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## Madonna's Postmodern Eroticism

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Madonna's Postmodern Eroticism  
by James Smith, '97

Madonna has been called "the most provocative artist in popular music today." The public controversy surrounding virtually every project she has undertaken from "Like a Virgin" in 1984 to her starring role as Eva Peron in the forthcoming Andrew Lloyd Weber version of *Evita* attests to her ability to push people's cultural buttons. Madonna has not only grabbed the attention of the general public, as any person who has had her 15 minutes of fame might do, but has also made her way into the realm of serious academia, arguably a more respectable accomplishment. In this essay, I will discuss academic arguments both criticizing and applauding the uses of the erotic. Finally, I will illustrate how Madonna embodies the ideologies of postmodernity in her representations of eroticism.

One criticism of Madonna's portrayals of sexuality is that they are not erotic but, in fact, pornographic. This criticism surfaced in 1990 with the production of her *Justify My Love* video, which MTV refused to air in any time slot--even evening rotations. In "Madonna's Postmodern Feminism," Cathy Schwichtenberg says that "*Justify My Love* has been characterized with a moralistic litany of charges against nudity, bisexuality, sadomasochism, and multiple partners (group sex). The video opens up a Pandora's box of sexual prohibitions, which are judged as such through the maintenance of a single sexual standard" (137). Schwichtenberg illustrates how this "single sexual standard" may be utilized by two very different camps:

Perhaps most alarming is the tactical alliance between antiporn feminists and the right wing, of which Rubin notes that, "stripped of their feminist content, much of the language and many of the tactics of persuasion developed by the feminist anti-porn movement have been assimilated by the right-wing" (Stamps 1990, 9). Thus, feminists concerned with violence against women find themselves strange compatriots with the Moral Majority in a coalition that will not necessarily deter male-perpetrated violence, but is likely to place sexual minorities under siege by the state (137).

The coalition of these two groups in the fight against "pornography" illustrates how "one's body (and what one chooses to do with it) may be the last bastion of freedom against those discourses that try to restrict it" (Schwichtenberg 137), for not only is the right wing suppressing sexual minorities in its typical form, but liberal feminists are assisting them in the effort. Schwichtenberg asserts that this feminist position demonstrates how "even those discourses associated with the progressive agendas of liberalism, socialism, and feminism, which supposedly pride themselves on a politics of cultural



diversity, often deny freedom of expression to alternative sexualities" (137).

Madonna poses a threat to many of her critics because she portrays sexuality in its various forms. She has asserted that you can only be controlled when you give up your sexuality, a view that echoes the sentiments of Audré Lorde in her 1978 essay, "The Uses of the Erotic." Lorde says, "In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial" (342). For both women, eroticism provides a source of personal power. "Of course," Lorde says, "women so empowered are dangerous" (340).

While the comparison to Audré Lorde is my own, Schwichtenberg herself compares Madonna to another figure from Ablove's section on "The Uses of the Erotic"--Robert Mapplethorpe. She says:

Both Madonna's polymorphic video and Robert Mapplethorpe's S/M photographs have served as vehicles for public controversy. The two have much in common as multidiscursive fragments that have insinuated themselves into our culture's sexual lingua franca as so many loaded signifiers. However, they share even more than representational proliferation and an excess of signification, for Richard Meyer (1990) notes that Mapplethorpe's visual aesthetic relies on the intrinsic theatricality of S/M, a high stylization that also informs the sexual stylistics of Madonna's *Justify My Love* video (138).

In "Looking for Trouble," Kobena Mercer's essay on Mapplethorpe, the issue of political alliances based on cultural discourses is discussed once again. Though Mercer was initially offended by Mapplethorpe's images of black men because they seemed to him to objectify the subjects, he says "I've changed my mind . . . because I have no particular desire to form an alliance with the New Right" (359).<sup>1</sup> He says:

The fact that Mapplethorpe's photographs are open to a range of antagonistic political readings means that different actors are in a struggle to hegemonize one preferred version over another. The risky business of ambivalence by which his images can elicit a homophobic reading as easily as a homoerotic one, can confirm a racist reading as much as produce an antiracist one, suggests that indeterminacy doesn't happen "inside" the text, but in the social relations of difference that different readers bring to bear on the text, in the worldly relations "between" (359).

The ambiguity of Madonna's work leaves it subject to the same types of "antagonistic political readings." For example, the scene in *Justify My Love* in which Madonna is kissing an androgynous individual can be read several ways. One might suggest that Madonna is illustrating her own homophobia by kissing an androgynous person rather than someone readily identifiable as a "real" woman. On the other hand, this scene could be viewed as highly homoerotic in that Madonna is kissing a

woman who has not gendered herself according to compulsory heterosexual standards of the "real." The latter would be my interpretation.

Madonna's role as postmodern revolutionary is most evident in her representations of sexuality. Her eroticism has been perceived by some in the gay and lesbian community as an affront to their identity. She appropriates what she needs from them yet refuses to identify as a lesbian herself. However, it is, in fact, the polymorphism in her theatrics and a rejection of identity that makes her postmodern. Schwichtenberg confirms that "sexual identities are displaced by multiple erotic acts" (138).

While Madonna may indeed be perceived as a threat to gay and lesbian identity, she represents a threat only inasmuch as she is a postmodern activist.<sup>2</sup> She takes these identities our culture insists are natural, essential, and real (heterosexual/homosexual, woman/man, religious/secular) and challenges their transparency. There is a fear that gay and lesbian people could become more politically disempowered if postmodern theorists and activists discount essential gay/lesbian identity. This concern is understandable because civil rights protection has historically been extended to people based on essential characteristics such as race and sex. In an attempt to ease such a concern, Judith Butler explains that "the deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics; rather, it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated" (quoted in Schwichtenberg 141).

Madonna has taken it upon herself to make "political the very terms through which identity is articulated." She is no more a tool for establishing gay, lesbian identity than she is for reifying heterosexual identity. She works to challenge both these identities by setting the example of her own postmodern eroticism.

#### Notes

1. Kobena Mercer goes on to talk specifically, as did Cathy Schwichtenberg, about the appropriation of feminist rhetoric for the purposes of the political right:

We have seen how the initial emancipatory aims of feminist antipornography arguments have been appropriated, translated, and rearticulated into the coercive cultural agenda of the New Right. Paradoxically, the success of late-seventies radical feminism lies in the way the reductive arguments about representation have been literally translated into the official discourse of the state, such as the Report of the Meese Commission in 1986. Such alliances are rarely controlled by authorial intentions, yet feminist discourses have helped to strengthen and extend neoconservative definitions of "offensive" material into more and more areas of popular culture (359).

2. I have intentionally mentioned only gay and lesbian identity here. I have excluded transgender and bisexual identities as those which are threatened by Madonna's activism because they are in fact more



represented than challenged through her polymorphous eroticism.

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