

So You've Been Musically Shamed

ABSTRACT In July 2014, an anonymous source leaked the raw audio of Britney Spears's confessional ballad "Alien." Haters pounced on this star's denuded voice, gleefully seizing on the viral artifact as a smoking gun for Spears's deficits and for the pop industry's artistic fakeries more broadly. My paper situates this flashpoint of Spears-shaming within late-capitalist archives of public humiliation, cyberleaks, and the paternalistic scrutiny of women's bodies and voices.

KEYWORDS: critical theory, media studies, popular music

*A marketplace has emerged where public humiliation is a commodity and shame is an industry.
How is the money made? Clicks. The more shame, the more clicks.*

– MONICA LEWINSKY¹

*"Poor Britney Spears"
is not the beginning of a sentence
you hear often uttered in my household.*

– TONY HOAGLAND, "POOR BRITNEY SPEARS," BEGINNING OF THE POEM²

In the summer of 2014, the internet sprang a musical leak. Suddenly circulating on YouTube was a video featuring the allegedly raw, non-Auto-Tuned sounds of Britney Spears singing her new album track "Alien."³ Spears's voice in this recording was noticeably off-key and off-kilter, like some abject artifact meant to be overwritten, forgotten, abandoned on the cutting room floor. In the video's comment threads, viewers' strident pronouncements of aching ears and melting brains swirled in a chorus of mockery. Haters pounced on the star's denuded voice and offered it as airtight

1. Monica Lewinsky, "The Price of Shame," *TED Talks* (2015), transcript available at http://www.ted.com/talks/monica_lewinsky_the_price_of_shame/transcript?language=en.

2. Tony Hoagland, "Poor Britney Spears," *American Poetry Review* 38 (2009): 47.

3. See Eliana Dockterman, "Listen to Britney Spears Singing 'Alien' Without Autotune," *TIME* (9 July 2014), <http://time.com/2969757/britney-spears-alien-autotune>. Video accessible at "Alien NO AUTOTUNE Britney Spears FULL," *YouTube* (10 July 2014), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MUDkRtsrCBI>. "Alien" was the first track on Spears's eighth studio album, *Britney Jean* (2013).

evidence of Spears's artistic deficits.⁴ Although track producer William Orbit tried to run damage control by saying that Spears had failed to warm up prior to the leaked run-through, people gloated nonetheless by labeling the pop diva's voice as "diabolical," "like a strangled cat," and, predictably, as "alien."⁵ Such dehumanizing characterizations whipped through a firestorm of pearl-clutching *gotcha!* journalism.

But how shocking was the leak, anyhow? Long before the "Alien" fiasco, critics had relentlessly accused Spears of lapses in vocal ability, variously by knocking her failure to sing in tune, by satirizing her vocal fry, or by pitting her against one-time arch-frenemy Christina Aguilera.⁶ A leak of Spears's unprocessed voice probably didn't tell listeners much beyond what they already knew. After all, writers have bewailed Auto-Tune in general as a "crutch" that conditions singers into "lazy" vocal habits; freed from the disciplined pressures to hit and hold their notes with precision, recording artists who rely excessively on the technology may feel content to let their pitch (observe the doubling down on metaphors of disability and impairment) "atrophy" and "wobble."⁷ Despite the collective charades of disgust and disbelief over Spears's "Alien" leak, then, it's a safe bet that people's heads were neither literally nor—and this is key—*figuratively* exploding.

Leak is an alarm, a toxin, a media buzzword, a deictic term. To shout *leak!* is to say *look here!* or *listen here!*, a forceful yank of the gaze and jerk of the ear. Headlines about the Panama Papers, Ashley Madison, Anonymous, WikiLeaks, U.S.-Russian collusion, Facebook, revenge porn, and other clickbaity items reliably set off clamor on social media.⁸ By their nature, leaks are supposed to surprise. Media scholar Wendy Chun and filmmaker Sarah Friedland, however, offer a skeptical reading of public responses to leakage, observing that "what is surprising about all of these recent leaks [in the news] is not their

4. On controversies over Auto-Tune, vocoders, and other voice-altering technologies, see William Cheng, *Sound Play: Video Games and the Musical Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 123–28; Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music*, revised edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 50–52; Robin M. James, "Deconstruction, Fetishism, and the Racial Contract: On the Politics of 'Faking It' in Music," *The New Centennial Review* 7 (2007): 45–80; and Kay Dickinson, "'Believe'? Vocoders, Digitalised Female Identity and Camp," *Popular Music* 20 (2001): 333–47.

5. Cameron Adams, "Are Y'all Ready to Hear What Britney Spears Sounds Like Without AutoTuned Vocals? Sure?," *News* (9 July 2014), <http://www.news.com.au/entertainment/music/are-yall-ready-to-hear-what-britney-spears-sounds-like-without-autotuned-vocals-sure/news-story/be8dc05879522bb6d4d87c11ec8c9692>; Jess Denham, "Britney Spears Sings 'Alien' Without Auto-Tune in Embarrassing Leaked Audio Clip," *Independent* (9 July 2014), <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/news/britney-spears-sings-alien-without-auto-tune-in-embarrassingly-brilliant-leaked-audio-clip-9595316.html>; and King of the Clouds, comment on "Alien NO AUTOTUNE Britney Spears FULL," *YouTube* (video uploaded on 10 July 2014; comment posted in 2016), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MUdKrtsrCBI>.

6. Deena Weinstein has pointed to a pattern of critics dismissing Spears's songs as a "paradigm of bad music" that's easy "to kick around" ("Rock Critics Need Bad Music," in *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate*, ed. Christopher J. Washburne and Maiken Derno [New York: Routledge 2004], 304).

7. Sonya Silver, "Autotune. Simple Irony, Really," *GearsLutz* (11 January 2010), <http://www.gearslutz.com/board/the-moan-zone/455796-autotune-simple-irony-really.html>; Alex Pappademas, "Love Letter to Auto-Tune, Final Installment," *The New York Times* (12 August 2011), <http://6thfloor.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/08/12/love-letter-to-auto-tune-final-installment>; Nick Holmes and Kevin Core, "Pitch Perfection? The 'Flawless' Vocal and the Rise of Auto-Tune," *BBC* (17 May 2013), <http://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-22514705>; and Mark Judge, "Britney, Auto-Tune, and Female Imperfection," *Acculturated* (12 August 2014), <http://acculturated.com/britney-auto-tune-and-female-imperfection>.

8. See Jon Ronson, *So You've Been Publicly Shamed* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2015).

existence, but rather our surprise at them,” in part “because *new media are not simply about leaks: they are leak*. New media work by breaching, and thus paradoxically sustaining, the boundary between private and public.”⁹ In other words, it’s surprising when people are (or act) surprised by leaks, because leaks, along with bugs, kinks, and glitches, are intrinsic to the very architecture of new media. Without the possibility of leakiness, no container and no inter-user channels can be said to exist. But now let’s take the recursion one level deeper. Should it come as a surprise when Chun, Friedland, and other savvy writers voice surprise toward others’ surprise toward leaks? If so, should *this* be surprising as well? Despite the rabbit-hole conceit, I am posing these questions seriously. Hard questions. Questions—characterized by what philosopher Gregory Currie terms “collapse of iterativity”—that we might be unable to fully wrap our minds around. But the discursive collapse speaks precisely to the allure of leaks: whatever their true shock value, leaks tempt people into performative spirals of metacritical introspection, all the while short-circuiting the intellectual, affective, and moral integrity of our own leakable bodies and of the body politic.¹⁰ Put another way, leaks involving other people rarely involve *only* other people. Leaks are about all of us. Because all of us leak.

My case study for this article is Britney Spears, who, for two decades, has been one of the most publicly shamed and lucratively leaked-about celebrities in American popular culture.¹¹ Sensationalist journalism has reduced Spears to her highest highs and, in equal measure, to her lowest lows. Just as “new media are leak,” as Chun and Friedland put it, so we could say *Spears is leak*; her persona is equatable to the sum of what she has leaked, the glitz and the dirt.¹² Besides the “Alien” leak, fans and haters alike have prodded every pixel of Spears, split every hair, floated every hypothetical pathology, archived every frame of lip-synch fail, dissected every relationship, and guesstimated every pound lost or gained. Critics have gossiped openly about her virginity and sexual activity since she was a teenager. And paparazzi have found ways to snap and sell countless photos of her genitals. Scrutiny of Spears has routinely

9. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Sarah Friedland, “Habits of Leaking: Of Sluts and Network Cards,” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 26 (2015): 4, emphasis in original.

10. Gregory Currie, “Imagination and Simulation: Aesthetics Meets Cognitive Science,” in *Mental Simulation: Evaluations and Applications*, ed. Martin Davies and Tony Stone (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 161.

11. See Christopher R. Smit, *The Exile of Britney Spears: A Tale of 21st-Century Consumption* (Chicago: Intellect, 2011); Stan Hawkins and John Richardson, “Remodeling Britney Spears: Matters of Intoxication and Mediation,” *Popular Music and Society* 30 (2007): 605–29; Sean Redmond, “Pieces of Me: Celebrity Confessional Carnality,” *Social Semiotics* 18 (2008): 149–61; and Melanie Lowe, “Colliding Feminisms: Britney Spears, ‘Tweens,’ and the Politics of Reception,” *Popular Music and Society* 26 (2003): 123–40.

12. Pop music scholarship aside, Spears makes curious cameo appearances in academic articles on topics ranging from international policy to search engine algorithms, from gay marriage to school dress codes. See Jenna Pitchford, “The ‘Global War on Terror,’ Identity, and Changing Perceptions: Iraqi Responses to America’s War in Iraq,” *Journal of American Studies* 45 (2011): 695–716; Brian Hayes, “Computing Science: The Britney Spears Problem,” *American Scientist* 96 (2008): 274–79; Robert R.M. Verchick, “Same-Sex and the City,” *The Urban Lawyer* 37 (2005): 191–99; Sandra Weber, “Boxed-In by My School Uniform,” *Counterpoints* 220 (2004): 61–65; and Mark Leonard, “Diplomacy by Other Means,” *Foreign Policy* 132 (2002): 48–56. In these articles that otherwise have little to do with Spears, the authors name-drop the singer as a versatile stand-in for assorted values and vices: celebrity, sexiness, sluttiness, craziness, whiteness, and Americanness. Is it strange that “Britney Spears” would appear in a book called *Hybridity: Or the Cultural Logic of Globalization* (by Marwan M. Kraidy [Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2005], 15), or in an article titled “Manishevitz and Sake, the Kaddish and Sutras: Allen Ginsberg’s Spiritual Self-Othering” (Craig Svonkin, *College Literature* 37 [2010], 166–93)? Or does the nature of mega-celebrity actually compel the inverse question, to wit: why *wouldn’t* Spears come up in a hermeneutics of Ginsberg?

banked on her Othering and dehumanization: as an alien, freak, or cult member (the shearing of her own hair in 2007); as an animal (rabid meltdowns, cagey hermeticism, physical confrontations with her hounders); as an impostor (with putative delusions about, among other things, her vocal proficiency and her entitlements to fame); and as slutty white trash. Public voice-shaming and slut-shaming of this singer have played out as intersectional bloodsports, filled with sexist, ableist, and classist jabs. In the end, Spears's "Alien" scandal is at once mundane smut and jarring cautionary tale, reverberating with people's trenchant anxieties about beauty standards, privacy, and interpersonal accountability in the age of ubiquitous leaks.

