more plausible candidate for this commercialisation is female popular song. This has seen a huge growth since the new beginning represented by rock and roll in the 1950s and 1960s, with the biggest growth being possibly in the years after the height of feminism as a social movement in the 1970s. In the 1960s and 1970s, female-performed

and female-oriented pop was still despised as an “other” to male-oriented rock and (to a lesser degree male-dominated) soul or funk music. It was not until the 1990s and 2000s that we have seen a massive growth and diversification of female artists across a variety of genres, to the extent that there is now a plethora of such acts.¹ However large the audience reached by self-help books, that reached by pop music is wider and also greater in age-range: pop is consumed by girls as part of a “coming of age” that now begins in the early, pre-teen years, but is also part of everyday life for much older women.

If in addition, we look at the way in which female artists have tended to ambiguously disown feminism (“I’m not a feminist but...”) or have blatantly commercialised it in a dumbed-down version, as in the Spice Girls’ notion of “girl power” and their endorsement of Margaret Thatcher, then female pop seems a very plausible candidate for Hochschild’s idea of feminism bursting the boundaries of a social movement and being abducted by commerce.

At the same time, popular song seems to exemplify very neatly Hochschild’s idea that culture provides us with an “emotional dictionary”, where we can look up and identify the “feeling rules” that are appropriate for particular situations (“Sociology”, “Emotion work”). Indeed, if we are to look for a commercialisation of the *feelings* aroused by feminism, of *what it feels like* to be independent or to work through the implications of striking a new deal in gender relations, then the burgeoning of female popular music seems to be just that. While advice manuals go into book-length rational arguments about how women should behave in the changed social context of work and relationships, the pop song provides us with an instant scenario of *feeling*. Social contexts in pop song are drastically reduced – work, family, class and kinship all disappear, except insofar as they are necessary to understand the emotions being felt within the self in relation to (usually) an other. In this way, the pop song corresponds to Giddens’ notion of the “pure relationship”, though we should also note that popular song’s expression at an emotional level of the relationship pure and simple predates by several decades the theorising of both Giddens and Hochschild.

In developing her notion of “feeling rules”, Hochschild was concerned to develop a *sociology of the emotions*, as distinct, in particular, from

¹ I say this tentatively, aware of the difficulties of measurement, and of the extent to which female performers become hidden from history by the process of historical construction of canons. A recent musical in the UK, for instance, has highlighted Kathy Kirby as one of the biggest selling pop music acts of the 1960s, yet who has even heard of her today?

psychoanalytic theory (Hochschild “Emotion Work”). The latter had famously seen an opposition between instincts and culture, where instincts represented animal urges that must be channelled and repressed by our cultural conventions. A sociology of the emotions, by contrast, does not locate our feelings outside culture in this way, but rather shows how culture gives us rules not just as to how we should behave, but also as to what we should *feel* in particular situations. The self, in mediating between these cultural rules and our actions in particular situations, is thus involved in a kind of “emotion management”, and Hochschild is at pains to point out that this work of managing the emotions must be seen as part of the emotion itself.

The division of the self involved in managing emotion is exemplified by going back to the lonely cowgirl on the bus and asking the question, “Why is she crying?” A sociologist of the emotions must recognise the variety of meaning that can be conveyed by tears in multiple situations. From anger and frustration to despair and self-pity, tears signify emotion, but we do not necessarily know *which*. We can only intuit the feeling that calls forth these tears, as invoked in the words that precede the crying in the account. To an extent these are tears of triumph, such as those shed by Alexandra Burke in public when she won the UK’s *The X Factor* in December 2008;² but there is also an expression of self-nurturance, an emotion also implicit in Burke’s reaction, when she cries for all that she has been through on the show. Personally, reading and thinking about the Chicago woman’s account, I became aware of “the tune playing in my head”, and heard The Crystals singing: “I felt so happy I almost cried”, (a line from the song, “Then He Kissed Me”). In the 1960s song, the desire to cry from happiness expresses the triumph of being picked by the desirable boy for romance and marriage. The Chicago woman’s account is clearly not this conventional romantic narrative; nevertheless, I argue that the division of the self involved has much in common with romance.

The heroines of romantic fiction, as has frequently been pointed out, tend to be independent, intelligent, feisty, and they are resourceful when their social status is thrown into question by an early narrative move (Radway). It is the conjunction of these almost masculine characteristics of independence with the very feminine ones of being loved and in love, that makes for the poignancy of the romantic narrative. It is just such a combination that is succinctly put in the Chicago woman’s account. It is

² I refer to the televised live final of *The X Factor* on ITV on December 13, 2008). See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kT9aE6oSe_w&feature=related (last accessed on 22/1/09)

not her independence alone that makes her cry, even if interpreted as loneliness; rather, it is the conjunction of this independence and of *being loved* that brings tears. In this moment, the woman is her own audience. Her tears are her own as she reflects on her self, a reflection that is spun outwards in the further recollection of the account. In her inner conflict, the emotion-managing self sides with the “cool”, independent self in crying for the one that is warmed by love.

