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 CHAPTER 9

The Day the Music Died Laughing: Madonna and Country

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Everyone thinks and writes that I have become a complete Anglophile. They say I've got no interest in America ... sometimes you have to go away from something to really appreciate and see it I certainly have gone through periods of thinking, Oh God, you know, I can't deal with America. (Madonna quoted in Sischy, 2001, p.157)

Madonna's twenty-year career has been founded on the often controversial appropriation of icons, images and musics derived from the (sub) cultures of American and European identity. Through this 'subcultural tourism' (Tetzlaff, 1993, p. 259) she has repeatedly addressed issues of identity and cultural politics. However, this expedition through alternate ethnic, sexual and gender identities has left her American national identity and ethnicity relatively unacknowledged. Madonna is a white, Roman Catholic, northern, urban, half French-Canadian, half Italian, working-class North-American who has transcended her social class and cultural origins. She has almost consistently refused to address personally or creatively this litany of specific markers of identity with the main exception her Catholicism. She has embraced her paternal Italian heritage (memorably asserting 'Italians Do It Better' in the 'Papa Don't Preach' video – Foley, 1986) but at the expense of her maternal North American roots, reproducing the patriarchal cycle of the denial of maternal inheritance. After all, we are more able to recognise Madonna as an Italian-American Ciccone than a French-Canadian Fortin (her mother's maiden name). Ethnicity and race have been central themes in much of her work but, arguably, she has been on the whole blind to herself as a white American. bell hooks (1992) specifically has criticised Madonna for this myopia, encouraging her to look to herself rather than to others in search of an understanding of cultural politics and power:

Perhaps when Madonna explores ... memories of her white, working class childhood in a troubled family in a way that enables her to understand intimately the politics of exploitation, domination and submission, she will have a deeper connection with oppositional black culture. If and when this radical critical self-interrogation takes place she will have the power to create ... acts of resistance that transform rather than simply seduce (p. 164).

The academic interrogation of Madonna has focused on her appropriations, subversions and transformations but her motivations in addressing cultural politics are uncertain. She tellingly admits:

I always approach every project I do with, What am I going to get out of it? What am I going to learn from it? Is it going to challenge me? Is it going to take me to another place? Am I going to grow from it? It always starts there (Jimenez, p. 2000).

Recent biographies of Madonna (Taraborrelli, 2001; Morton, 2002) likewise characterise her as selfish and egocentric in motivation, with every decision based on what is good for herself, her career and ambition (and, lately, her children). She is not obviously altruistic and we should be careful of claims that her interventions in cultural politics are more than by-products of a single-minded pursuit of success. The seduction of her demographically diverse audience has been achieved through adroit marketing manoeuvres to broaden her appeal and fan base, and the transformative cultural impact of this work is hard to quantify. Yet, we should not suggest this characterisation describes Madonna alone within the music industry, and her consistency of interest in oppressed groups is indicative of a certain political commitment.

By becoming an all-American cowgirl for the promotion of *Music* in 2001, Madonna may have partially begun a new phase of self-analysis, but in what sense is this an interrogation of her ethnicity or nationality? Has she perhaps recognised herself within the All-American cowgirl such that in the early 21st century she has felt it necessary to engage with both country (the USA) and Country (music and its associated cultural practices)?

Madonna, the USA and the UK

Madonna's pursuit of self-creation and re-invention works in parallel with the American dream and the foundational myths of American identity. The New World has always represented an opportunity to cut past cultural ties and reconfigure a new national identity that supports freedom, opportunity, meritocracy and democracy - through hard work anybody can become anything or anyone. Madonna reproduces the unfortunate reality of this myth; that it is mainly those with a white European heritage who can fully lay claim to the dream. However, the self-actualisation of Madonna closely matches the fundamental philosophy of the United States - to succeed in the face of adversity, to build an identity from the remnants of past conflicts and to embrace the new.

What complicates Madonna's attachment to her nationality and ethnicity is the adoption of England as her home after marriage to Guy Ritchie. This has resulted in her 'dealing with America' while simultaneously adopting a studied English persona. Her self-mocking acceptance speech for the 2001 Brit Awards through an exaggerated Queen's English reflects an awareness of this new 'Britishness' that she has increasingly assumed. Her Scottish wedding at Dornoch Cathedral and Skibo Castle reproduced both the romanticism of the American tourist and the lifestyle of the British monarchy who retreat to Scotland to holiday. Though there was an element of ironic self-parody in the Brit speech, Madonna has fallen for the myths of the British country lifestyle (but apparently not the National Health Service, returning to Los Angeles for the birth of Rocco after criticising the backward nature of British health care and famously declaring to an American radio station that British hospitals were old and Victorian - see Taraborrelli, 2001, p. 347).

Only lately has Madonna begun to locate herself as a white European-American with a matching cultural heritage and has reproduced the north-eastern WASP fascination with English and Scottishness. This seems at odds with her French-Canadian and Italian Catholic heritage, but entirely consistent with her tendency to adopt alternate ethnic and national identities. Her adoption of English country life (and the Ritchie aristocratic heritage) inflects her work around America and Country. English country life is a privileged idyll of the well to do whereas American Country is a populist form drawing on a specifically working-class heritage. Madonna has formerly distanced herself from Country and what she felt was an unreconstructed, racist and redneck culture (Morton, 2002, p. 212). Yet Madonna is now drawn to both a conservative English

country lifestyle that is suspicious of the modernising tendencies of urban culture, and mainstream conservative elements of American culture against which she has formerly defined herself.