"SHE'S VERY NORMAL": ANIMAL CONTROL AND WHITE TRASH ROYALTY

*There's only two types of people in the world:
The ones that entertain, and the ones that observe.*

– BRITNEY SPEARS, "CIRCUS"

My ears just bled.

– MATT THOMPSON, COMMENTING ON SPEARS'S OUT-OF-TUNE "ALIEN" LEAK¹³

Discourses of *it hurts me to have to hear this* have been around for a while. In the eighteenth century, physicians and philosophers exhaustively theorized "the idea that music could overstimulate a vulnerable nervous system, leading to illness, immorality and even death."¹⁴ With recourse to notions of female hysteria and to the Enlightenment "cult of sensibility," researchers of this period warily eyed certain styles of music not just as moral vices (à la Plato) but also as legitimately pathogenic or pathological. In a 1900 issue of *The Medical Magazine*, J. Herbert Dixon warned readers that girls who practiced piano excessively could suffer "the baneful influence of the continual vibrations on the organ of Corti [in the cochlea], and so on the brain," with symptoms including "headaches, neuralgia, nervous twitchings, hysteria, melancholia, madness."¹⁵ In past and present rhetorics of aural harm, the ear is framed as a conduit, the organ that allows foreign sonic substances to slip through. Ears, in this formulation, aren't merely anatomical channels through which external sounds may leak inward; ears themselves, as permeable media, *are* metonymic leaks. As scholars of sound studies like to point out, humans have eyelids but have no "earlids."¹⁶ Ears are chronically receptive, hence persistently leaky.

13. Matt Thompson, comment on "Alien NO AUTOTUNE Britney Spears FULL," *YouTube* (video uploaded on 10 July 2014; comment posted in 2016), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MUdKrtsrCBI>.

14. Quoted in James Kennaway, *Bad Vibrations: The History of the Idea of Music as a Cause of Disease* (New York: Ashgate, 2012), 23.

15. Kennaway, *Bad Vibrations*, 76.

16. Hillel Schwarz, "Inner and Outer Sancta: Earplugs and Hospitals," in *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies*, ed. Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 279.

Social media platforms today have amplified and accelerated people's claims about offensive sounds and offendable ears.¹⁷ Upon the leak of Spears's non-Auto-Tuned vocals for "Alien," listeners lined up to file for damages in the court of mob justice. "PROTECT your ears," an Australian website cautioned with regard to this "hideously painful leaked studio clip."¹⁸ YouTube viewers similarly shared laments such as "My ears, my precious ears, they can't take it anymore!"¹⁹ while critics dissed Spears's voice as "toxic to the ears" and "pretty shocking."²⁰ Public uproar painted the singer's vocals as an extraordinary sonic invasion of exceptionally delicate cochleae. To be sure, the "Alien" leak sat in good company. Around this time, it was just one specimen within a thriving internet business of voice shaming. One trend has involved "isolated vocals," through which someone tries to strip a singer's (typically live-in-concert) voice from accompanying sounds (backup vocals, instruments, synths, audience noise), then posts this bare-bones voice online for listeners to admire or, more often, to ridicule. It's the acoustic equivalent of pulling the rug out from under someone, as the editing yanks away the bass and other sonic buffers in order to cause a potentially embarrassing fall from grace. Surges in computer and mobile audio-editing apps have lowered the price of entry into DIY practices of musical tinkering.²¹ Methods of isolating vocals can thus come across as cheap in dual senses—financially (free or inexpensive software) as well as ethically (a cheap shot, a low blow).

Women are disproportionately shamed via these curations of isolated vocals, whether it's Mariah Carey struggling with "All I Want for Christmas Is You" at a 2014 Rockefeller Center holiday performance, or Katie Price flubbing a duet of "A Whole New World," or Courtney Love rocking "Celebrity Skin," or Linda McCartney belting out "Hey Jude."²² Conversely, the isolation of male artists' vocals is commonly submitted as testaments to these men's "genius": Michael Jackson, David Bowie, Kurt Cobain, Marvin Gaye, Freddie Mercury, Eminem, and Paul McCartney (with occasional nods to divas such as Adele and Beyoncé).²³ Nothing about this gendered double standard comes as a shock.

17. These days, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Reddit, and comparable upvote-dependent platforms incentivize and facilitate the broadcasting of personal yet mass-standardized reactions (see Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* [New York: New York University Press, 2013], 153–94). Emoticons, Likes, thumbs-ups, thumbs-downs, clicks, taps, and swipes give users shorthand validations of identity formation and social participation: *I feel, therefore, I am*. Call it an economy of *homo affectus*, wherein claims of one's affectability double as self-humanizing ploys—which, in turn, may succeed at the direct expense of dehumanizing, alienating, and shaming someone else.

18. Adams, "Are Y'all Ready."

19. Taylor Best, comment on "Alien NO AUTOTUNE Britney Spears FULL," *YouTube* (video uploaded on 10 July 2014; comment posted in 2016), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MUdKrtsrCBI>.

20. Lyndsey Parker, "Producer William Orbit Defends Auto-Tune-Free Britney Spears Song Leak," *Yahoo* (9 July 2014), <http://www.yahoo.com/music/bp/producer-william-orbit-defends-auto-tune-free-britney-spears-song-leak-211307690.html>.

21. See Jamie Lendino, "The Best Audio Editing Software of 2018," *PC Mag* (12 February 2018), <http://www.pcmag.com/roundup/356915/the-best-audio-editing-software>.

22. See Harriet Gibsons, "Raw Power: Why Mocking the Isolated Vocals of Courtney Love Is Misogynistic," *The Guardian* (10 October 2014), <http://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2014/oct/10/raw-power-why-mocking-isolated-vocals-of-courtney-love-is-misogynistic>.

23. See "Isolated Vocal Tracks—17 Voices That Marked the Last Century," *Ground Guitar* (2017), <http://www.groundguitar.com/isolated-vocal-tracks-17-voices-that-marked-the-last-century>.

Acoustically zooming in on a woman's blemished voice calls to mind the tabloid gambit of visually zooming in on women's bodies: the encircling of engagement rings (or absence of engagement rings), of baby bumps (or not), of augmented breasts (or not), or of Botoxed faces (or not), frequently with an actual arrow—the most on-the-nose deictic device—pointing at the gawk-worthy piece of flesh (fig. 1). Vocal and photographic croppings alike bank on the irresistibility of note-by-note, pixel-by-pixel voyeurism.²⁴

A leak of a famous performer's vocal foibles can conceivably make the singer appear fallibly human and relatable. Don't we all have bad voice days, bad hair days, and days when pretty much everything seems to go wrong? Yet because celebrities are supposed to be larger than life, any signs of ordinariness may paradoxically make them appear all the more extraordinary, freakish, and alien. Examples of this paradox readily catch our eyes at the grocery store's magazine racks—namely, the *Us Weekly* feature, "Stars: They're Just Like Us!", which, upon its launch in April 2002, began showing "suddenly [. . .] the beautiful extraterrestrials pumping gas, schlepping FedEx packages, and tying their shoes."²⁵ Along with *People*, *In Touch*, *National Enquirer*, and other gossip rags, *Us Weekly* has hiked up the supply and demand for photographing celebrities in their natural habitats, with stars rendered familiar (*look, it's Jennifer Lopez carrying her OWN luggage*) to the point of uncanniness (. . . *which is sooo weird!*). In this lucrative market, paparazzi embark on safaris. More accurately, they conduct capture and release programs: ambush the star at the supermarket, snap some pictures, and then let her retreat to a hiking trail where she can be photographed and monetized anew. In 2008, journalist David Samuels spoke of how the paparazzi agency X17 would task its photographers to "[wait] 12 or 14 hours a day, six or seven days a week" near Britney Spears's home, in hopes "that one day Britney will roll her car into a ditch, or be taken away again strapped to a gurney."²⁶ With paparazzi routinely catching the singer off-guard, numerous candid photos of Spears have given her the appearance of a startled, disgruntled animal over the years (fig. 2). No wonder the American poet Tony Hoagland, in "Poor Britney Spears," leaned into easy animal comparisons by calling the star "my adorable little monkey/prancing for your candy," while taking bonus digs at her "slim javelin of talent" and "recklessly little protective clothing."²⁷

An infamous rock-bottom week for Spears in 2007 can illuminate the paparazzi's guerilla tactics and the tabloids' animalization of celebrities. One February evening, Spears was caught using an electric razor to shave her own head in a Ventura Boulevard hair salon. She appeared, according to Samuels's multi-abjecting summary, "at once vulnerable and wildly alienated, the expression one might expect to see on the face of a young cult member who had just set fire to her birth certificate on the

24. See Hilary Weaver, "Jennifer Aniston Says She Can't Escape Baby-Bump-Rumor Photos," *Vanity Fair* (30 November 2016), <http://www.vanityfair.com/style/2016/11/jennifer-aniston-says-she-cant-escape-baby-bump-rumor-photos>.

25. Ruth Graham, "One of Us," *Slate* (22 September 2016), http://www.slate.com/articles/life/the_next_20/2016/09/the_invention_of_us_weekly_s_stars_they_re_just_like_us_feature.html.

26. David Samuels, "Shooting Britney," *The Atlantic* (April 2008), <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/04/shooting-britney/306735>.

27. Hoagland, "Poor Britney Spears."



FIGURE 1. [Left] Cover of *In Touch* magazine. [Right] Candid photograph of Rachel Bilson with emphasis on and close-up of, well, nothing (ringlessness).