The Cautionary Self in Girl-group Music

However, the continuities between the divided self of the postmodern cowgirl and earlier narratives of the female self can be taken further if we look to the sphere of popular music. Indeed, the second point with which I take issue in Hochschild’s work is that her key concept of a “paradigm of caution” in modern advice manuals (“Commercial Spirit” 25) is not simply typical of late or post modernity, but rather is *anticipated* in the girl-group music of the early 1960s. In writing more generally of emotion management in today’s society, Hochschild extends this concept of caution to the modern, western *culture of love*. She explains that the “modern paradox of love” consists in the contradiction that today’s culture both encourages us to explore and experience love as never before, and at the same time cautions against “trusting love too much” in an era of high divorce (“Sociology” 8).

Paradoxically, while people feel freer to love more fully as they wish, and to trust love as a basis of action, they also feel more afraid to do so because love often fades, dies, is replaced by a “new love” (9)

The girl-group music of the first half of the 1960s was distinctive in its use of voices within the group. Several musical genres of the 1950s and 1960s were defined by their singing groups, including doo-wop and barbershop singing, while others frequently featured lead and backing singers (rockabilly, early rock’n’roll, rhythm’n’blues, gospel and its emergence into soul music). This paradigm of lead/backing singers, where the lead is the prominent solo voice and the backing singers have a subordinate role, using simplified lyrics and less prominent music, has a fairly continuous descent through *male*-performed beat and rock music from the 1960s through to the present day (see Bradby “Oh Boy! (Oh Boy!)” and “She Told Me”). In much girl-group music, however, it is not possible to talk of lead and backing singers in this way. In a sample of 28 girl-group songs that were hits in the US between 1960 and 1967, I found

that all of them in some way reverse the expected relationship of solo singer and chorus (Bradby “Do Talk and Don’t Talk”). My study used six criteria, three of them musical:

- chorus opening the song;
- chorus singing at a higher pitch than the lead;
- chorus singing in counterpoint with the solo voice in the fadeout of the song;

and three lyrical:

- chorus articulating the pronoun “I”;
- chorus articulating full subject-object sequences of pronouns;
- chorus having the more verbal part in the fadeout.

Of the 28 songs, 18 exhibited three or more of these characteristics, and all showed at least one of them.³

While I am not claiming that *all* girl-group songs exhibit a cautionary voice in the form of the chorus’s restraint of the lead singer, there are several songs that are emblematic of the genre where this is the case.⁴ They include the Chiffons’ No. 1 hit, “He’s So Fine”, where the chorus’s loud “Doo lang, doo lang” introduces the song and almost drowns out the solo voice, as well as their later “Sweet Talkin Guy”, where the lyrics divide more explicitly between solo and chorus voices, particularly in the closing fadeout where both “voices” sing “Stay away from him” in different rhythms, as it were to each other.

In the Cookies’ “Don’t Say Nothin Bad (About My Baby)” the purport of the lyrical message is a defence of the girl’s choice of the “bad” boy against society’s disapproval. Here the “chorus” voice represents this outer disapproval of society, and is louder, higher in pitch, and preceding in time to that of the solo voice, which presents an inner defence of her love. For instance, in the “Middle 8” section of the song, the chorus sings “Everybody says he’s lazy”, in dialogue with the lower, solo voice, which replies, “But not when’s he’s kissing me”. In addition, the music of the song presents the lyrics of the title line in such a way as to give them a different meaning than is implied in the title as it is written down:

Written song title: Don’t say nothin’ bad (about my baby)

Line as sung: Don’t say nothin’ [[silent beat]] bad about my baby

³ See Bradby (Do-talk and Don’t-talk) Table 4, p. 360 for the detailed findings.

⁴ I have written about these in more detail elsewhere (Bradby, “Do Talk and Don’t Talk”), and so will only briefly summarise here.