Madonna has rarely wrapped herself (metaphorically or literally) in the American flag, but has often adopted other flags of convenience. For example, by changing her kilt during the *Drowned World Tour* (2001) from tartan, to the British Union flag, to the Stars and Stripes; wearing the national football shirt of the country she was playing during *The Girlie Show* tour (1993); criticizing Americans for being unsophisticated when interviewed in Britain, and British workmen for being lazy when speaking to Americans (see, for example, Daly 2002, p. 168). When she has specifically embraced the American flag, it has been in an undoubtedly ambiguous manner.

In 1990, Madonna's Stars and Stripes-draped contribution to the 'Rock the Vote' campaign (wearing only a flag, underwear and boots) was both an affirmation of liberal representational politics and a youthful send-up of the seriousness of the campaign's message (Mandziuk, 1993, pp. 173-75). Madonna's paradoxical contribution reproduced the notion that American adolescents are both 'violators and precursors of system' (Meyer Spacks, 1981, p. 296) and as such can be trusted to abide by, subvert and contribute to the ongoing renewal of the democratic consensus of American identity. Madonna's characteristic iconoclasm meant she could not easily sustain a serious political address to the American people, finishing the television spot with the line 'If you don't vote, you're gonna get a spanking' (Mandziuk, 1993, p. 174). Madonna then outlandishly failed to vote herself.

During the performance of 'Holiday' in *The Girlie Show* Madonna acted out a military call and response routine with the backdrop of a huge American flag. Both she and her dancers wore long, ceremonial, military trench coats with a red and white-striped lining that alluded to the backdrop. The demand that Australia 'have a good time' was barked out as a command that perhaps suggested only Madonna and America can offer the world this good time. This almost imperialistic display was obviously a parody, but played on America's belief that the world must love the USA as a benevolent provider of global popular culture and protection to the globe; a belief severely shaken in September 2001.

After the September 11th attacks on America, Madonna made an intervention at the tail end of her *Drowned World Tour* in the national crisis that engulfed the nation. She opened her postponed Los Angeles show on 14th September wearing a kilt made from the American flag, and called on the audience to pray for President Bush's restraint. She attempted a short, didactic speech on global terrorism followed by a call for a minute's silence that was interrupted by chants of 'USA! USA! USA!' - Madonna's response was to distance herself from the overt nationalist sentiment by saying 'if you want the world to change, change yourself'.¹ This refusal to embrace ideologically a US subject position even at this moment of national tragedy (while paradoxically clothing herself in the American flag) is both a testament to Madonna's sincerity in her belief in liberal politics and human rights, and perhaps her inability to accept herself as, in the final analysis, an American. Her donation of \$1 million, the proceeds of her Los Angeles shows, to children orphaned by the attacks does indicate something of her non-aligned altruism and compassion.

Madonna and family temporarily relocated to Los Angeles in late 2002. Her subsequent album and eponymous single, *American Life* (2003), promised a critique of contemporary America, but merely pronounced her misgivings with her (celebrity) life. Rather than positioning herself in the American *we*, she sang from the *I* of her unique experience and this self-conscious strategy was emphasised through her suggestion that the American dream is 'a very powerful illusion and people are caught up in it, including

myself. Or I was.’(quoted in Rees, P (2003) p. 89). The single ‘American Life’ mapped Madonna’s career - her path to success, material gains, entourage of helpers and advisers and her non-aligned religious beliefs. She rails against materialism, and reveals she has recently woken to the empty illusion of the American dream. But Madonna’s perspective is neither ‘extreme’ (as she suggests) or democratically motivated. Arguably, Shania Twain’s ‘Ka-Ching!’ (2003) is more successful as social commentary in its criticism of the ill-effects of unrestrained consumption and American materialism as experienced by the majority. Madonna’s disillusion with *her* experience of the American dream does not result in her withdrawal from public life, but instead heralds the arrival of her latest foray into the global popular music market place. Madonna ambivalently and rhetorically asks whether she is satisfied with her ‘American’ life suggesting she believes her ambition is sated, but also fame and financial success are banal in themselves. Instead of using this moment of heightened awareness to radically reposition herself, she leaves the question of her satisfaction hanging in the aether; apparently happier to pose questions than provide answers no matter how tentative.

However, in the ‘American Life’ video (Akerlund, 2003), Madonna ostensibly found a vehicle for her liberal political convictions during the build up to the Iraq War. The video shot pre-war represented a military-chic fashion show. Western models, wearing military paraphernalia, are followed onto the catwalk by middle-eastern child ‘victims of war’. Footage of American weaponry in action apparently ‘targeting’ these children is unequivocally, due to timing and the global political context, an anti Iraq war statement. The video also seemed a condemnation of the unethical use of such images by the fashion and news media, while simultaneously and questionably exploiting them in a pop promo. Madonna sings to camera backed by an American flag, and later disrupts the fashion show, leading a group of dancing female para-militaries to destroy this ‘offensive’ spectacle. In the final act of the video Madonna throws a grenade/cigar lighter at a seated President Bush look-alike. Despite the obvious allusions to the Iraq war, Madonna initially claimed the video was non-specific and ‘anti’ the 30 wars taking place across the world at any one time (Rees 2003 p. 92). This disingenuousness may have marked Madonna’s discomfort at the prospect of her anti-Bush message hitting international TV screens between images of the soon to commence hostilities. By the end of March 2003 after war had begun, Madonna pulled the video stating that