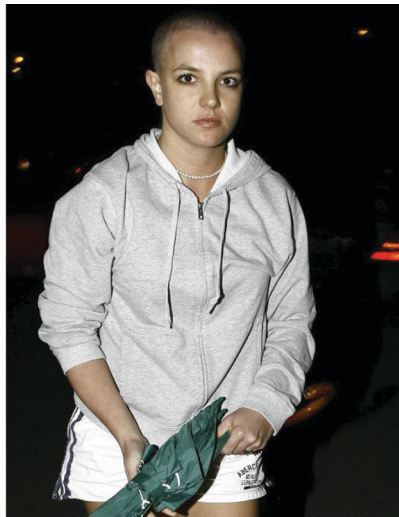
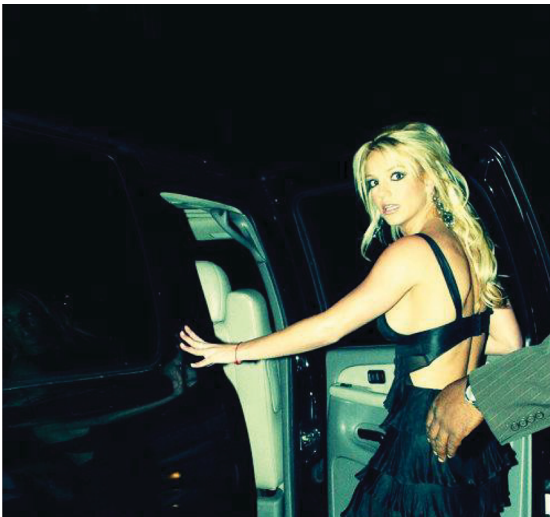


FIGURE 2. Candid photos of Spears.

sidewalk.”²⁸ Public responses likewise overwhelmingly linked this act of self-shearing with insanity and freakery.²⁹ Surely, people said, Spears’s willful disposal of her gold locks was a cry for help.³⁰ Yet the close shave turned out to be merely the warmup act to a greater scandal a few days later, when an X17 team tracked the singer to the house of her then-husband Kevin Federline. Spears had hoped to see her children, who at the time were under Federline’s care. But she was denied entry. So she drove away to a nearby Jiffy Lube, paparazzi still hot on her trail. What happened next made instant headlines. “She took her hat off, and she was bald,” recalled paparazzo Daniel “Dano” Ramos. “She was breathing like a bull. It was like smoke was coming out of her nostrils.”³¹ Spears then leapt out of the car and screamed “Motherfuckers!” while brandishing an umbrella and using it to strike the door of a paparazzo’s car. If Spears behaved like a “bull,” though, maybe it’s because the paparazzi choreographed themselves like bullfighters. As Dano explained, paparazzi work optimally in “triangle” formations so that the celebrity has nowhere to turn.³² With the savage grace of matadors, paparazzi manufacture arenas where celebrities may feel—and act—like cornered animals.³³

In her first concert tour after the umbrella showdown (as well as after a gauntlet of rehab, divorce, custody battles, a death in the family, and other hardships), Spears aptly played on themes of caginess and cagedness. Called *The Circus Starring Britney Spears*, each concert opened with the 2008 namesake song “Circus,” with Spears descending from the ceiling in an interlocking pair of glittery hoops, invoking one-part burlesque dancer, one-part ensnared beast (fig. 3). With hardly a breath in between, Spears would then transition from “Circus” into the 2007 song “Piece of Me,” featuring her inside yet another cage, this one gold and rectangular. In case anyone could miss the blunt symbolism of cages in multiple shapes and colors, the lyrics for “Piece of Me” take explicit aim at the insatiable photographers who stalk the stars: “I’m Mrs. Oh-My-God-That-Britney’s-Shameless!/I’m Mrs. Extra-Extra-This-Just-In!/I’m Mrs. She’s-Too-Big-Now-She’s-Too-Thin!/I’m Mrs. You-Want-a-Piece-of-Me?” Ironically, or all too fittingly, Spears’s post-show obligations have often included photo ops with V.I.P. ticketholders—presumably superfans dying to

28. Samuels, “Shooting Britney.”

29. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson defines “freakery” as a “category of corporeal otherness” and of “generalized embodied deviance” (“Introduction: From Wonder to Error—A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity,” in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson [New York: New York University Press, 1996], 10).

30. Women with shaved heads, points out Patrick Barkham, “emerge in art as either frightening or frightened” (“The Bald Truth,” *The Guardian* [20 February 2007], <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/feb/20/gender.music>). In science fiction, bald women also tend to come off both/either alien and/or alienated: Ripley in *Alien 3*, Furiosa in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, Eleven in *Stranger Things*, and Jack in *Mass Effect 2*, to name only a few.

31. Samuels, “Shooting Britney.”

32. Samuels, “Shooting Britney.”

33. Vanessa Grigoriadis delivers a play-by-play of the thrilling “Britney detail” as follows: “A Britney chase is more fun than a roller coaster, but with the chance that the experience could cause lasting harm. ‘Britney is the most dangerous detail in Hollywood,’ says [Harvey] Levin of TMZ. There are twenty paps in the core Britney detail, a bunch of hilarious, slightly scary thugs who use expert drag-racing skills to block off new guys who try to get in the mix. It’s like a game of Frogger, with everyone jostling to be the first car behind Britney, the better to shoot all over her when she stops (and then watch their feet, because several have found themselves on crutches after she speeds away)” (“The Tragedy of Britney Spears,” *Rolling Stone* [21 February 2008], <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/the-tragedy-of-britney-spears-rolling-stones-2008-cover-story-20080221>).

get a piece of her. Listen, however, to the weird way Felicia Culotta, the coordinator of a Las Vegas V.I.P. package, characterized this artist to the eager meet-and-greeters: “Britney plays off energy. If you go in scared of her, she is going to be scared of you. So don’t be scared of her. She’s very normal.”³⁴ It’s good advice. But don’t Culotta’s remarks sound like she was talking about a skittish creature at a petting zoo? Even this well-intentioned message of *Britney: she’s just like us!* rang with dehumanizing and infantilizing insinuations, affirming that Spears is sufficiently *unlike* normal people to warrant the caveat of alikeness in the first place.

If Culotta’s words come across as condescending, they nevertheless align with Spears’s daily control by a squad of agents, lawyers, public relations specialists, and family members. Sure, most celebrities rely on managers. Spears’s micromanagement, though, is next level. Following her breakdowns in 2007 and an emergency visit to a psychiatric hospital in 2008, the singer has remained under court-ordered conservatorship. This means Spears “cannot make key decisions, personal or financial, without the approval of her conservators: her father, Jamie Spears, and an estate lawyer, Andrew M. Wallet. Her most mundane purchases, from a drink at Starbucks to a song on iTunes, are tracked in court documents as part of the plan to safeguard the great fortune she has earned but does not ultimately control.”³⁵ Over the past decade, rumblings about this paternal(istic) conservatorship have fed concurrent rumors about Spears’s mental and moral incapacities. Is the star incompetent? Depressed? Profligate? Reckless? Hanging by a thread?

Tabloids’ dehumanizing portraits of Britney Spears have been virtuosically intersectional, concentrating on everything from the star’s gender (womanhood, girlhood, hyperfemininity, unfemininity) and sexuality (dating men, kissing Madonna) to matters of disability (psychological ails, physical injuries) and faith (Baptist upbringing, atheism, “dabbling” in Hinduism).³⁶ And unlike some white musicians—whose color and race might go unremarked via the cultural logics and hegemonies of white privilege—Spears’s whiteness has received colorful coverage because it has been nominally inextricable from white trash narratives, which sit discursively adjacent to stamps of animality and incivility.³⁷ Raised in a modest household in Kentwood, Louisiana, which hosts a population of just over 2000, Spears has been this rural town’s most famous export. As a teenager, she blossomed into a picture-perfect and photo-ready exemplar of the American Dream: rags to riches, dairy farms to Big Apple penthouses. But as scandals began piling on, critics were quick to dredge up her white trash roots. In January 2004, when Spears married

34. Serge F. Kovaleski and Joe Coscarelli, “Is Britney Spears Ready to Stand on Her Own?” *New York Times* (4 May 2016), http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/08/arts/music/is-britney-spears-ready-to-stand-on-her-own.html?_r=1.

35. Kovaleski and Coscarelli, “Is Britney Spears Ready to Stand on Her Own?”

36. Jeannette Walls, “Oops, Spears Switched Religions Again,” *Today* (18 January 2006), <http://www.today.com/popculture/oops-spears-switched-religions-again-wbna10696063>.

37. For a reflexive critique of “unmarked whiteness” (and how academic presumptions of white unmarkedness might paradoxically reify the implicit workings of white privilege), see Ruth Frankenberg, “The Mirage of an Unmarked Whiteness,” in *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*, ed. Birgit Brander Rasmussen, Eric Klinenberg, Irene J. Nexica, and Matt Wray (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 72–96.



FIGURE 3. Spears performing “Piece of Me” in her *Circus* tour. Screen capture by author.

(and, 55 hours later, divorced) her childhood friend Jason Alexander, *Guardian* writer Kathryn Flett called the singer “a white trash girl who, after years of high-gloss polish in the Business of Show, is currently reverting to type,” as evidenced by “a seven-minute, \$70

ceremony at a Las Vegas chapel.”³⁸ *Reverting* to type—implying that one cannot escape a white-trash upbringing. Subsequently, in the fall of 2004, Spears married Kevin Federline and, a year after that, gave birth to her first child. Concerning this arduous period in Spears’s life, *Rolling Stone* writer Vanessa Grigoriadis declared:

[Spears] is not a good girl. She is not America’s sweetheart. She is an inbred swamp thing who chain-smokes, doesn’t do her nails, tells reporters to “eat it, snort it, lick it, fuck it” and screams at people who want pictures for their little sisters. [...] Federline gave Britney license to fully embrace her white-trash side—walking into gas-station restrooms barefoot, dumping ashtrays out hotel windows, wearing novelty tees like I’M A VIRGIN, BUT THIS IS AN OLD SHIRT and, most notably, not strapping the kids into car seats.³⁹

Sociologist Karen Bettez Halnon viewed Spears and Federline along similar lines, calling them the “quintessential ‘super trash’ romance” whose nuptials confirmed that “Spears was no longer a cute and innocent virgin but rather a not-so-intelligent, beer-drinking, trucker-hat wearing, cigarette-smoking, sexually charged, white-trash princess.”⁴⁰ Notice how, for these authors, white trashiness is multifariously yoked to indecency (shouting, cursing, bad parenting), dirtiness (unkempt nails, uncovered feet), substance use (smoking, drinking), sluttiness (loss of virginal status), and animality (“a swamp thing,” in the words of Grigoriadis). Notice additionally how, like sluttiness, white trashiness gets summoned as a sticky quality in spite of wealth and fame.⁴¹ Once white trash, always white trash—this is what writers infer when they harp on Spears “reverting to,” “fully embrac[ing],” and “backslid[ing] into” white-trash status, as if it were a malady prone to the whims of remission and relapse.⁴² As much as people love feasting on stories of overcoming, then, they reserve plenty of appetite for the opposite: stories of abject failure, not least those involving sexualized, sexist, or misogynist fantasies of a woman returning to her rightful place, whether it’s white-trash roots or some other besmirched subject position.⁴³ For although plenty of male musicians receive praise for recuperating or “owning” their white-trash identity—Eminem, Kid Rock, and the “King of White Trash Culture,” Elvis Presley—female musicians and celebrities (Spears, Madonna, Miley Cyrus, Anna Nicole

38. Kathryn Flett, “She Did It Again,” *The Guardian* (20 August 2005), <http://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2005/aug/21/features.review97>.

39. Grigoriadis, “The Tragedy of Britney Spears.”

40. Karen Bettez Halnon, *The Consumption of Inequality: Weapons of Mass Distraction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 122, 124. For a lexical and social history of “white trash,” see Matt Wray, *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); and Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz, eds., *White Trash: Race and Class in America* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

41. Olivia Oliver-Hopkins, “‘It’s Got to Get Me Some Education!’ Class and the Camp-Horror Nexus in *House of 1000 Corpses*,” in *Sontag and the Camp Aesthetic: Advancing New Perspectives*, ed. Bruce E. Drushel and Brian M. Peters (Lanham, MA: Lexington Books, 2017), 158.

42. Russell Meeuf, “Class, Corpulence, and Neoliberal Citizenship: Melissa McCarthy on *Saturday Night Live*,” *Celebrity Studies* 7 (2016): 143. See also Kimberly Bachechi, “Our Icons: Ourselves: Britney Spears, Justin Timberlake, Kevin Federline, and the Construction of Whiteness in a Post-Race America,” *Celebrity Studies* 6 (2015): 164–77.