In the written song title, the phrase is “Don’t say nothing bad” (a dialect form of “Don’t say anything bad”). It’s breaking up as sung into the shorter phrase “Don’t say nothing” gives out a more generalised negative injunction, more akin to the solo voice’s reply at the end of the first verse, “So girl you’d better shut your mouth”. The break in the line then associates the word “bad” with the second half of the phrase, implying that there is indeed something bad, or bad news, about the boyfriend. This is elaborated in the second verse, where the line, again broken with a silent first beat of the bar is:

Don’t you tell me [[silent beat]] My baby’s just a playboy

In other songs, caution is expressed more directly through the lyrical message. Indeed, one of the founding songs of the girl-group genre, The Shirelles’ “Will You Love Me Tomorrow” is an exemplary “cautionary” song, and is worth examining in more detail. This song was a hit in 1960, before “the sixties” as a decade had happened. The song’s lyrics repeatedly contrast “tonight” as a time of both passion and trust (“Tonight you’re mine completely”) and “tomorrow” as one of uncertainty and loss (“But will my heart be broken When the night meets the morning sun”). This contrast is pointed up musically by the intervention of the chorus in the line (see Bradby “Do-Talk and Don’t Talk” 361). From this contrast flows the repeated question, “Will you still love me tomorrow?”, and its accompanying plea, “Tell me now, and I won’t ask again” (also endlessly repeated because, within the song, *unanswered*).

This song may perhaps be interpreted through a feminist lens of the critique of the sexual double standard, whereby women/girls are liable to be discarded by men once they have slept with them, as “soiled goods”. It may well have been the case that this ideology prevailed at the time, but such a critique is not assumed in the scenario evoked in the song, which is more simply that of doubt for the future of a present, passionate love. The fact that the feelings evoked are those of a teenage girl in bed with her boyfriend is undoubtedly radical for the time, and there may be a mild, feminist critique of the lesser constancy of men implied. However, it is worth noting that this song was performed live by the Beatles in their early concerts (Everett 96), and so was quite capable of a meaningful performance by male voices. The very strong voicing of possession in the first lines of the song may even be heard as more appropriately sung from the male perspective (“Tonight you’re mine completely You give your love so sweetly”), and the song has had a recent live reincarnation as sung by the Red Hot Chilli Peppers on their 2006-7 tour.

In its contradictory messages of present passion and future doubt, the song expresses very economically the injunctions analysed by Hochschild, to explore sex and love, but to beware of loving too much. What is more, it does so not through the development of an argument, but by evoking the *feelings* that are being experienced by the girl in the scenario. The scene itself is vividly sketched, particularly in the evocation of the night/sex ending with the sun rising; the performance itself, with the girl's interior voice speaking to us/herself and unheard by the boyfriend of the bedroom scenario, also generates an intimacy with her and her thoughts which is unusually immediate.

This song's frank depiction of a teenage girl's sexuality and sexual feelings can be seen as a curtain-raiser for the conventional image of "the swinging sixties". What I wish to emphasise is that this is in some sense a *cautionary* song, and this message of caution is there from the beginning of the period. Unlike many other famous girl-group numbers, there is no invocation here of society, or the girl's mother or father as opponents of her love.⁵ In this sense, the caution and doubt of the song appear to stem solely from the relationship; hence, I would argue that this move in popular song voices the feelings appropriate to the "pure relationship", freed of social class and kinship ties and constraints. It is arguable that gender is still an external social factor: in its successful recorded forms (first by the Shirelles in 1960, and later by the song's co-writer, Carole King on her hugely successful *Tapestry* album in 1971) the song does appear to articulate a gendered message, aimed at and voiced by women and girls. In this sense, I argue that the song forms an entry in the "emotional dictionary" which we all inherit from that time, and that this entry is appropriate to the time when women first enter into "pure relationships" on a mass scale.

Managing the Divided Self

However, it is not my wish to overemphasise the "cautionary self" of girl-group music to the exclusion of the self that expresses desire. It is the power of the active, desiring self that is so distinctive about girl-group music, a power which is generated precisely through the sustaining of individual female desire *against* the cautioning of society, parents, the peer-group, or simply the more conventional side of self. In this way, the

⁵ The Shangri-Las, "Leader of the Pack", The Crystals, "He's a Rebel", The Shirelles, "Foolish Little Girl", are just a few well-known songs that voiced the opposition between a girl's desire and social factors.

self of the girl-group music of the 1960s is nearly always a “divided” one, anticipating Hochschild’s analysis of the split in the postmodern self between “the desire to be attached and the desire to be independent”.

A major feature of the active expressions of desire found in girl-group music from the 1960s was that the grammatically “active” verbs were found mainly in songs where the “I” of the performance addresses her love in the *third person*, as he/him. In such songs, the entry of the grammatical third person means that the song is very clearly heard as a conversation among girls, and it is here that the most active expressions are found, as in “I’m gonna make him mine” (from the Chiffons’ “He’s So Fine”) or “I’m gonna walk right up to him, Give him a great big kiss, Tell him that I love him...” (the Shangril-Las’ “Give Him a Great Big Kiss”). In the group of songs addressed to a love in the second person, as “you”, the expressions of desire are nearly always passive, as in “So won’t you say you love me?”, (from the Ronettes’ “Be My Baby”).