I do not believe it is appropriate to air at this time. Due to the volatile state of the world and out of sensitivity and respect to the armed forces, who I support and pray for, I do not want to risk offending anyone who might misinterpret the meaning of this video’(Madonna.Com, 31st March 2003)

Unlike her equivocal response to September 11th, when faced with America at war, Madonna demonstrated her support for the US and UK armed forces, notably without passing comment on the legitimacy of the war. Madonna’s motivations for pulling the video may include a reluctant but fundamental patriotism, and fears of a commercial backlash if her *American Life* was denounced as un-American. Therefore, her deeply uncharacteristic wish not to offend anybody possibly demonstrated her sensitivity to the differences between subverting cultural political norms and meddling in global politics.

Madonna of the trail

So then, what is at stake in Madonna's adoption of the persona of All-American cowgirl? It is first necessary to explore the fundamental importance of the cowgirl/boy myth to American identity in order to appreciate Madonna's appropriation and possible transformation of this myth. But what is equally important is to identify why Country music performers themselves have consciously appropriated the cowgirl/boy image in performance since the 1930s.

In the early twentieth century, the National Society of Daughters of the American Revolution placed statues of 'The Madonna of the Trail' at 12 locations on the nineteenth century Western trails, to celebrate the pioneer women who helped settle the American West. The active role of women in the West, as outlined by Lucey (2002), was underplayed in the 'Cowboy boom' in twentieth-century American popular culture, with women usually represented as homemakers or the victims of Native American or black-hatted brutality. Nineteenth-century Montana-based Evelyn Cameron relished the freedom and challenges the West gave her and other women, writing 'Manual labour ... is all I care about, and ... is what will really make a strong woman. I like to break colts, brand calves, cut down trees, ride and work in a garden' (Cheney, 2001).

Wright (2001) locates the cowboy, and by implication the cowgirl, as representing American individualism and self-interest based on the maximisation of private property, self-preservation and strictly egoistic motivations. The West was democratic, egalitarian, free and provided the opportunity to rise for Americans and immigrant Europeans. Of course, this democracy and equality did not also embrace racial or sexual equality, and white male Europeans were predictably ascendant. It was only through the adoption of the ideologies at the heart of the American dream that women, blacks, Hispanics, Chinese and others were able to promote their own interests. The cowgirl therefore represents the adoption of the American myths of freedom within the Western wide open 'virgin' expanses. However, the cowgirl is a problematic proto-feminist figure, as pioneer women were often denying their sexuality and gender to conform and compete with men, playing them at their own game of market relations and the violent subjugation of difference.

Images of the American wilderness are the backdrop against which American individualism grew (Wright, 2001, p. 187), and these images are continually revisited in American popular culture and lately by Madonna in the 'Don't Tell Me' video (Jean Baptiste Mondino, 2000) and the Cowboy section of the *Drowned World Tour*. For much of the twentieth century the Western was the most popular film and literary genre of American popular culture. Western iconography remains central to the American experience in the early twenty first century 'in other areas of culture [such as] clothes, music, dances, rodeos, festivals, vacations, furniture, magazines, advertising [and] art' (Wright, 2001, p. 9).

Since the 1940s Country musicians have transformed and muddied our understanding of the lineage and heritage of Country music through the adoption of Western iconography. The Hollywood singing cowboys (Gene Autry, Tex Ritter, Roy Rogers), Hank Williams and the contemporary Country hat acts (Garth Brooks, Tim McGraw) integrated the Western myth into what is essentially hillbilly mountain music (Tichi, 1994). Peterson (1997) argues that the Western styling of Country performers, male and female, does not work homologically. Country music generally does not originate in the American West, and Country performers have had little or nothing to do with its geographical, historical or social realities. Country adopted the Western look to

counter an inherent American cultural bias against redneck mountain culture, in an attempt to appeal to an urban and national audience. Americans of all regions identified with the cowboy as it 'fitted the American self concept' (Malone quoted in Peterson, 1997, p. 93). Country's adoption of Western style was therefore a marketing strategy which obfuscated its origins, creating an image with dubious authenticity.

Female Country artists also adopted the style. For example, Charline Arthur was an androgynous fifties rockabilly cowgirl renowned for the irreverence of her provocative performances. Loretta Lynn, an authentic Appalachian mountain girl, preempted Madonna's calls for female emancipation in her hymn to the liberatory potential of 'The Pill' (1974). Dolly Parton, a respected Nashville Bluegrass artist and hard-headed business woman, denied the relevance of feminist theory while arguing for personal freedom through self-actualisation – a creed not far removed from Madonna's.² Madonna is therefore a 'new kid on the block' when it comes to overt image manipulation, a strong head for business and cultural controversy. These Country cowgirls, among many others, proved the ability of women to succeed in their own terms long before Madonna entered the cultural scene (Bufwack and Oermann, 1993). As a cowgirl Madonna may be parodying and criticising Country, while missing the irony of her implicit critique of these women.