43. See William Cheng, “Staging Overcoming: Narratives of Disability and Meritocracy in Reality Singing Competitions,” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 11 (2017): 184–214; and Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 78–105.

Smith, Jessica Simpson, Paris Hilton, Lindsay Lohan) have stood to face reprobation for the slightest hint of trashiness.⁴⁴ As with the shaming of isolated vocals, the double standard burns bright.

Because a white-trash woman is shamefully unwomanly. Just as crucially, a white-trash woman is *shameless about the shamefulness* of her unwomanly vices. Among the most “significant stigma symbol[s] of so-called white trash status,” notes Halnon, is the expression “just don’t give a fuck,” which “refers to a kind of indignation, to outward displays of not caring.”⁴⁵ Unsurprisingly, Spears’s white-trash, “don’t give a fuck” reputation has leapt across national borders and languages. Canada’s premier newspaper *Globe and Mail* once called out Spears’s “trailer-trash vulgarity.”⁴⁶ In the United Kingdom, Spears has been deemed a “chav” (unsocialized young person in sportswear).⁴⁷ And in Uriangato, Mexico, where Spears’s CDs and plastic dolls were flying off store shelves at the turn of the millennium, anthropologist Hilary Parsons Dick met local informants who referred to the singer as “*una gabacha sinvergüenza*,” or “a shameless white-trash woman.”⁴⁸ Ascriptions of unapologetic shamelessness are a small skip and hop away from permissions to shame unapologetically. If someone is perceived as shameless (ergo unshameable), then eager shamers obtain implicit license to fire at will.

As Britney Spears has tumbled from one “rock bottom” to the next, people have expressed both admiration and resentment that she indeed seemingly “doesn’t give a fuck” anymore—about a wardrobe malfunction during a Vegas concert, about lukewarm reviews of her 2016 album *Glory*, or about “starv[ing] herself down” for a performance.⁴⁹ In a *Rolling Stone* decennial retrospective on Spears’s 2007 *Blackout* album, Rob Sheffield described the work as “an avant-disco concept album about getting famous, not giving a fuck, getting divorced, not giving a fuck, getting publicly mocked and despised and humiliated [. . .] [b]ut mostly it’s an album about not giving a fuck.”⁵⁰ Even if Spears exudes a kind of blunt insouciance, she typically doesn’t bring this attitude onto the stage, where, over thousands of shows, she has

44. See Hamilton Carroll, *Affirmative Reaction: New Formations of White Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 101–27; Bachechi, “Our Icons: Ourselves,” 173–74; and Gael Sweeney, “The King of White Trash Culture: Elvis Presley and the Aesthetics of Excess,” in *White Trash: Race and Class in America*, ed. Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz (New York: Routledge, 1997), 249–66.

45. Halnon, *The Consumption of Inequality*, 112. Halnon furthermore offers a typology of white-trash characteristics and caricatures, including the “redneck,” the “drunk,” the “wifebeater,” the “lot lizard,” the “mullet man,” the “smokin’ mama,” the “vacuous tart,” the “stripper,” the “super-hot scammer,” and the “Jerry Springer Show Freak” (97–110).

46. Sarah Hampson, “No Sex Please. I’m Not Britney,” *The Globe and Mail* (16 July 2005), <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/no-sex-please-im-not-britney/article18241016>.

47. Milly Williamson, “Female Celebrities and the Media: The Gendered Denigration of the ‘Ordinary’ Celebrity,” *Celebrity Studies* 1 (2010): 119.

48. Hilary Parsons Dick, “*Una Gabacha Sinvergüenza* (A Shameless White-Trash Woman): Moral Mobility and Interdiscursivity in a Mexican Migrant Community,” *American Anthropologist* 119 (2017): 224.

49. Stephen M. Silverman, “Britney Spears Says She Was at ‘Rock Bottom’ in Rehab,” *People* (29 May 2007), <http://people.com/celebrity/britney-spears-says-she-was-at-rock-bottom-in-rehab>; and Anna Holmes, “In Defense of the Badly-Behaved Britney Spears,” *Jezebel* (17 August 2007), <http://jezebel.com/290011/in-defense-of-the-badly-behaved-britney-spears>.

50. Rob Sheffield, “Britney Spears’ ‘Blackout’: A Salute to Her Misunderstood Punk Masterpiece,” *Rolling Stone* (30 October 2017), <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/rob-sheffield-on-britney-spears-blackout-punk-masterpiece-w510038>.

vigorously danced and sung in front screaming fans. At the same time, her empowered stage presence might belie her disempowerment behind the scenes. During concerts, her cage props can ooze kink and sex. When the curtains fall, however, the bondage is real. Between the physical flanks of paps and the legal boilerplates of conservatorship, Spears has been tightly steered, zoned, and controlled for most of her life.

All the more newsworthy, then, when the tight ship springs a leak or veers off course. Some of the most sensationalized moments in Spears's career have involved the singer's apparent inability either to control her body (lashing out with an umbrella, messing up choreography, gaining weight, suffering nip slips) or to control her voice (the "Alien" leak, lip-sync fails, giving "the worst interview of the year," telling "liars" to "kiss [her] lily white southern Louisiana ass," and mysteriously fading in and out of a British accent).⁵¹ In addition to body-shaming and voice-shaming, Spears has faced fat-shaming and slut-shaming in spades. Euphemisms for *fat* and *slut* jointly traffic in accusations about, once again, the deficit of control: a woman dubbed fat has "really let herself go" or "given up" on herself; a woman dubbed slut is "loose" or all too ready to "give it up."⁵² But whereas Spears has been slammed for failing to be a good singer and a good girl, critics count precisely on her out-of-control, leaky moments to produce news, bait clicks, elicit gasps, and crank the money mill. In short, the media has relied on concomitant narratives of Spears losing her voice (singing ability), losing her body (unrealistic thinness), and *loosening* her body (virginity) over a strenuous career.

Voice-shaming, fat-shaming, slut-shaming—it's the trinity of a shitshow business.

LEAKS, SLUTS, AND SHIT

*If she wants to make a career comeback
and her agent pushes her into the MTV awards show
but she can't lose the weight beforehand
and so looks chubby in a spangled bikini
before millions of fanged, spiteful fans and enemies,
then gets a little drunk while getting her nerve up
so botches a step in the dance routine
which makes her look, one critic says,
like a "comatose piglet,"
well, it wasn't by accident, was it,
that she wandered into that glitterati party
of late 20th century striptease celebrity?*

— HOAGLAND, "POOR BRITNEY SPEARS," MIDDLE OF THE POEM⁵³

51. Amber Ryland, "Britney Spears: Overwhelmingly the Worst Interview of the Year in Chicago—'It Was a Struggle For Her to Form a Sentence,'" *Radar Online* (23 December 2013), <http://radaronline.com/exclusives/2013/12/britney-spears-worst-interview-of-year-chicago>; and Sara Hammel, "Britney Spears: 'Kiss My A--!'", *People* (2 December 2010), <http://people.com/celebrity/britney-spears-fights-back-kiss-my-a>.

52. See Feona Attwood, "Sluts and Riot Grrrls: Female Identity and Sexual Agency," *Journal of Gender Studies* 16 (2007): 233–47.

53. Hoagland, "Poor Britney Spears."

On 10 September 2007, a Britney Spears fan named Chris Crocker rocketed to YouTube fame with his two-part video, “Leave Britney Alone!” Voicing teary concern for Spears’s wellbeing, Crocker pushed back against the critics who were roundly panning Spears’s opening act at the 2007 MTV Video Music Awards the day before.⁵⁴ Out of fear that Spears might wither under the media’s vicious attacks, Crocker implored: “Do we really want to see a twenty-five-year-old woman leave behind two children and die? Have we learned nothing from Anna Nicole Smith [who died in February 2007 from drug overdose]?”⁵⁵ Crocker repeatedly dignified Spears as “a human” and castigated the people who were treating her inhumanely: “I know it’s hard to see Britney Spears as a human being. But trust me, she is. [. . .] All you people care about is readers and making money off of her. She’s a human! Leave Britney alone!”

Reviewers of Spears’s performance at the VMAs complained about this singer’s sloppy dance moves, lethargic tempo, and weight. Her “tight body was long gone,” noted one critic; so were “those abs of yore.”⁵⁶ In the book *Fat Shame*, Amy Farrell reflects on the ways “the story of [Spears’s] downfall—which includes questionable parenting techniques, violent behavior, and drug and alcohol binges—is largely told through a narrative about her fat body. [. . .] The *New York Daily Post* said that Spears [at the 2007 VMAs] was ‘stuffed into a spangled bra and hot pants and jiggled like Jell-O,’ while *E! Online* described the horror of the ‘bulging belly she was flaunting.’”⁵⁷ Writers effectively depicted Spears’s flesh as *leaking* out of her two-piece. These depictions drew validation from a *New York Times* report that revealed how Spears, an hour before curtains up at the VMAs, had “decided not to wear the custom-fitted corset designed for the performance, opting for a black bikini-style costume that revealed more of her body.”⁵⁸ And here’s where fat-shaming crashed into slut-shaming: some people claimed they took issue not with Spears’s size per se, but rather with the fact that Spears, at *that* size, dared to wear such a sexy get-up. “She isn’t fat,” admitted a blog commenter. “But she isn’t fit enough to be wearing (or not wearing) what she is.”⁵⁹ *Us Weekly* editor Janice Min gave her professional opinion along similar lines: “In that ensemble, you just can’t have an ounce of anything extra. Many women wouldn’t eat for days if they were wearing that.”⁶⁰ Translation: what right did Britney have, as

54. See “Britney Spears—Gimme More Live at MTV VMA’s 2007,” *YouTube* (28 January 2013), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=udDISRgyxMc>; and John Maynard, “In VMA Comeback, Britney Makes All the Wrong Moves,” *Washington Post* (10 September 2007), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/09/09/AR2007090902135.html>.

55. “Leave Britney Alone (Complete),” *YouTube* (11 August 2011), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WqSTXUjEtk>.

56. Sheila Marikar, “Why Was Britney So Bad?” *ABC News* (10 September 2007), <http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/story?id=3582432>.

57. Amy Erdman Farrell, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 121.

58. Jeff Leeds, “Spears’s Awards Fiasco Stirs Speculation about Her Future,” *New York Times* (13 September 2007), <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/13/arts/music/13brit.html>.

59. Associated Press, “Was Media Unfair to Call Britney Spears Fat?” *Today* (10 September 2007), <http://www.today.com/popculture/was-media-unfair-call-britney-spears-fat-wbna20713930>.

60. Quoted in Associated Press, “Was Media Unfair?” For writings on voice, body, and body image (via the case study of Karen Carpenter and anorexia nervosa), see George McKay, “Skinny Blues: Karen Carpenter, Anorexia Nervosa and Popular Music,” *Popular Music* 37 (2018): 1–21; Freya Jarman-Ivens, *Queer Voices: Technologies, Vocalities*,

someone who was no longer pencil-thin (and, moreover, as a new mother of two)—what right did she have to wear anything other than a head-to-toe potato sack? Did she have no shame?