This passivity, while manifested through grammar, is socially constructed in relation to gender, and has proved remarkably tenacious over the years. While male-performed songs regularly link *I* and *you* with an active desiring verb, female-performed songs do so much less frequently, tending instead to substitute a *You-me* wish or expression of desire. The analysis is complicated by the finding that *I-verb-you* sequences do occur in girl-group songs, but they tend to express the painful *reality* against which the wish, or fantasy is asserted. In this sense, the *I-you* sequences work as a *caution* against the wish of the fantasy self. The Chiffons’ “One Fine Day” exemplifies this contrast:

Though **I** know **you**’re the kind of guy
Who only wants to run around
I’ll be waiting and some day darling
You’ll come to **me** when you want to settle down
One fine day....

I turn now to look at some of the songs of Britney Spears, starting with her first big hit of 1999, “Baby One More Time”. I have chosen to focus mainly on Spears in this paper because the public discussion of both her person and her music over the last decade seem to have provided a focus for society’s conflicting ideas and feelings about what a modern girl/woman should be like. In applying this schema of the social grammar of female desire to her early songs, I have found that similar contrasts of reality and fantasy, activity and passivity can be observed in the pronoun

sequences of “Baby One More Time.” Ignoring for the moment the visual images of the video, the lyrics of the song are expressive of loneliness and missing the boy, with the wish, or desire, expressed as the passive, “Hit me baby one more time.” The singer actively castigates herself for having let her boyfriend go (the reality) and contrasts this with the wish to be hit upon one more time (the fantasy). The active pronoun sequences in the lyrics are:

I shouldn't have let **you** go

and

When **I**'m not with **you** I lose my mind,

Both of these take the form *I-not-you*: that is, the reality being described is a negative one. By contrast, the wish of the song is expressed in the passive, *you-me* form

Show **me** how **you** want it to be

Tell **me** baby

In this case, although there are strictly speaking no subject-object pronoun sequences, the *you* is nonetheless weakly expressed as the subject of the imperatives of which *me* is the object, (“show me,” “hit me”); and *you* is also strongly expressed as the subject of the verb “want”. From the point of view of the singer, then, she is the object of his wants, and this is once again, the conventionally passive, female expression of a wish. The continuation of the above extract, “Cos I need to know,” clearly separates the fantasy *me* from the actual *I*. Elsewhere, the musical interweaving of voices means that we hear, “My loneliness is killing me and I,” a phrase expressive of a schizophrenia of loss, a split that is already implicit in the pronoun schema quoted above, “When I'm not with you I lose my mind,” which can be outlined as *I-not-you-I*.

Britney Spears' second major single, “Oops I Did It Again”, reverses the more conventional scenario of the feelings of the woman who has been left, and instead sketches a scenario where she is unable to reciprocate the love of a boy. In this song, *she* is doing the leaving, and she justifies this claim by again singing of loss, albeit this time more abstractly, as the loss of romance:

You see my problem is this:

I'm dreaming away;

Wishing that heroes, they truly exist.

I cry watching the days.

This song contains a repeated active expression of reality,

I made **you** believe,

but contains no full pronoun sequences expressive of a wish. Instead, the lyrics repeatedly juxtapose and counterpose two subjects, *you* and *I*, as if the *I* were refusing objectification into a *me*. As in her first hit, the narrative is still of the loss of romance, but the self is more resigned than protesting. The singer recognises that she is only dreaming of old-style romantic heroes, and that this makes her a fool, even as she competently plays the adult game of pretence. The maintenance of her independent subjectivity is at the cost of any serious fantasy of love.

These songs sketch the appropriate feelings for a social context where romance is no longer a believable scenario for a girl as she makes the transition to adulthood, but nevertheless, is still very much there as a reference point, as something which has been *lost*. If the transition of growing up is the “master narrative” of rock and pop music, and if this music allows children to *rehearse* this transition ahead of time, then it is also the case that pop’s appeal to a younger and younger audience corresponds to a widening of the ways in which children are allowed to pretend to be adults. Britney Spears’ appeal to a new demographic known as “tweens” (between childhood and teenage years) was both typical and constitutive of this. Inasmuch as the tweens were a strong part of Britney’s fan base in the early years of her career, one surprising implication is that very young girls were already rehearsing feelings of nostalgia for the *loss* of romance even as they explore what it will feel like to be an adolescent girl, herself rehearsing to be an adult woman.