What is crucial to understand is that the cowgirl was not born of vaudeville or Country music as a cross-dressing male/female expression of mythic fantasy and desire, but is a real and vital historical figure and has become an enduring American myth. Like Madonna in the present, when female and male Country artists adopted the Western costume they were both undertaking a parodic commentary on this myth while recognising the potency of the cowboy/girl in the wider culture. Madonna, and Country artists past and present, have recast and utilised the myth as a way to ensure they are a more saleable commodity, perpetuating the currency of this enduring cultural icon. Madonna's specific strategy may have been to tap into the late 1990s success of contemporary female Country artists such as Shania Twain, Faith Hill, LeAnn Rimes, Gillian Welch, and the Dixie Chicks.

Madonna does not overtly question or acknowledge the darker side of the individualist cowboy myth (white, male, heterosexual supremacy), and clearly connects with the private, selfish and strictly egoistic motivations of the pioneer European. She has been absolutely reliant on the promise of the American dream as embodied in these American icons. Madonna may have culturally challenged the white, male, north-eastern hegemony of North-American social and cultural values, but she has personally benefited from being a metaphorical cowgirl. The statues of 'The Madonna of the Trail' are therefore significant as Madonna has more in common with pioneer Western women than she probably cares to acknowledge through the filter of her liberal politics and global perspectives.

Parody and pastiche

Before moving on, it is important to clarify the parodic terms of engagement of Madonna's work. Jameson (1991, p. 17) claimed it is unfeasible within postmodern culture to talk of parody due to the relativistic nature of cultural value in the flattened cultural hierarchy of postmodernism. He argues that there is no normative critical ground from which a specific parodic stance can be taken on a cultural form or practice. Parody can only work if it is measured against a normative set of values, either to ridicule conservatively the new which threatens the established order or radically subvert the old through parodic iconoclasm. Jameson prefers the term 'pastiche' to describe the late capitalist prevalence of 'blank parody', but also recognizes that parody, despite the lack

of a cultural dominant from which to measure its critical stance, can still be ‘more or less playful, critical, ironic, or empty’ (Dentith, 2000, p. 162).

From this perspective, Madonna has no stable position from which we can treat her parodic engagement as critical. Her strategy therefore is arguably merely play or pastiche rather than directed critique. Though Madonna’s consistent identity transformations and appropriations make her critical position on the USA difficult to ascertain, there is consistency in the specific identification she has made with the subcultural margins of American culture and other ethnic identities (English, Latin-American, Japanese). Madonna therefore uses the margins and her recent adoption of an English upper-middle class identity as critical ground from which to question American hierarchies and values with contradictory and complex outcomes.

Jameson’s work on parody is unhelpful as his contention that parody is unachievable - leaving us merely with pastiche - assumes we are crushed by a *flattened world* (Jameson quoted in Dentith, 2000, p. 162), where no hierarchy of value remains from which to criticize or engage with culture through parody. It may be more useful to suggest that we are immersed in a *drowned world* where parodic inter-textuality does not simply operate in a rhizomic Deleuzian manner, but also in a complex multi-dimensional depth across postmodern popular culture. Within this depth we must strategically assess each parodic act on its own terms, locating it in its specific historical, social and cultural contexts, allowing a mapping of such parodic interventions.

It can also be argued that intentionality in parody is not inherent as creative acts always implicitly and explicitly critique former genres, forms and practices. Madonna may have had few clear strategic parodic intentions in her turn to America, but we can interpret and strategically (re)construct the meaning of her work as parodic transformation. Parody as a mode of cultural engagement still has currency, though we need to use it tentatively, and this is well demonstrated in Dentith’s suggestion that ‘parody includes any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice’ (2000, p. 9). Madonna certainly has polemically alluded to a field of contemporary American experience that she has been previously alienated from in engaging with both country and Country. We may not be able to second-guess Madonna’s intentions and motivations, but we can characterise her work as parody. Pastiche is not a particularly useful concept, as all creative acts to a greater or lesser extent are an implicit parodic critique of that which came before due to their inherent inter-textuality, whether or not there is clear authorial intent.

The Millennial all-American techno-cowgirl

From ‘American Pie’ (2000) onwards, Madonna has reflected on the diversity of American identity and the overarching myths of the American dream with ambivalence, ambiguity and discomfort. This exploration may have its origin and critical perspective in an exhaustion of other ‘marginal’ identities and the perspective that English exile has afforded her. Whatever the origins, there is clear evidence that Madonna has returned to America from ‘within’ its margins while paradoxically keeping physically distant from it. As a result, Madonna has at the turn of the century engaged with the iconography of the America, the West and the Country music formation.³

‘American pie’ (2000)

In 1971, Don McLean’s ‘American Pie’ represented a key moment in American popular culture after late sixties psychedelic rock where a more spiritual, honest and self-consciously authentic voice was developing in American singer/songwriter folk and

Country rock. This was a voice that spoke nostalgically about fifties Rock & Roll (reflecting on the death of Buddy Holly – ‘the day the music died’) and black Rhythm & Blues with an evident sense of generational bereavement (the post-war baby boomers then hitting mid-twenties adulthood). ‘American Pie’ represented a desire for a return to a time of certainties before counter-cultural challenges to mainstream American values and a fixed consensual sense of national identity and purpose. It is a deeply conservative song which also attempts to acknowledge the importance of the previous decade’s struggles and maps the development of Rock and Roll into ‘Rock’ – music with pretensions to cultural weight that perhaps had lost sight of the fun of Rock and Roll. ‘American Pie’ is about the death of Rock and Roll, possibly Rock (and probably Brian Jones, Janis Joplin and Jim Morrison, though Lester Bangs felt the word play of the song could mean everything and nothing (1996, p.130)) and hope of a spiritual and musical rebirth. The film *American Graffiti* (Lucas, 1973) realised the vision of ‘American Pie’ by concretising the nostalgic emotional and cultural perspective of the early seventies, looking backwards but knowing that inevitably we move on relentlessly through time - nowhere more so than in the fields of fashion and popular music.