In societal narratives of respectable womanhood, a subtle yet crucial quirk distinguishes fat-shaming from slut-shaming. Fat-centered narratives often work as boomerangs, circling between misfortune and redemption based on weight fluctuations. “Just as fatness narrates [Spears’s] downfall, a newly thin body is what later becomes the motif for her comeback,” notes Farrell.⁶¹ A kindred and contemporaneous example was Monica Lewinsky, who, as a guest star in the 1999 ad for the American weight loss program Jenny Craig, exemplified “a ‘dieting narrative’ that moves the primitive, impulsive fat woman into a new status of civilized and controlled.”⁶² Condemnation of Lewinsky and Bill Clinton relied not just on reports of the couple’s “kinky sex,” but also on a “mutual fatness [that] marked them as already culpable [. . .] [as] two people who were impulsive, whose bodily cravings were out of control.”⁶³ But whereas pounds may be visibly and measurably shed, it’s harder to shed a reputation of lasciviousness. In the public eye, as Wendy Chun and Sarah Friedland declare, the “slut is the woman who is repeatedly and habitually open and opened. [. . .] The slut ‘asks for it’—that is, she brings penetration and exposure upon herself through her openness and thus constant vulnerability.”⁶⁴ Merciless models of sexism operate under forced corollaries of *once a slut, always a slut*. Like white trashiness, sluttiness sticks. Its unretractability is buoyed by misconstruals of virginity (and the presumed irrevocability of its loss) and compounded by misunderstandings of affirmative sexual consent (a single *yes* meaning *yes, definitely and indefinitely*).⁶⁵ In the internet era, the permanence of one’s slut branding is anchored by the quasi-permanence of naked pictures and their weaponized form, revenge porn. An implicit tag of slut-shaming is “Once It’s There, It’s There to Stay” because, as Chun and Friedland explain, “once you’ve exposed yourself as a slut—as a consenting spectacle, as shameless—you deserve no protection, no privacy. [. . .] [C]onsent once, circulate forever.”⁶⁶ Once someone gives themselves up to the public eye, in other words, they—and their photographic documentation—will stay fair game for tabloids and trolls. (Tellingly, “giving it up,” with its deflowering and sub-dom connotations, is the paparazzi’s code phrase for celebrities who are “good sports” and who cop to being “attention whores.”)

and the Musical Flaw (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 59–94; and Mitchell Morris, *The Persistence of Sentiment: Display and Feeling in Popular Music of the 1970s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 118–42.

61. Farrell, *Fat Shame*, 122.

62. Farrell, *Fat Shame*, 122.

63. Farrell, *Fat Shame*, 122. Critiquing the media’s scrutiny of Britney Spears’s physical and mental fitness, Brenda Weber writes: “[Spears’s] 2007 weight gain of between 20 and 40 pounds signaled in media accounts not just a private life and a career out of control, but a mind unhinged. [. . .] The thin body is always one step closer to a Western ideal of empowered rational individualism and increasing upward class mobility, whereas the heavy body is made all the more abject through a madness brought on by a bodily disorder that culminates in an alienation from the self and a perpetual residency in the class codes of ‘poor white trash’” (“Stark Raving Fat: Celebrity, Cellulite, and the Sliding Scale of Sanity,” *Feminism & Psychology* 22 [2012]: 346).

64. Chun and Friedland, “Habits of Leaking,” 10.

65. Laura M. Carpenter, *Virginity Lost: An Intimate Portrait of First Sexual Experiences* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 57–61.

66. Chun and Friedland, “Habits of Leaking,” 3.

No-going-back principles of sluttiness have clung to Britney Spears ever since the release of the music video for her 1998 debut mega-single, “(Hit Me) Baby One More Time,” in which she personified a sexy Catholic schoolgirl. Writers frequently point to this song as a millennial pop touchstone. Diane Pecknold remarks that if American pop’s “new teen girl sound of the 2000s and 2010s [. . .] can be imagined as having an inaugural moment, it would surely be in the opening ‘Oh baby, baby’ of Britney Spears’s 1998 hit ‘. . . Baby One More Time’” and its “distinctive vocal fry.”⁶⁷ Ann Powers, invoking alien comparisons, likewise observes how Spears burst from a chrysalid in this “catchy electro-pop come-on” expertly produced by Swedish songwriter Max Martin: “With her gorgeous flesh and tiny voice—its metallic tone perfectly suited for manipulation—Spears presented from the beginning as a hybrid: half shopping mall American, half creature from another planet. Her body, voice, and projected emotions were youthful but washed clean of any adolescent awkwardness.”⁶⁸ With the phrase “washed clean of any adolescent awkwardness,” Powers is referring to the music video’s meticulous production values. Every angle, frame, cut, costume change, vocal inflection, and audiovisual sync is rigorously accounted for, resulting in a sanitized and glossy spectacle. But might there be something awkward—even disturbing—about such presentational Purell? Could the “clean” surface of “. . . Baby One More Time” be as unnerving as, say, the bright, white, hyper-sterile, impossibly spotless rooms featured in numerous science fiction thrillers? (If you’re in an alien or zombie movie, and you find yourself in such a room, chances are something terrible is about to go down.) Sometimes, the most polished surfaces send the most muddled signals.

Case in point: a few months after the release of the music video for “. . . Baby One More Time,” Spears graced the cover of *Rolling Stone* wearing an open blouse, polka-dot panties, and a bra. Her left hand gripped a pink phone, and her right hand clutched a plush doll of Tinky Winky the Teletubby. Like the choreography and iconography of “. . . Baby One More Time,” this cover shoot was fastidiously styled (airbrushed and “washed clean,” to use Powers’s words). Yet the “cleanliness” of the photo shoot couldn’t mask the mixed signs therein: the purple plushie toy said *girl*, the pink phone said *teenager*, the shiny black bra and cleavage said *woman*, and the multi-item caption—“Inside the Heart, Mind, & Bedroom of a Teen Dream”—authorized voyeuristic entry into this celebrity’s inner life and dwelling. The feature story itself began in a way that made good on the cover’s tease: “Britney Spears extends a honeyed thigh across the length of the sofa, keeping one foot on the floor as she does so. [. . .] The BABY PHAT logo of Spears’ pink T-shirt is distended by her ample chest, and her silky white shorts—with dark blue piping—cling snugly to her hips.”⁶⁹ To be clear, Teen Dreams aren’t quite kids anymore. Like other adolescent stars,

67. Diane Pecknold, “‘These Stupid Little Sounds in Her Voice’: Valuing and Vilifying the New Girl Voice,” in *Voicing Girlhood in Popular Music: Performance, Authority, Authenticity*, ed. Jacqueline Warwick and Allison Adrian (New York: Routledge, 2016), 84.

68. Ann Powers, *Good Booty: Love and Sex, Black & White, Body and Soul in American Music* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017), 302.

69. Steven Daly, “Britney Spears, Teen Queen: Rolling Stone’s 1999 Cover Story,” *Rolling Stone* (15 April 1999; published online 29 March 2011), <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/britney-spears-teen-queen-rolling-stones-1999-cover-story-20110329>.

Britney Spears “performed awakening” on the world stage, surprising and even scandalizing people with her displays of sexuality and skin.⁷⁰ The music video for “. . . Baby One More Time” literalizes awakening by opening with a daydreaming Spears, who, upon the salvational *ding!* of the 3 p.m. school bell, snaps out of her stupor and hurries into the hallway where she leads a group dance number replete with gyrations, shimmies, back flips, and high kicks. She exhibits coming of age by dramatically coming *to life*, transforming from a languid, silent pupil into a hyperenergetic, vocal ringleader (fig. 4).

Prior to the meteoric debut of “. . . Baby One More Time” and the alluring magazine shoots, a pre-teen Britney Spears had sung in Baptist church choirs, participated in pageants, and frolicked in the G-rated *New Mickey Mouse Club*. Once a teenage Spears became a household name, however, she arrived seemingly at a point of no return, cementing into a precocious sex icon and eventually a presumed slut. Diane Sawyer, in a 2003 interview with Spears, held up the singer’s photo shoots in *Esquire* and *Rolling Stone*, and asked incredulously: “What happened to your clothes? What’s this about? No kidding. What is it about?”⁷¹ Musicologist Melanie Lowe, who conducted focus groups with adolescent girls, describes how she found herself “overwhelmed” by these girls’ intense reactions to the mere mention of Britney Spears, whom they described as “slutty,” “trashy,” and “slore [portmanteau of slut plus whore] slore slore slore slore slore whore!”⁷² In a 2006 pull-no-punches invective against Spears and Lindsay Lohan, Bette Midler called these millennial celebrities “wild and woolly sluts.”⁷³ And in 2015, Naomi Wolf, author of the bestseller *The Beauty Myth*, penned a *Guardian* op-ed imploring “young women” to “give up vocal fry” while naming Britney Spears as a famous fryer; this trendy speech mannerism, to the ears of Wolf, “sound[s] like ducks quacking” and forfeits a woman’s authority.⁷⁴ (The animal simile is condescending enough, but Wolf makes it clearer, with a bonus

70. Powers, *Good Booty*, xxi. Ann Powers uses the phrase “perform[ing] awakening” to describe Miley Cyrus’s provocative (and, according to many critics, shockingly sexual) performance with Robin Thicke at the 2013 MTV Video Music Awards. Concerning this arch-twerker, Powers writes: “Reaching sexual maturity at a time when pop’s culture of pleasure and sensual awareness had never been more frankly explicit, Cyrus did the sensible thing. She performed awakening, the same way she’d performed awkward adolescence for years on prime time” (xxi). Emily White has noted the curiousness of the phrase “sexual awakening,” almost “as if before the moment of adolescence kids were asleep but now they live in a psychological morning” (*Fast Girls: Teenage Tribes and the Myth of the Slut* [New York: Scribner, 2002], 24)—that is, as if kids are not even humanly cognizant until puberty jolts them into vigilance and social participation. On girl groups and coming-of-age rituals (social, musical, performative), see Jacqueline Warwick, *Girl Groups, Girl Culture: Popular Music and Identity in the 1960s* (New York: Routledge, 2007). See also Jacqueline Warwick and Allison Adrian, “Introduction,” in *Voicing Girlhood in Popular Music: Performance, Authority, Authenticity*, ed. Jacqueline Warwick and Allison Adrian (New York: Routledge, 2016), 1–11; and Alexandra Apolloni, “The Lollipop Girl’s Voice: Respectability, Migration, and Millie Small’s ‘My Boy Lollipop,’” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 28 (2016): 460–73.

71. “Britney Spears ‘Primetime Interview with Diane Sawyer (Part 1)’ HD,” *YouTube* (4 September 2013), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qROlBPwDGo>.

72. Lowe, “Colliding Feminisms,” 137, 124.

73. Sheila Marikar and Jonann Brady, “Bette Calls Britney a Wild and Woolly Slut,” *ABC News* (8 December 2006), <http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/story?id=2707901&page=1>.