The songs obey the structural grammar set out in the 1960s songs, in that the address to a male *you* invokes a *passive* wish on the part of the female singer. The tempering of this wish by an active expression of knowledge about the *you* is also part of this structure. More notable is the fact that songs which involve girl-talk about *he/him* are rare in recent pop music, and the “third person” expression of active desire found in the 1960s songs seems to have largely dropped out in the last decade. Even a group like the Spice Girls, which explicitly invoked a group ethos and an address to the female audience through girl-talk, never sang songs to/about “him”. Their sassy independence was, to some extent, an independence also from the romantic narrative, which perhaps helps to explain this. Other groups that have sung songs of female independence have always sung them defiantly at “you” (e.g. TLC’s “No Scrubs” [1999], Destiny’s Child’s “Independent Women” [2000], Pussy Cat Dolls’ “I Don’t Need a Man” [2006], Beyoncé’s “Irreplaceable” [2006]), even where there is an initial address to the female audience and some talk about “he/him”.

However, the absence of the third person romantic address to “him” does not mean that there is no voice of desire coming through recent female pop. It hardly needs saying that there has been a shift from the discourse of romance to one of sex in the years since the 1960s, with Madonna’s “Material Girl” of 1985 being a significant landmark in this shifting terrain. Perhaps paradoxically, while expressions of sexual desire by female performers have become more and more insistent and explicit, they have tended to keep within the grammatically *passive* structure of the *you-me* trope. Compare, for instance, Britney Spears’ expression “Hit me” (from “Baby One More Time”, 1999) with her “Gimme More” (2007): while the lyrics of the second song are more explicitly sexual, and the imperative is more repeated and insistent than in the earlier song, both songs are asking *you* to do something *to me*. The imperative gives strength to the female voice, but it cannot undo this grammatical passivity.

A song which is an exception in that it does contain girl-talk about *him* is Girls Aloud’s “Sexy (No, No, No)”, a hit in the UK and Ireland in 2007.⁶ The song has a repeated refrain in question and answer format:

Did you tell him? No, no, no
 Give him kisses? No, no, no
 Whisper honey? No, no, no
 You're delicious? Hell no!
 [and so on]

This format recalls some of the Shangri-Las’ big hits (“Leader of the Pack” [1964], “Give Him a Great Big Kiss” [1965]) and also the recycling of this style in John Travolta and Olivia Newton-John’s “Summer Nights” (1978). The “retro” referencing to the Shangri-Las is to songs where the conversational style is very prominent and where the girl’s desire is very forcefully expressed. The core of the song is contained in the solo verse (also repeated several times) that immediately follows the question and answer refrain:

I can't deny no way my d-d-dirty mind is saying
 Lover, come and get me, get me
 But for a while I dropped that d-d-dirty style when I discovered
 That it's sexy, sexy

The message appears to be that while the girl subject is capable of active expression of her desire (the second group of four lines in question

⁶ Girls Aloud have been a consistently popular band in the UK and Ireland over the last decade. However, they have never had a hit in the US, nor apparently elsewhere in Europe. Created by a TV talent show in 2002, they have since then had 20 consecutive top ten singles in the UK.

and answer format ends with an emphatic “Hell, yeah!”, with the “yeah” then taken up and repeated), she attributes this voice to her “dirty mind” and discovers that her sexual pull increases when she drops this active voice and instead ignores her lover. This message could be read as simply a restatement of an old rule of flirtation, power and attraction, which could apply to either gender. However, the allusion to her sexual desires as “dirty” does seem to make it into a more traditional reinstatement of female sexual passivity for fear of (self-)censure as slag/slut. The contradictory nature of these desires as well as their articulation in conversation are both well captured in the title of the song (“Sexy (No, No, No)”). At the same time, the song exemplifies the shift from the 1960s, when the contradiction was about the expression of *romantic* desire, to the current decade of the 2000s, when it is around the expression of *sexual* desire. The next section examines in more detail this shift to a contradiction around the sexual self.

The Cool and the Hot

The themes in Britney’s first songs of the loss of romance, and a self that has grown out of it but still hankers after it, resonate with Hochschild’s analysis of the cooling of the modern self and the disinvestment in love. But what is very obviously missing from the analysis so far is the *sexuality* displayed in the performance of Britney Spears’ songs. My third point at issue with Hochschild is that the lack of a developed theory of sexuality in her work means that she cannot fully account for the modern female self, although I believe that another of her concepts can help us to a better understanding, as I shall try to show.