The recording of ‘American Pie’ by Madonna was suggested by Rupert Everett due to the song’s role in *The Next Best Thing* (Schlesinger, 2001), where both actors co-starred. The song has been treated as a secular hymn to youth by its American fans and Madonna’s version predictably received mixed responses as a kind of sacrilege. Due to the song’s themes it appeared an odd choice for Madonna. Acknowledging her consistent identification with the voices of the post-sixties counter-cultural margins, and her challenges to the All-American golden age represented in ‘American Pie’, the song marked a considerable cultural dis-re-location for Madonna. The song perhaps represents Madonna ceasing to live in the egocentric now of relationships, self-reflexivity and personal exploration (à la *Ray of Light* (1998)), and reaching out into her national culture and its icons and myths for creative sustenance. This appropriation seemed more essentially legitimate than others in her career, as she apparently reclaimed her national heritage through ‘American Pie’ and her later transformation into the All-American cowgirl.

If in the ‘American Pie’ video (Stolzol, 2000) Madonna is suggesting America is heterogeneous and diverse without an authentic core, does she place most Americans as excluded from the table of authenticity? Is she reiterating the alienation that gay, black and Hispanic Americans feel while simultaneously alienating ‘mainstream America’ from the foundations of American identity? The video for ‘American Pie’ (Philip Stolzol, 2000) seems to address this with a simple answer that all subject identities are valid aspects of American life and none should be ascendant.

The video is mostly in split screen with tiara-wearing ‘princess’ Madonna performing a playful rendition of the song while dancing exuberantly behind, around and in front of a large American flag on what looks like the stage of a rural village hall (actually shot in England, giving this performance ironic nuances in its representation of homecoming). Madonna seems to reiterate and revisit some of the discomfort she felt in the 1990 ‘Rock the Vote’ television spot by marching, saluting the audience and then irreverently showing us her buttock cleavage to undercut any sense that we view her as seriously taking on the persona of proud American. The rest of the video consists of split screen tracking shots of most possible permutations of regional, class, age, sexual, occupational, subcultural and gender identity at large in the American sub-continent. They are shot in front of American flags, bowling alleys, small town churches, suburban and urban streets. The participants look impassive, troubled or sombre, but rarely smiling. We are led to believe that the American people are on the whole anxious, distressed or quietly proud. Only Madonna, a former cheerleader, and a college

cheerleading team seem at all happy about the prospect of being American at the beginning of the 21st century. The video, shot in 2000, does feel at times prescient due to its celebration of the ‘the people as heroes’ of American society (fire-fighters included) and seems to pre-empt the national embrace of the American flag in the sombre mood post-September 11th. However, the video suggests nothing more profound than the belief that all Americans are equal and valid individuals who should be treated with respect whatever their subjectivity. This liberal message, enshrined in the constitution, but meted out variably across American society, seems an abnegation of cultural-political responsibility. If Madonna were a political radical, she would have ensured the video represented more openly the inequities and economic divide at the heart of post-governmental corporate America.

Madonna’s ‘American Pie’ is therefore a simple visual restatement of liberal politics and individualism within the national context. The conservative treatment of the song, with its religiosity, nostalgia and sombre assessment of the national *zeitgeist* suggests Madonna has little to add and nowhere to go as a cultural radical. She could genuinely embrace oppositional politics to mark herself as definitively radical in the early twenty-first century, but has instead embraced the trappings of an English aristocratic lifestyle. Maybe it is because American cultural studies, critical pedagogy and Madonna’s transformative agenda have succeeded in repositioning the margins at the centre, with the oppositional becoming the norm in American popular culture, that she now needs to look elsewhere to construct a commentary or critique of America. Where were the equivalent of burning crosses, the perversion of bigoted values, the images of abject poverty and social despair? Mainly hidden behind the ubiquitous American flags of the video, it would seem. *The Next Best Thing* dealt more clearly with issues around American family values and gay sexuality, demonstrating Madonna’s continued commitment to the exploration of such themes. But such a critical engagement was absent from the ‘American Pie’ video, with gay and lesbian kisses causing only mild controversy due to their innocuous, honest and underplayed treatment. Instead of oppositional cultural politics, Madonna turned next to mainstream Americana to explore her relationship to the nation portrayed in ‘American Pie’.