74. Naomi Wolf, “Young Women, Give Up the Vocal Fry and Reclaim Your Strong Female Voice,” *The Guardian* (24 July 2015), <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jul/24/vocal-fry-strong-female-voice>. Critics both laud and lament Spears as an archetypal fryer. One person has gone so far as to claim that Spears “invented” vocal fry with her raspy moans and rattles in “Baby One More Time” (“Britney Inventions,” *Tumblr* [24 October 2013], <http://britneyinventions.tumblr.com/post/64960448604/vocal-fry-is-a-singing-technique-first-developed>), while



FIGURE 4. Spears in “Baby One More Time.” Screen captures by author.

unsolicited comparison, that she also associates vocal fry with a certain looseness or wantonness: “Vocal fry’ is that guttural growl at the back of the throat, *as a Valley Girl might sound if she had been shouting herself hoarse at a rave all night.*”⁷⁵ Myriad insults lobbed at Spears and Spears-alikes . . . and the above comments are just the ones made by female (and self-identified feminist) critics! Plainly, slut-shaming of Spears hasn’t come solely from men and anonymous internet trolls. It has been an equal-opportunity sport, admitting participants of all genders and ages.

If fat-shaming and slut-shaming narratives have respectively depicted Spears as redeemable (via weight loss) and incorrigible (as a loose woman), the case of voice-shaming has fallen somewhere in between. From a reviewer’s excoriation of her “pathetically lip-synched” 2007 performance at the VMAs to YouTubers’ jeers at the “Alien” leak, the critical history of Britney Spears has largely played out as a history of listeners doubting her vocal talents.⁷⁶ But a speculative *pre*history is where greater intrigue lies: fans insist that Spears, far from being an essentially bad singer, is a victim of having her voice *taken* from her. Sitting in fans’ crosshairs are industry forces, in particular Jive Records, the American label that signed the star from 1997 through 2011. Some say Jive “ruined” Spears’s voice by forcing her to sing persistently in a salacious yet insalubrious

others concede how, at the very least, this debut single employed vocal fry “anachronistically” (Thom Dunn, “What Is ‘Vocal Fry,’ and Why Doesn’t Anyone Care When Men Talk Like That?” *Upworthy* [28 July 2015], <http://www.upworthy.com/what-is-vocal-fry-and-why-doesnt-anyone-care-when-men-talk-like-that>) and “quite a long time before the term became popularised” (Alex Matsuo, “10 Most Irritating Female Celebrity Voices,” *The Richest* [13 March 2015], <http://www.therichest.com/expensive-lifestyle/entertainment/10-most-irritating-celebrity-vocal-fry-offenders>).

75. Wolf, “Young Women.” A few days after Wolf published her piece, the *Guardian* printed a response by historian Erin Riley, who argued that vocal fry is just an excuse that gives people yet another reason not to listen to women. “Before vocal fry, there were complaints about overuse of the word ‘like.’ Before that, there was upspeak,” Riley points out. “But history shows once vocal fry is no longer the excuse, there’ll be another. It is the listeners, not the speakers, who are the problem” (“Naomi Wolf Misses the Point about ‘Vocal Fry.’ It’s Just an Excuse Not to Listen to Women,” *The Guardian* [27 July 2015], <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jul/28/naomi-wolf-misses-the-point-about-vocal-fry-its-just-an-excuse-not-to-listen-to-women>).

76. “Britney a Bust,” *New York Post* (10 September 2007), <http://nypost.com/2007/09/10/britney-a-bust>.

“baby voice” with vocal fry.⁷⁷ Such claims are corroborated by compilations on YouTube offering glimpses into the vocal chops of Spears in her youth. In a fan-made montage called “The Hidden Potential of Britney Spears,” we see the singer performing as a finalist on *Star Search* in 1992, crooning Christmas carols at a Miss New Orleans pageant in 1996, and singing capably on multiple other occasions.⁷⁸ By pointing to these examples, and by pointing at Jive as a corporate archvillain that drained the light out of a starlet’s budding voice, fans have continuously attempted to absolve Spears’s present-day vocal infelicities.

In the comment threads for videos such as “The Hidden Potential of Britney Spears,” “Britney Spears (REAL VOICE),” or “BRITNEY SPEARS HAS LOST HER VOICE FOREVER! (PROOF),” laments about Spears losing her voice to Jive resonate with a slew of familiar narratives about the kleptovocal vices of music industries past and present. Wistful remarks about Spears’s once-untainted and now-irretrievable voice bring to mind the way musicians sometimes pine for the “lost voice” of castrati and rue, notwithstanding the ethics of castration, the dearth of audio recordings by these lyric “angels.”⁷⁹ Or take the example of opera singer Maria Callas, who, by her 40s, had begun exhibiting symptoms of vocal damage. Despite critics’ harsh reviews, as musicologist Laurie Stras points out, “[Callas’s] vocal deterioration (in pathological terms) was seen by her loyal fans as an inevitable outcome of physical self-abuse brought on by the pressures of stardom,” and her “public persona as tragic heroine allowed, and continues to allow, her audience to connect a personal history with an otherwise indeterminate sound of damage.”⁸⁰ In literary narratives, vocal damage plus dreams of fame have served up deadly cocktails for women who virtually sing themselves into the grave, whether it’s the doomed Antonia in Jacques Offenbach’s 1881 opera *Les Contes d’Hoffmann* or the consumptive, coughing Satine in Baz Luhrmann’s 2001 film musical *Moulin Rouge!* Although one could reason that it’s better for a chanteuse to have sung and perished than never to have sung at all—better to vocally “[rebel] against a domestic/paternal order that would silence her,” as Heather Hadlock surmises regarding Offenbach’s Antonia—the double bind of silence-or-singing-equals-death is a false choice, a rock and a hard place deceptively upsold as open pasture.⁸¹

Fans of Britney Spears, by blaming Jive and its theft of the star’s voice, are essentially running a two-pronged defense. First, they could say that Spears has an authentic and

77. Mia Renee, “The Curious Case of Britney Spears’ ‘Baby Voice,’” *Miarenecole.com* (2016), <http://miarenecole.com/2016/10/11/the-curious-case-of-britney-spears-baby-voice>; and James Dinh, “The Curious Case of Britney Spears’s Voice: Where Did It Go?” *She Knows* (10 July 2014), <http://www.sheknows.com/entertainment/articles/1043415/the-curious-case-of-britney-spears-voice-where-did-it-go>.

78. “The Hidden Potential of Britney Spears,” *YouTube* (3 March 2018), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v8xdYEO4ukw>.

79. Patrick Barbier, *The World of the Castrati: The History of an Extraordinary Operatic Phenomenon* (London: Souvenir Press, 1996), 242; and J.S. Jenkins, “The Lost Voice: A History of the Castrato,” *Journal of Pediatric Endocrinology and Metabolism* 13 (2000): 1503–8.

80. Laurie Stras, “The Organ of the Soul: Voice, Damage, and Affect,” in *Sounding Off: Theorizing Disability in Music*, ed. Neil Lerner and Joseph Straus (New York: Routledge, 2006), 178.

81. Heather Hadlock, *Mad Loves: Women and Music in Offenbach’s Les Contes d’Hoffmann* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 13.

proficient voice hibernating beneath the thick layers of industry influence. Second, they could say that even if Spears can never recover her pre-Jive talent, her current voice is beautiful as it is, warts and all. Just as some art collectors appreciate, even favor, paintings with patina—the oxide coating that, as anthropologist Shannon Lee Dawdy puts it, conveys value via the “requisite crust and haze of time”—so fans cherish Spears’s summative patina, the layers of tabloid smear and the stubborn crust of performative habits accumulated over the years.⁸² Now let’s go further and imagine this patina as not solely metaphorical but also physiological: the oft-rumored scars lining Spears’s larynx, or the nodules and polyps along the vocal folds. In terms of laryngeal damage and the prospect of phonomicrosurgery, Spears sits in good company. Tales of mixed success (Adele) and outright horror stories (Julie Andrews) abound.⁸³ Especially for female singers, a common and noticeable symptom of throat impairment is the onset constriction of range. Some divas—albeit, not Spears—are famous for hitting high notes. Yet just as they are lauded for successfully soaring to the peaks of their tessitura, these women may be denounced with equal zeal if or when they fall short. Virtuosos such as Idina Menzel, Demi Lovato, Christina Aguilera, and Mariah Carey have been tsk-ed and shamed for “whiffing” climactic notes as well as for preventatively transposing melodies into lower registers.⁸⁴ But what this kneejerk scolding perpetually overlooks is that any accrued limitations in vocal register might owe to how these singers, as literally as possible, *give their voices* to listeners over the course of their careers—sometimes belting out high notes so loudly, exhaustively, and detrimentally that the worn-and-torn throat is left with hardly any more voice to give.

Big Bad music industries, insatiable fans, and a host of external forces aren’t the only things that can crack a pop star’s voice. For pubescent and adolescent girls, developmental rites of passage come with a slew of internal pressures and natural changes that stand to make, unmake, and remake the voice. Diane Pecknold, a scholar of gender and pop music, and Barbara DeMaio, a professional soprano and voice teacher, respectively characterize these bodily changes:

In the teen girl voice, the physical failures of closure and transition associated with the mutations of puberty—the rasps, breaks, breathiness, straining, and other failures to connect or cohere—sonically project an infinite state of restless becoming whose endpoint is never determined. [. . .] This thoroughgoing transformation produces a litany of control problems: insecure pitch, noticeable register breaks, breathiness or huskiness, temporary range limitations, voice cracking, and hoarseness.⁸⁵

82. Shannon Lee Dawdy, *Patina: A Profane Archaeology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 13.

83. See Andrea Mandell, “Adele Has ‘Damaged’ Vocal Cords, Cancels Final Shows,” *USA Today* (30 June 2017), <http://www.usatoday.com/story/life/music/2017/06/30/adele-has-damaged-vocal-cords-cancels-final-shows/103334582>; and Justin Wm Moyer, “How Julie Andrews’s Voice Was Stolen by a Medical Disaster,” *Washington Post* (19 March 2015), http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/03/19/how-julie-andrews-voice-was-stolen-by-a-medical-disaster/?utm_term=.672b4581a9f1.

84. Jon Caramanica, “Review: Mariah Carey and Her Can’t-Look-Away Debut in Las Vegas,” *New York Times* (7 May 2015), <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/08/arts/music/review-mariah-carey-and-her-cant-look-away-debut-in-las-vegas.html>.

85. Pecknold, “These Stupid Little Sounds,” 78, 79.

As young women grow into puberty and beyond there are many changes in the larynx; children are not miniature adults. Along with the development of the lamina propria there is a hardening of the arytenoid cartilages, mentioned earlier; while the arytenoids are hardening, the vocal folds cannot close cleanly, causing the breathy sound common in young girls due to the mutational chink (so-called because it is a product of the voice as it mutates during puberty) or gap in the vocal folds that can extend into adulthood. The thyroid-arytenoid muscle strengthens and lengthens as it develops, favoring the development of a strong, healthy chest voice. At the same time, the crico-thyroid muscle also develops, extending the “head voice.”⁸⁶

Pecknold’s and DeMaio’s nuanced descriptions make a girl’s road to vocal maturity sound like a sonic minefield. For girls, as Laurie Stras observes, “what is actually [vocal] development can sound like aberration. [. . .] These voices *by their nature* were liable to sound out of control, at least occasionally.”⁸⁷ And it’s not just girls’ voices that can sound aberrant; discourses *about* these voices, by virtue of their inherent complexity and specialized vocabulary, mirror the mystique at play. Words such as “lamina propria,” “thyroid-arytenoid,” “crico-thyroid,” and “mutational chink”—though familiar to voice teachers, students, and physicians—may sound like the stuff of sci-fi, delineating young women-in-training as veritable little aliens. (I was uninformed about this terminology until a knowledgeable colleague guided me toward pertinent literature.)