Sexuality comes through Britney Spears’ vocal performance from the first broken utterances of “Oh baby baby”, especially when heard in conjunction with a sexual understanding of the lyrics.⁷ In common with the prioritization of the visual in popular culture, however, it has more frequently been identified in her videos and visual images (Lowe; Redmond). A word that occurs frequently in favourable online

⁷ See, for instance, the discussion at <http://forum.wordreference.com/showthread.php?t=232732>, for the mystery around the meaning of “Hit me”, and the assumption that it must therefore have a sexual meaning, backed up by reference to the Urban Dictionary, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=hit> (both sites last accessed on 22/1/09)

commentary on Britney Spears' songs and videos is "hot". To quote but a couple of examples:

[loverofbeats](#) (4 days ago)

regardless of what has been said about britney, this song and video is so classic, it's still hot.

[Erii77](#) (4 days ago)

damn she was hot (was, probably making a comeback, but was)

(from comments under the video of "Baby One More Time" on Youtube, <http://ie.youtube.com/watch?v=J0nVAC2gkpk> , accessed on 22/1/09, just ten years after the first release of the song)

[senorvergara](#) (1 year ago)

sorry to upset the haters but she looks fucken hot in this video.

(from comments on Britney's "Gimme More" video on Youtube, http://ie.youtube.com/comment_servlet?all_comments&v=m3ceCMpPJgc&furl=/watch%3Fv%3Dm3ceCMpPJgc , accessed 22/1/09)

Als Fußnote?

The interchange between loverofbeats and Erii77 exemplifies the dual meaning of "hot" to mean both successful, and sexual. The second example uses "hot" in a more straightforwardly sexual sense. In my opinion, the widening of usage of this term in recent years is itself constitutive of changing ideas about sexuality and the female self. From having been indicative of rock'n'roll's view of (often young) women (think Rod Stewart, "Hot Legs", or Prince, "Hot Thing"), the term has been appropriated in the last few years by women to talk about themselves: a newly confident female sexuality is no longer just a reflection of male fantasies. That "hot" can now be used in a positive and approving sense by and of women is surely a major conceptual change from a time when most words linking women and sexuality were negative ones (as in the "slut" lexicon), or indicated a seductive subordination to male desire (as in "sex-kitten" variants).

This shift, which is in line with what Wouters analyses as the change in the "'lust balance' of sex and love", cannot be encompassed by the critique of "ladette culture" or in Hochschild's words, of how advice-book culture has resulted in women "assimilating to male rules of love", including "the separation of love from sex" ("Commercial spirit" 26, 27). Contrary to these critiques, being "hot" is not incompatible with femininity, nor does it mean behaving badly. Hochschild's continual emphasis on the "cooling" of the female self here seems very much at

odds with contemporary popular culture. However, in her rich exploration of time in modern working/family lives in *The Time Bind*, she puts forward the idea of the “potential self”, as the one we would be if we ever had time to (235-7). She introduces this concept in relation to how fathers working long hours in an American company talk about their relationship to their children, giving the example of a father who plans a camping trip with his children to the mountains, and buys all the equipment, but never gets around to going. His potential self imagines many other future projects. “The problem was that his actual self had no time to carry out any of them.” (236) These potential selves, says Hochschild, “were substitutes – not preparation – for action” (235). I want to suggest that in a rather similar sense, modern female-oriented pop music puts forward the sexual self as a potential self; and that it does this for a female audience.

The example of the unused camping equipment already implies an interchange between public discourses (of advertising, the body, health, and so on) and private conversations of the self. It is just such an interplay that is involved in the construction of the “hot” female self of contemporary pop culture. If pop music presents us with a series of potential selves, and in particular with sexual selves, it may well be the case that in our own lives these turn into selves that we don’t really have time to be. Dorothy Smith has pointed to the time and labour that women must expend in learning to put on make-up as instructed by ads in women’s magazines: for her, this labour-time is a hidden cost of the discourse of femininity in our society. Clearly, much *more* time, effort and expertise is involved in acquiring a body with/and the ability to dance and gyrate in public like modern pop stars do, let alone all the other adornments and accoutrements needed for particular “looks”.

However, the potential, sexual selves of pop music remain potential for reasons other than our lack of time. For one thing, the sexual self is only a partial self, that has typically belonged to the night rather than the day. Dress codes, particularly for women, have carefully differentiated these selves, so that dress considered too sexual in the office or workplace will incur social disapproval. In the past this day/night division was superimposed also on a public/private division: “nice” women did not wear sexual clothes in public. The growth of public spaces for teenage and young adult socializing outside of family contexts – the dancehall, the disco, the club – is of course one of the major social changes that took place in the 20th century, and it is a commonplace to associate these with the growth of genres of popular music such as rock’n’roll, disco or techno/dance music. These spaces have allowed for the growth of public,

sexual selves in ways that traditional society could not contemplate. But however the “hot”, sexual self is indicated – and dress and dance styles have changed enormously over the years – it is for most women a partial self, not one that they wish to maintain or attempt to emulate at all times.