Music and the cyberroundupinstallation (2000)

Released in September 2000, *Music* is vibrantly packaged using images and a typographical style that are immersed in the iconography of the West (as designed by Jean Baptiste Mondino). The design and visual impact owes a good deal to Miss Rodeo America and Lisa Eisner’s book *Rodeo Girl* (2000). Miss Rodeo America, part rodeo and part beauty pageant, began in 1955. The cowgirls of these rodeos are alluring remixes of the American past and cowgirl/boy iconography of the twentieth century. The rodeo women embody a nostalgic American cultural and sexual desire. They are dazzlingly glamorous and astoundingly inauthentic in their representation of the past and present of rural American life in the West. These images are for many the source of the recent focus on the reinvention and co-optation of Western style in the fashion world (and by Madonna), and are so rich they almost blind us to the origins, sources and heritage of this style.

For *Music*, Mondino utilises over-saturated colour images of Madonna as a hyper-real urban/rural cowgirl. Madonna adopts a club version of the Western look while standing in the street outside a single level suburban dwelling, alternately striking a pose, sipping a milkshake and scrutinising an acoustic guitar. In-between times she is sleeping in a haystack wearing an elaborately embroidered shirt, a pink Stetson with a tiara around the brim, jeans and sequined shoes. The red sequined shoe on the backplate of

the CD is an obvious allusion to Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* (Fleming, 1939), and her plaintive cries of 'there's no place like home' seems apposite in an album drenched in rural Americana and which embodies Madonna's American homecoming. Fragments of the lyrics of 'Music' are presented over several pages of the CD booklet in a Country and Western nineteenth-century poster font. A repeated image of a cowboy on a bucking bronco specifically ties these images to Miss Rodeo America, though by representing a male rather than female rider. This, and the overt glamorisation of the Western look indicates Madonna is not making any explicit connection with the historical cowgirl to subvert the cowboy myth. But she implicitly parodies the cultural fantasy embodied in this iconic style that is rooted firmly in America's founding myths, and is (still) the popular dress of large sections of the American people, from Presidents to cowhands. Eisner's cowgirls match Madonna rhinestone for rhinestone, and as such Madonna is adopting and popularizing a fashion already in club and mainstream American fashion culture. She further elaborates the style in the video for 'Music' in a specifically ghetto fabulous urban/club setting. What is significant is that Madonna here has turned to Americana, underlining her interest in exploring her relationship to mainstream America through a fashion and cultural style that is rich and multi-layered in its meaning.

The music of *Music* is consistent with this de/reconstruction of Western iconography. Very little in the album announces itself as Country music per se, but the turn to acoustic instrumentation within a digital environment and songwriting that alludes to acoustic singer-songwriting ('I Deserve It', 'Nobody's Perfect', 'Don't Tell Me' and 'Gone') mixes the organic with future machine music, with implicit and explicit allusions to Kraftwerk in 'Music'. This locates Madonna's engagement with Country not as nostalgia but a contemporary attempt at reconstructing a cyber-folk sensibility, with the introspective environment of these songs cybernetically coupled to digital studio technology and the global audience. Madonna was to further explore this in her promotional mini-tour and webcast at the end of 2000.

In November 2000, Dolce and Gabbana created an environment they called a 'Cyberroundupinstallation' which attempted to further elaborate the techno-Western persona of Madonna for her New York launch of *Music* and London Brixton Academy webcast. The Wild West theme park presented a hyper-real vision of a contemporary frontier town with barbecues, beauty pageants, mechanical bulls, a saloon and orbiting horseshoes. This Italian take on the contemporary American West resonates with Sergio Leone's hyper-real spaghetti Western filmic environment in the 1960s, and with the techno-theme park aesthetic of *Westworld* (Crichton, 1973). Dolce stated 'the idea was to create a young person's take on anything Western, add glamorous touches and not take anything literally. Even our haystacks and horses are made of gold' (Robson, 2000). After performing in this Disney-esque Western playground Madonna went on to further develop the cowgirl in a more complex way for the 'Don't Tell Me' video and the *Drowned World Tour* cowgirl section.

'Don't tell me' (2000)

The 'Don't Tell Me' video (again created by Mondino) further questions the cowboy/girl as an American icon, the myths of the American West and Madonna's relationship to them. The video represents three separate levels of experience or reality. West-world 1 is that which Madonna occupies – the performance space of the studio. West-world 2 is the back-projection before which Madonna performs and West-world 3 is the roadside advertising poster site within the Western landscape that also suggests a drive-in movie screen due to its moving images. Madonna occupies only the ersatz studio space walking, dancing or riding a mechanical bucking bronco. She walks to camera dressed in

an everyday low key, plaid flannel shirt, jeans, boots and dirt dressed up only with a large buckled belt, representing the West as authentic reality. She dances wearing a hyper-Western-styled black leather shirt and suede chaps costume representing the West as inauthentic performance. She rides the mechanical bronco wearing a red printed vest top and brown leather tasselled trousers representing the West as a vicariously experienced cultural playground akin to the Cyberroundup installation. Her physical removal or alienation from the open spaces of the West parallel her previous distancing from these aspects of American culture, and represents her at a borderline or frontier which is difficult to traverse.