Along with the pressures exerted by Jive, then, morphological idiosyncrasies shaped, skewed, and challenged the vocal development of a young Britney Spears. It’s hard to say how this singer would have fared had she received alternate forms of training and different industry mandates. But for the record, Spears herself has rarely shown any delusions about bodily or vocal perfection. After her panned performance at the 2006 VMAs, Spears called herself a “fat pig” while crying backstage.⁸⁸ And in their 2003 ABC interview, when Diane Sawyer asked Spears if she likes her own voice, the singer looked stunned.

“Do I *like* my voice?” Spears echoed, briefly pausing as if taken aback by the forthright and rudimentary question. “Um, I’ll be completely honest. I think my voice is . . . okay? I like the feeling that I get when I sing. It’s not so much my voice. But I would love to have a voice like Christina [Aguilera’s] [or] like Whitney [Houston’s].”⁸⁹ For all of the media’s chronic speculations about her ditziness and mental instability, Spears hasn’t needed others to tell her she’s not the best singer or the thinnest performer or the most saintly celebrity in the world. Not that evidence of self-awareness has ever stopped people from explaining all things Britney Spears to Britney Spears.

86. Barbara Fox DeMaio, “Girls and Puberty: The Voice, It Is a-Changin’: A Discussion of Pedagogical Methods for the Training of the Voice through Puberty,” in *Voicing Girlhood in Popular Music: Performance, Authority, Authenticity*, ed. Jacqueline Warwick and Allison Adrian (New York: Routledge, 2016), 104.

87. Laurie Stras, “Voice of the Beehive: Vocal Technique at the Turn of the 1960s,” in *She’s So Fine: Reflections on Whiteness, Femininity, Adolescence and Class in 1960s Music*, ed. Laurie Stras (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 36, emphasis in original.

88. Alice Vincent, “A Decade Later: How Britney Moved on from Her Year of Hell,” *The Telegraph* (16 February 2017), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/music/artists/miming-through-the-heartbreak-the-story-behind-britney-spears-t>.

89. “Britney Spears ‘Primetime Interview.’”

Leave Britney alone? Not a chance.

FAKE NEWS (VOICE EDITION)

When she started singing that ageless song ["Amazing Grace"] with such clarity and beauty, she sounded astonishing, like a young Aretha Franklin, soulful and pure. In my mind that's what her "real" voice sounds like, a wholesome, powerful sound, not like the breathy, super-produced pop voice given to her by record producers.

—LYNNE SPEARS⁹⁰

It gets more complicated.

In the comment threads for the various videos (copies, reposts, mirror links) of "Alien NO AUTOTUNE," Spears's diehard defenders have clashed with haters. Wave after wave of insults, shaming, and name calling. Equally prevalent in the comments, however, is a debate that has little to do with whether the singing is good or bad, in tune or not. It's a debate about whether the sounds of Spears's voice in the leaked video—and, by extension, the leak itself—are even *real*. Several viewers came to insist that the voice was manipulated to sound out of tune.

you can clearly hear the autotune lowering the notes and making them flat. i cant belive
people are this stupid⁹¹
this is not real this is fake promise i know britnye does not sing like that⁹²
This has obviously been edited by someone too make her voice sound worse⁹³

If a voice these days can easily be Auto-Tuned into sounding on-pitch, then, as these commenters argue, a voice can be detuned and faked into sounding off-pitch. Some people's superlative truth claims plunged straight into *ad hominem*s. Others opted to focus instead on technicalities. One commenter invited listeners to notice how pitches "change in every part" and that "some of the notes were just forced (by means of editing) to make [Spears's] voice off key."⁹⁴ Or my favorite remark, which siphoned authority from music theory: "The person who made [the video] put auto tune on the vocals but in the wrong key which causes it to sound like this. If you understand music theory and scales you will understand."⁹⁵ But even if (de)tuning were to leave audible tells—an infinitesimal buzz, a timbral twang—these tells have remained indeterminate enough to foreclose consensus. I've included screen grabs from a few threads (fig. 5). Notice the common semantic ploy in the otherwise varied claims of veracity or fakery: the amplification of statements by "clearly," "obviously," "so," "promise," and other intensifiers, which overstated epistemic confidence in the face of underwhelming evidence one way or the other. The promissory

90. Lynne Spears, *Through the Storm: A Real Story of Fame and Family in a Tabloid World* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 91.

91. iLike Pepsi, comment on "Britney Spears—Alien (No AutoTune)."

92. Divas Addixt, comment on "Britney Spears—Alien (No AutoTune)."

93. Graham Simmons, comment on "Britney Spears—Alien (No AutoTune)."

94. Pylon21 (fig. 5).

95. Let's Mash It Up! (fig. 5).

ping-ponging of *fake news! 100% real! swear it's false! I PROMISE it's real!* messily scattered the burden of proof across party lines. And although a few commenters saw a silver bullet in producer William Orbit's statement about the leak simply being Spears's warmup, not everyone was convinced. For all we know, fans argued, the "admission" by Orbit doesn't discount the possibility that he spoke hastily for the sake of putting out a PR fire; maybe Orbit hadn't heard the leak firsthand at all. In sum, the alleged leak of "Alien" led some listeners to attack Spears as a faker and a meritless singer, whereas others defended Spears by saying the leak itself was fake and had no merit. Together, people knew they probably would never ascertain the absolute truth, yet they participated in the back-and-forths anyway. No one saw reason to concede.⁹⁶

In 2017, I presented excerpts of this Spears paper at a few places. During these opportunities, I asked audience members to experiment with relistening to both the lyrics and the tuning of the "Alien" leak. I wondered aloud whether we could shift the onus of aesthetic appreciation from Spears's flawed, purportedly deceptive voice to our own fallible, deceivable ears. Here are the song's opening lyrics.

*There was a time I was one of a kind,
lost in the world out of me, myself, and I—
was lonely then
like an alien.
I tried but I never figured it out
why I always felt like a stranger in a crowd,
but that was then,
like an alien.
But the stars in the sky look like home; take me home.
And the light in your eyes lets me know I'm not alone.
Not alone, not alone, not alone,
not alone, not alone, not alone,
not alone, not alone, not alone,
not alone, not alone, not alone.*

On the surface, the lyrics look straightforward. The protagonist, presumably Spears or her stage persona, has found a companion who relieves her loneliness. But what if we can't trust our first reading and listening of the song? As Spears sings about alienation, each refrain contains twelve iterations of "not alone" plus one lead-in. Although the words overtly celebrate companionship—"the light in your eyes lets me know I'm not alone"—the sheer repetitiveness of "not alone" belies its denotations. For why would someone need to chant "not alone" a whopping total of fifty-one times throughout the song, if not to reassure herself or to persuade others of her not-aloneness? The way we might hear it, each successive "not alone" recants its own assertion, unraveling the

96. In a review of Spears's 2016 album *Glory*, Lindsay Zoladz points to a silver lining in this star's lack of a "traditionally virtuosic" voice, which has, throughout her career, provided "oddly, a stylistic boon: she was free to stretch it out like taffy, pitch it down to a low, alien moan, or smash it into a million crystalline pieces" ("Leaving Britney Alone," *The Ringer* [30 August 2016], <http://theringer.com/britney-spears-glory-album-vm-as-42701dddac4c#.7g4wj6or>).

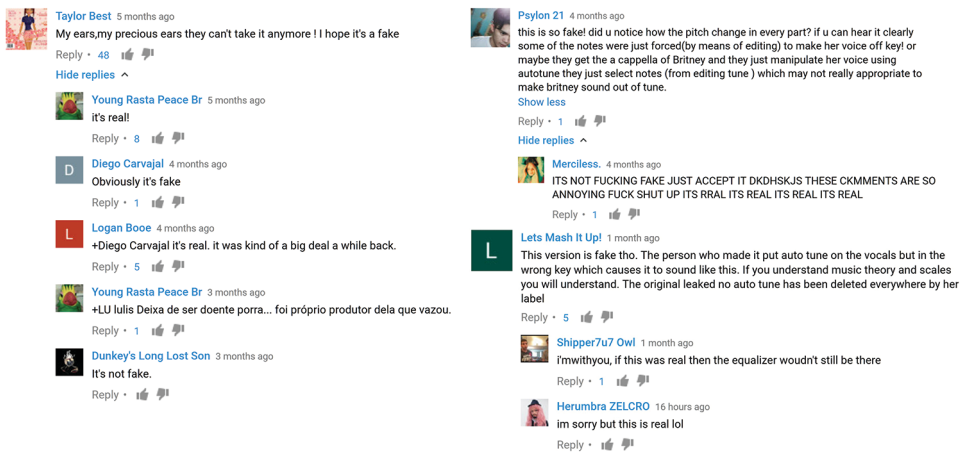


FIGURE 5. Viewers' comments under the YouTube videos of the "Alien" leak.

speech act from within. Yet only by taking into account the multiple instances of "not alone"—only by patiently listening in full, and relistening over time—would we access this hermeneutic alternative. With diametric interpretations resounding, maybe the truth sits in a liminal space, somewhere between the desperate denials of aloneness and the naivety of a newfound paramour as panacea.

If the lyrics of "Alien" can be read against their own grain, then Spears's voice (its tone, tuning, timbre) has the potential to be creatively reheard in kind. In my presentations, I typically played three versions of "Alien" to facilitate a listening exercise: first, the official album version; second, the alleged leaked version; and lastly, a synchronized playback of the first version superimposed over the second. Superimposing the two tracks created audible frictions between the in-tune voice and the out-of-tune voice, with a result vaguely reminiscent of the "thick" aesthetics achieved by vocal layering techniques in hip hop.⁹⁷ Although my experiment in superimposition was nowhere near as sophisticated or laborious as professionals' sound-engineering wizardry, I wanted my combination of Spears's two-voicedness to drive home a principle upheld by certain philosophies of compassionate justice: that we are all probably more than the sum of the best and the worst we've ever sounded, musically and otherwise.⁹⁸ Time and again, no doubt, Spears has been broken into *her* best and worst pieces—sonically and graphically, by the clean croppings of Auto-Tune versus embarrassingly isolated vocals, by the air-brushed magazine covers versus the most unflattering candid photos. We, the public, have always had choices in terms of what to do with these pieces. Smelt them into ammunition? Craft them into art anew? Leak them? Leave them alone?

97. Adam Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 54–55, 73–75.

98. See William Cheng, *Just Vibrations: The Purpose of Sounding Good* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 10–11; and Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2014), 17–18.