Secondly, the sexual self remains a potential self to the extent that women and girls still feel constrained by unequal discourses of gendered sexuality. This is more than Hochschild’s “stalled gender revolution” inasmuch as that refers to the failure of men to assume family and housework roles to the same extent as women have assumed public working roles (*The Second Shift*). I refer rather to the continued operation of pre-feminist discourses of “slag/slut”, through which women are condemned for alleged displays (or leakings) of inappropriate sexuality (Cowie and Lees). Whether particular women/performances are praised as “hot” or condemned as “sluts” is a new tightrope that women must negotiate in the contemporary world, which now extends to virtual life online – the most recent public panic about these issues has been in relation to the posting of sexualised, or “hot” photos on Facebook and other social networking sites.

While Wouters acknowledges that the optimistic egalitarianism of the 1960s “sexual revolution” remains somewhat unfulfilled, this is not just because of what he sees as the puritanism of the feminist and anti-pornography movements of the 1970s and 1980s. It is also implicit in the grammatically active and passive roles that still predominate in the gendered discourse of sexuality. As long as the “hot” female self still articulates desire in the passive voice, as in the repeated title/refrain of Britney’s “Gimme more”, it is hard to see sexual roles as equalised, particularly if this continued grammatical passivity exists because of the social unacceptability of forthright *active* expressions of sexual desire by women.

Music critics have seen the career of Britney-Spears-the-performer through the narrative of her “growing up” from teenage girl to adult woman. The scenario of loneliness and loss that had accompanied the image of the “hot” dancing schoolgirl in her first hit was quickly reversed on her second album (*Oops I Did It Again*, 2000) where, as already noted, the title song sketches the girl who ends the relationship because the boy is too serious, a message reinforced in the next release from this album, “Stronger”, which even negates a line from her first hit (“My loneliness ain’t killing me no more”). In brief, the transitional period (“I’m Not a Girl, Not Yet a Woman”) of this and her next, “reflexive” album, *Britney*

(2001), which between them contain six songs about leaving men, and another seven exploring aspects of being alone, may be seen as providing “feeling rules” for the “postmodern cowgirl” whose cooled self derives strength from *leaving* men and experiencing alone-ness.

However, the move to playing the “adult woman” on her next album, *In the Zone* (2003), is seen by the critics as one in which she “equates maturity with transparent sexuality and the pounding sounds of nightclubs” (Erlewine, “Review of *In the Zone*”). In this adult world, there is precious little room for love and romance, which are invariably qualified by critics as “teen”, hence discursively inappropriate for “adult women”. Instead, the “invitation” song comes to predominate on this and Britney’s 2007, “comeback” release, *Blackout*, as an indication of sexual independence. If in the early years, the invitation was one primarily to dance, with sex as a *double entendre*, on these two albums the invitations become more and more literally sexual, with numbers such as “Freakshow” and “Get Naked (I Got a Plan)” incurring critical scorn as “strip-club anthems” (Erlewine, “Review of *Blackout*”). Indeed, Britney’s online fans take up this issue in relation to the video of “Gimme More”, where many of the comments are critical, and the words “stripper” and “slut” occur quite frequently.⁸ It is instructive to compare these comments with those under the video of “Toxic”,⁹ which are overwhelmingly favourable, even though her raunchiness is discussed. The narrative of the video for “Toxic” is one in which, as one fan perceives it, “the girl took advantage of the man, when usually its the other way around” (appletini43). Hawkins and Richardson have also highlighted the agency being attributed to and enacted by Spears in this video, while going further and finding an “obvious” camp or drag meaning:

We witness a fantasy where the pop diva fashions herself as an imitation of an original, which is parodied in order to be provocative and challenge (618).

I suggest that the hotting up/camping up of traditional roles such as the air-hostess¹⁰ work *only insofar* as they are “provocative and challenging”.

⁸ These comments can be read by accessing “view all comments” under the Youtube posting of the video for Britney Spears’ “Gimme More” at:

http://www.youtube.com/comment_servlet?all_comments&v=m3ceCMpPJgc&fromurl=/watch%3Fv%3Dm3ceCMpPJgc Last accessed on 6/02/09

⁹ These comments can be read by accessing “view all comments” under the Youtube posting of the video for Britney Spears’ “Toxic” at:

http://www.youtube.com/comment_servlet?all_comments&v=TkIytHD5v9c&fromurl=/watch%3Fv%3DTkIytHD5v9c Last accessed on 6/02/09