The cowboy dancers, however, have the licence to roam between these spaces. The video incorporates images of contemporary Country and Western culture with Madonna/Mondino demonstrating the dichotomy of authenticity and inauthenticity in Western iconography through the device of an image within an image (within an image). The posterised / drive-in movie Marlboro Men in denim, clean tucked in shirts and pristine hats are portrayed dancing alone, and then in competition, placing this key twentieth-century cowboy icon up for interrogation as an inauthentic cultural construct at home in the world of advertising more than the American plains. When these dancers join Madonna, they too have adopted a club version of Western style and are in black, switching from line dancing in unison with Madonna to offering their pelvic areas to her in deferential subjugation. The dancers have moved from the 'authentic' Marlboro world into an inauthentic contradictory ill-defined space in support of Madonna's performance. The cowboys seem to have thwarted Madonna's attempts at keeping a critical distance from Western culture, while she has subverted them by meeting them only on her own terms, and in apparel that would be more at home in a gay club than a honky-tonk bar.

Yet Madonna's West-world 1 is still located in a studied pseudo-studio space which we are constantly reminded of as the camera tracks backwards to reveal the artifice involved in representing the rich and intoxicating American Western landscape. We are reminded of the measured and constructed nature of this 'reality' which is shown to be highly fraudulent. By implication we are also reminded that the seductive myths of the American West are as equally inauthentic. If West-world 1 is so bogus, how much more so are the Baudrillardian simulations of West-world 2 and 3, which represent the filmic and advertising media through which the visual myths of the West are perpetuated?

A cowboy rodeo rider in full tasselled costume is continually intercut in slow motion throughout the video and is finally unseated/dethroned as the video ends. This suggests Madonna's debunking of the potency of the cowboy myth as well as questioning its specifically male and camp nature which, as has been demonstrated, exscribes cowgirls from the history of the American West. Madonna/Mondino perpetuate this exscription by failing to have a single cowgirl in her video, but this is maybe an attempt to underline the homo-erotic aspects of the myth.

The contemporary American moment is therefore demonstrated to be still fascinated by the archetypal cowboy and indicates the importance of Madonna's parody of aspects of this culture in the present. Line dancing, after all, is a systematised parody of frontier and square dancing, and Madonna's choreographed parodic critique of this 'folk' dance allows us to track back and identify the deceit in formalising spontaneous dance into an invented American tradition.

The Drowned World Tour – the cowgirl section

For the *Drowned World Tour* Madonna further explored Country iconography. She wrote a parody of an 'old school' honky-tonk Country and Western track called 'The

Funny Song'. She adopted, not always successfully and, as will be argued below, problematically, a southern drawl for the Country section of the show. Madonna wore a version of 'trailer park' chic, with a Stars and Stripes vest top, embroidered jeans, cowboy boots and a racoon's tail. She also donned a cutaway acoustic guitar as a badge of folk/Country authenticity. Choreographed line-dancing and an onstage mechanical bull sustained the visual themes introduced in the 'Don't Tell Me' video. Back projections of lonely American desert landscapes and highways (referencing *Easy Rider* (Hopper, 1969), *Paris, Texas* (Wenders, 1984) and *Thelma and Louise* (Scott, 1991)) were representative of Madonna's further journey into the wilderness and heartland of the myths of America. Dancing in unison around Madonna are multiple 'Marlboro men/women/whatever' of diverse ethnic origin which scrutinises the underplayed reality of ethnic and gender diversity in the historical American West, while alluding to the representation of America's need to embrace its diversity in the 'American Pie' video.

In this section of the show, Madonna opens up questions around authenticity central to Country. Country is diverse and has its own set of internal debates about authenticity, such as Alt. Country being recognised as an anti-Nashville punk inspired oppositional Country, and the Americana Music Association supporting Bluegrass and heritage Country in Nashville itself. Madonna may not have intended to engage with these issues, but by drawing on folk/Country stylings within overtly synthetic Electronica the question of musical authenticity opened up in *Music* is further explored. The plastic wrapped bales of hay Madonna used as a seat during this section of the performance stand as metaphors for the music of *Music* and as indicators of the difficulty in nailing down the authentic. They do this both as a representation of the artificially constructed nature of Madonna's relationship to the organic of folk and Country music in her cowgirl character, but also as a representation of the preservation of the organic within this music. Contemporary Country music also walks this line of preservation and re-invention.

The parody of Western iconography within the cowboy section of the tour is both a critique and celebration of aspects of this 'authentic' culture. However, Madonna's critique results in a problematic set of outcomes, not least in her replication of anti-rural prejudice that has long been at the heart of urban America's attitudes to Country, and Country's attitudes to its origins.

Madonna through her tone and the vocal inflection of 'The Funny Song' in the *Drowned World Tour* replicates the northern (urban) disdain for southern (rural) culture that is a key issue in understanding American identity. Madonna becomes regionalist and perpetuates the long American tradition of denigrating the rural redneck, as a result of which Country adopted Western iconography while retaining its accent. It can be argued that in revisiting America, Madonna reproduces the ideological divide at the heart of North-American identity, and in choosing a side, alienates not only Southerners, but also the swathe of working class and lower middle class white Americans of all regions who look to Country as a vehicle for their dreams, hopes and desires. I would argue that by mocking the culture of these people, Madonna reproduces northern urban intellectual elitism. Madonna's music suddenly dies laughing, like a stand up comedian telling a joke without any inclination of the punch line. The difficulty in understanding Madonna's attempt at parody here is that:

The question of the cultural politics of parody is comparable to that of the cultural politics of laughter, which has likewise been claimed both for anti-authoritarian irreverence and as a means of ridiculing and stigmatising the socially marginal and the oppressed (Dentith, 2000, p. 28).