¹⁰ I use this term deliberately, conscious that Hochschild rejected it in favour of the gender-neutral “flight attendant”, precisely because of its sexual connotations, in her important examination of the role and its “emotion work” (*The Managed Heart*)

Even without her futuristic, Lara Croft *alter ego* of the poison narrative, Britney's air-hostess character is already one who having summoned her man down the aisle, pushes him into the toilet, grabbing him by the tie before stripping off his face and kissing the beautiful actor underneath. The gesture of grabbing men by the tie around the neck and pushing them backwards is repeated in 2008's "Womanizer", filmed by the same director as an obvious sequel to "Toxic". To be provocative and challenging in this way is to set the princess up as attainable only to those who pass the test of overcoming her almost superhuman strength. While this sets up a competitive trial of strengths with the male viewer, I suggest that to the female viewer, this image of hyper-real strength and sexual agency is attractive precisely because it presents a fantasy reconciliation of sexual desire without (i.e. outside) the discourse of the "slut".

The lyrics of "Toxic" clearly attribute danger and toxicity to the man, whose lips are poisonous.¹¹ The video reverses this, attributing toxicity to the female performer, as if she were singing to her *self* as "you". She is the one who obtains and wields the poison in a narrative of sexual revenge (Hawkins and Richardson 608). In making the toxic male into a *femme fatale* in this way, the video arguably sanitises the remarkably ambivalent, **anti-man** message of the song, which repeatedly spits out the phrase, "You're toxic." Once again, however, the important point to note is that active female sexuality is presented in a highly contradictory way. The *feeling* I get from the conjunction of song and video is that the hyper-sexualised imago (Hawkins and Richardson 614, 618) is one who rejects (says No to) all the spellbound, gawping men in her way, and her only message for the one she *did* desire is again negative (revenge, death, No) because he has cheated on her/is a womaniser.

In conclusion, I believe the case of Britney Spears is interesting precisely because she is the pop performer who has possibly most consistently been accused of going too far in displaying provocative sexuality over the last decade; yet even within this body of sexually ambiguous work, it is possible to find ample support for the feelings of the "postmodern cowgirl" from which we started out. Her early, romantic persona has been "cooled", she is fine with leaving men and being alone, and she strikes off on a nightclub life where she is sexually provocative, challenging and issuing invitations to men. These songs represent for the young women of today the "feeling rules" for the "hot" alter ego that they

¹¹ And despite two apparently active *I-you* pronoun sequences, both of them leave agency with the man: I'm addicted to you – addiction is loss of agency; I love what you do – again, it is *you* who is doing something (to me).

would like to be, a “potential self” in Hochschild’s terms. Young female fans continually refer to and praise Britney (and, of course, other stars) as “hot” in their online comments, a recent innovation in everyday discourse which attempts to attribute a positive value to active, female sexuality. The difficulty of being that “hot” self in the still-real world of slags and drags is sometimes overcome through ironising performance, as in camping it up and posing/posting photographs online. Since the time of “Toxic”, the constructors of the Britney persona have themselves become more and more ironic about her own performative relationship to the voracious, global audience, not just in “Piece of Me,” but in a series of other songs, from “Overprotected,” through “Freashow,” “Circus,” and “Mannequin.” This “ironic” escape clause is also present in the song “Gimme more:” while I have up till now interpreted this phrase as the voiced sexual demand of the female singer (Lacan¹² and Danja¹³ come together here), the phrase is contextually that of the *crowd* in the club context, who demand of the performer, “Gimme more”. This ironisation, drawing attention to the *performative* element of the “hot” self, is what makes it postmodern, and at its best, fun and pleasurable.

This paper has not been about the “real life of Britney Spears”, since her person, in as much as it ever existed, has been legally destroyed in the last year, under a draconian “conservatorship” which has stripped her of all legal, financial and parental personhood (Eliscu), making her one of the most unfree persons on this planet. Her downfall and condemnation have been so great, though, as to give more than ample credence to the “cautionary self” that gave warning in the 1960s songs of what would happen to a too independent female sexual desire. Her “life” as it is known through the media is itself the cautionary tale of our times.

List of Works Cited

¹² See Lacan in list of works cited.

¹³ Danja, the producer of “Gimme More” is quoted as saying that the song is about “feeling good, celebrating womanhood” (MTV News staff, “Britney Spears’ Single is Released.” August 30, 2007, accessed at <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1568618/20070830/story.jhtml> on 6/2/09).

- appletini43. Online author of comment posted under video of Britney Spears' "Gimme More" on Youtube, viewed by accessing "all comments" at: http://www.youtube.com/comment_servlet?all_comments&v=m3ceCMpPJgc&fmurl=/watch%3Fv%3Dm3ceCMpPJgc , accessed on 6/2/09
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