Madonna irreverently questions the American cowgirl/boy myth while simultaneously ridiculing and stigmatising the culture of a perpetually denigrated cultural grouping – poor white America. We cannot clearly demarcate a particular punch line that would orientate Madonna’s parodic critique, and there are probably many possible conflicting punch lines with the laughter travelling in more than one direction. But if the laughter never materialises due to the ineptitude of the delivery of the joke, the comedian is said to die in the full glare of audience scrutiny.

Why is this apparently innocuous parody of Country so significant? The answer can be found in the role Country has played in the lives of Americans. As Bufwack and Oermann have suggested, Country music is a repository of the lived experience of poor America which

is a window into the world of the majority of American women. It describes poverty, hardship, economic exploitation, sexual subjugation, and limited opportunities. But it also contains outspoken protest and joyful rebellion. The history of women’s country music reveals a rich vein of positive images, self-assertive lyrics, and strong female performers (1993, p. x).

Madonna’s ‘The Funny Song’ therefore takes on significance due to its lightweight and ill-considered treatment of themes at the heart of Country. The narrative about a symbolic or actual barbecuing of her father’s bones after finding him shot through the head, is sung with an accent that is as much a demonstration of contempt for rural America(ns) and could suggest an ignorance of the depth and history of critical working class women’s Country music. Madonna attempts to introduce a narrative of female rebellion into the Country form, when in fact such rebellion has always been a feature of Country music. The song reveals a certain unawareness of the significance of such ignorance when it comes to the amplification and reproduction of anti-rural, poor, white working-class values, and possibly the belittling of the female experience in the West. It is telling that Madonna quickly dropped the song from her *Drowned World Tour* set after September 11th due to its banal violence.

This is dangerous territory for Madonna to become enmeshed within as she perhaps perpetuates some of the prejudices that have a long history in American popular culture. ‘As early as the 1840s, popular literature and entertainment had created negative stereotypes of poor white Southerners. Folk humorists characterised male mountaineers as degenerate, inbred, illiterate, dirty, immoral, drunken, foolish, shiftless, and lawless and their female counterparts as pipe smoking, snuff dipping, work-laden, slutty and ugly’ (Bufwack and Oermann, 1993, p. 24). This stereotype may no longer be as ubiquitous but it is still present within American popular culture even if it is now more variably deployed. The poor swamp or mountain-dwelling southerner has been inflected differently in films such as the Loretta Lynn biopic *Coal Miner’s Daughter* (Apted, 1980) and *Southern Comfort* (Hill, 1981), and the stereotype challenged through the celebration of the dignity of these people, their heritage and culture. This has been most notable in the recent revival of mountain music in the Country world, specifically seen in the success of the Bluegrass and old-school Country of the *O Brother, Where Art Thou* (Coen Brothers, 2000) soundtrack album at the 2001 Country Music Association awards.

Conclusion

Madonna’s engagement with country and Country can be read as a political act that argues for the recognition of American diversity and heterogeneity over the traditional American quest to subsume difference within national uniformity. Paradoxically,

Madonna replicates through parody the elitist values that inform the cultural and social hierarchy of class in the United States. These contradictory outcomes are in the nature of parody, and as outlined by Rose:

most parody worthy of the name is ambivalent towards its targets ... entail[ing] ... a mixture of criticism and sympathy ... the way in which its comedy can laugh both at and with its target, may be traced to the way in which the parodist makes the object of the parody a part of the parody's structure. (1995, pp. 51-2)

Madonna parodies by co-opting, appropriating, recontextualizing and transforming aspects of Americana through the integration of elements of Western style into the structure of her creative works. In 2000-01 Madonna overtly looked to her American heritage and engaged in a critical assessment of the seductive icons and myths of the American West with both 'sympathy and criticism'. However, Madonna reproduced through tone and perhaps ignorance the denigration of the culture of poor, rural America and the Country culture of many American people. The ambivalence of her attitudes to America are inherent in parody as a strategy, and as Dentith suggests, parody is always 'politically and socially multivalent; its particular uses are never neutral' (2000, p. 28). By parodying the parody of Western style, while adopting elements of Country authenticity Madonna may be signalling both a desire to ground herself in her white American ethnicity and the problematics of ethnic and national essentialism, a continual theme in the transformations she has undertaken in her own life and career. She also forces us to recognize her personal investment in the American dream as a free-roaming cowgirl expressing herself across the wide open plains of global popular culture.

NOTES

¹ News stories around Madonna's response to the September 11th tragedy are archived at <www.madonnarama.com/arc8-2001.shtml>, last visited 1 August 2002.

² Parton's resistance to feminist perspectives were expressed in the programme 'Did I shave my legs for this' (BBC Radio 4, 1 January 2002). Programme produced by Nick Barraclough for Smooth Operations and presented by Liz Kershaw.

³ The 'Country formation' is a concept transposed from Grossberg's 'Rock formation' (1994, p. 41). Neither 'Country' or 'Rock' as specifically *cultural* formations can be reduced to music alone – both are a complex multi-layered interplay of practices, material culture, technology, fashion, mediation, language and music formed at the intersections and inter-faces of industry, text and audience. Therefore Madonna engages with the 'Country formation' but not directly with 'Nashville'.

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