During my presentations, I found it fascinating to watch the facial expressions and body language of my audience members, especially when I played for them the leaked version of “Alien.” As people listened to Spears falling conspicuously flat on sustained words such as “sky” and “home” in the first refrain, some faces would contort into winces, smiles, or suppressed laughter; heads would shake; torsos would squirm in the chairs. What is it, though, about a few flat pitches that can animate listeners’ bodies into living GIFs? Are these behaviors performative? Fake? Conditioned? Granted, in formal music education, we’re usually taught to think of performative flaws as impurities, whether it’s coming up short when singing a high note, pinching an adjacent key on the piano, or croaking a low A-flat on a tenor saxophone. A visual score, an oral template, or a teacher’s demo lays out an aspirational and clean rendition, and for purposes of musical reproduction, all obvious errors are toxins, the grime that leaks into an otherwise idealized and sanitary system. But in musical performances, not least those with improvisatory traditions, is there nonetheless something toxic about hygienic perfectionism and its demands on bodily discipline? Insofar as disciplined musical ability is something that builds up *in your system*—your muscles, nerves, circuitry, calloused skin, vocal folds—we can’t claim it’s normal or natural for a voice to sound always in tune, or for a thumb to strike every ivory dead center. Discipline makes us capable of amazing feats. But discipline is also bound to Foucauldian control and its warnings of consequent punishment.⁹⁹ Stated differently: are pitch norms in (tonal) music any more or less toxic than, say, gender norms, or able-bodied norms, or the racialized norms of respectability politics? Any more or less political? Certainly for some musicians, it can be second nature to obsess over the worst few seconds of a performance, perhaps just a single fudged note or a forgotten lyric, despite smooth sailing everywhere else. All it takes is one delicious leak to bring would-be shamers out of the woodwork.

In terms of collective fallibility, though, leaks are great equalizers. Everything and everyone is leakable, physically and metaphorically, corporeally and informationally. No one should feel immune to the surveillance of Big Brother, the blaze of revenge porn, the blackmail of ransomware, and the plethora of phishing ploys that, like antibiotic-resistant bacteria, engage in arms races with your latest version of antivirus software. No one has inalienable rights to privacy, and no one is exempt from the alienation that breaches of privacy can precipitate. To this point, the chant in Spears’s “Alien” rings true: the singer is correct when she professes to be “not alone, not alone, not alone,” seeing as how her susceptibility to leak is a key way in which the stars *are* just like us. Although people take special notice when a leak pertains to a celebrity, we have to remember that leaks can *make* someone a celebrity (think of Kim Kardashian and Ray J). With today’s prevalence of hacking technologies, a leak could happen to you, even if it sounds like the sort of thing that only happens to other people (for we are all other people’s other people). An anonymous source could dump the entirety of your digital existence onto

99. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House, 1975); see also Katherine Bergeron and Philip V. Bohlman, eds., *Disciplining Music: Musicology and Its Canons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

the internet—bare-skinned selfies, NSFW web history, medical records, dirty laundry, skeletons in the closet—and open you up to body-shaming, sex-shaming, voice-shaming, humiliation, hate mail, and even the threat of physical violence.

Say *data leak* or *data dump* enough times, and these words start summoning images of the natural yet embarrassing leaks and dumps of the human body. Corporeal discharges and scatology are grossly appropriate for conceptualizing privacy's discontents.¹⁰⁰ We know that everyone poops and that everyone has crap to manage. But people learn, internalize, and project abjection. For though we all have actual shit inside us, we sometimes shit on others when they don't seem to have their shit together (disarray), when they lose their shit in public (outburst), when their shit hits the fan (crisis), or when they shit their pants (prompting disgust).¹⁰¹ Or the urinary equivalent: during a 2005 performance in San Diego, Black Eyed Peas singer Fergie visibly wet her shorts, a "most unattractive moment" (in her own words) that people haven't let her live down.¹⁰² Indeed, in February 2018, the internet's tsunami of shaming directed at Fergie's "sexy sendup" of the "Star-Spangled Banner" led some listeners to bring up the pee incident; her sultry rendition of the national anthem was so shamelessly "out there"—to wit, leaking outside the boundaries of respectable taste—that commenters seized on the opportunity to reminisce about the literal leaks of her past.¹⁰³ Yet aren't bodily emissions, ejections, and confessions the things that make us commonly human as well as humanly common? Instead of flinging leaks and shit in people's faces, can we help others save face? Can we

100. At the 2014 Grammy Awards, Lorde performed her chart-topper "Royals" (which won the night's Song of the Year) and, alongside the down-tempo sultry vocals, broke out some "weird dance moves" that reportedly "freak[ed] people out" (Justin Massoud, "Lorde Breaks Out Some Weird Dance Moves for 'Royals' at 2014 Grammys," *K945* [26 January 2014], <http://k945.com/lorde-weird-dance-moves-royals-2014-grammys-video>; and Tanya Chen, "Lorde's Grammy Performance Proved Her Dancing Continues to Freak People Out," *Buzzfeed* [26 January 2014], <http://www.buzzfeed.com/tanyachen/lordes-grammy-performance-proved-her-dancing-continues-to-freak-people-out>). Within hours, someone uploaded a video titled "LORDE WITH-OUT AUTOTUNE - Royals - Grammys 2014," *YouTube* (26 January 2014), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7uzRoZoZPJU>. But it wasn't a *gotcha!* clip of isolated vocals; rather, it was an over-the-top satire that, as Diane Pecknold describes, "replaced Lorde's vocals with a track of unintelligible growls, choking gasps, throat clearing, and even farts" ("These Stupid Little Sounds," 92). In this conspicuously fake leak, the insertion of farts is especially revealing. Besides their intended comedic effect, the scatological sounds played on viewers' anxieties over not knowing what to make of then-17-year-old Lorde's dancing, singing, girling body—a body-out-of-control whose choreographies defied easy legibility.

101. Cindy LaCom, who lives with multiple sclerosis, offers a personal, visceral account: "Shit is filthy, and it represents contagion in ways that many physical and cognitive disabilities do not. [...] But when people discover that I might shit my pants or pass gas through an open fistula on my buttocks as a consequence of my Crohn's, conversation stops cold and verbal constipation becomes the order of the day" ("Filthy Bodies, Porous Boundaries: The Politics of Shit in Disability Studies," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 27 [2007], <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/111/11>). See also Margrit Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism, and (Bio)ethics* [New York: Routledge, 1997], 13–61.

102. Kayla Caldwell, "'The Most Unattractive Moment of My Life!' Fergie Opens Up about the Now-Infamous Moment She Wet Herself Onstage," *Daily Mail* (13 November 2014), <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2834060/The-unattractive-moment-life-Fergie-opens-infamous-moment-wet-onstage.html>. Concerning the urination episode, Fergie explained that she and her fellow musicians were running late to the concert, such that she had been left with no time to visit the restroom before the show: "I'm running on and we jump and do 'Let's Get It Started,' and I get crazy and I jump and I run across the stage and my adrenaline was going and gosh" (Caldwell, "Most Unattractive Moment"). I thank Jacqueline Warwick for bringing this Fergie incident to my attention.

103. Chris William, "Fergie Sexes Up National Anthem at NBA All-Star Game and America Isn't Having It," *Variety* (18 February 2018), <http://variety.com/2018/music/news/fergie-nba-all-star-game-national-anthem-1202704177>.

better differentiate between consequential, generative, maybe game-changing leaks—say, those brought to light by Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowden, the silence breakers of #MeToo, and whistleblowers—and frivolous, faux-shocking smears? Instead of understanding leakability in terms of individual risk, how might we approach the issue with sights set on collective responsibility?

Before I attempt to answer these questions, a literary comparison from the nineteenth century bears mentioning. As I researched Britney Spears, my mind has repeatedly wandered to George du Maurier's *Trilby*. In this bestselling 1895 novel, a man named Svengali is a Jewish—and, some argue, anti-Semitically caricatured—hypnotist who manipulates the titular heroine Trilby, bidding her to sing her way to stardom.¹⁰⁴ Originally tone-deaf, Trilby becomes an excellent chanteuse under Svengali's Auto-Tune enchantment. At the novel's climax is a calamitous London performance during which Trilby, temporarily freed from Svengali's spell, reverts to singing out of tune. She is humiliated. One detail typically omitted in accounts of *Trilby*, however, is that du Maurier does give the heroine a kind of celestial voice during her mortifying nadir on the London stage. Facing a jeering audience in a proto-Apollo Theater, the singer doesn't have her own Chris Crocker to plead, "Leave Trilby alone!" . . . so she takes matters into her own hands.

[Trilby] had not got further than this [part of the performance] when the whole house was in an uproar—shouts from the gallery—shouts of laughter, hoots, hisses, catcalls, cock-crows. She stopped and glared like a brave lioness, and called out: "[W]hat have I done, I should like to know?" And in asking these questions the depth and splendor of her voice were so extraordinary—its tone so pathetically feminine, yet so full of hurt and indignant command, that the tumult was stifled for a moment. It was the voice of some being from another world—some insulted daughter of a race more puissant and nobler than ours; a voice that seemed as if it could never utter a false note. Then came a voice from the gods in answer: "Oh, ye're Henglish, har yer? Why don't yer sing as yer *hought* to sing—yer've got *voice* enough, any'ow! why don't yer sing in *tune*?" "Sing in *tune*!" cried Trilby. "I didn't want to sing at all—I only sang because I was asked to sing—that gentleman [Svengali] asked me—that French gentleman with the white waistcoat! I won't sing another note!"¹⁰⁵

According to historian Daniel Pick, Svengali is the ultimate "alien hypnotist," an embodiment of Victorian mass paranoia toward psychopathology and illusions of free will.¹⁰⁶ But in her shining and lucid moment on the London stage, Trilby is the one who channels the powerful "voice of some being from another world," even temporarily silencing the clamor. Facing hecklers and trolls, our heroine taps into a voice that is proudly alien in its unshameability. Stripped of an artificially beautified voice, she nevertheless finds *a* voice, which she promptly uses to say STFU! to her haters. Irrespective of Svengali's

104. Gayle Wald, "How Svengali Lost His Jewish Accent," *Sounding Out!* (26 September 2011), <http://soundstudiesblog.com/author/gaylewald/>.

105. George du Maurier, *Trilby* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1894), 378–79, emphasis in original.

106. Daniel Pick, *Svengali's Web: The Alien Enchanter in Modern Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 221.

magical pitch correction and conservatorship-like management, Trilby shows that she had a voice all along. It just didn't happen to be a people-pleasing, pitch-perfect *singing* voice.

In a 2008 memoir, Lynne Spears, mother of Britney Spears, accused a man named Osama "Sam" Lutfi of acting as her daughter's puppet master. Lynne explicitly called Lutfi "Svengali" in the book.¹⁰⁷ Yet trying to shame and blame a singular Svengalin-in-Chief within Spears's inner circle can be a disingenuous and hypocritical game. Is the archvillain Lutfi? Jive? Mother Lynne, author of a tell-all memoir? Father Jamie, conservator? Music critics? Paparazzi? *US Weekly*? Or us, the public? Celebrity, by definition, cannot exist without public celebration and complicity. People who attack or defend Spears for her scandals are joining an overall attention-granting chorus that sustains the diva's fame and infamy. So is it even possible, I have asked myself, to write an academic article about Spears without reproducing the media's scrutiny of her life, body, and voice? Doesn't the dialectical academese of what queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick called "paranoid reading"—here's a case for X, now here's a case against X—resemble the fickle syntax, as Spears sings in "Piece of Me," of *She's-Too-Big-Now-She's-Too-Thin*? Was the best thing I could've done just to leave Britney alone? As I prepared the PowerPoint slides for my oral presentations of this research, for example, I found myself instinctively and repeatedly Googling terms such as "Britney Spears + Weight Gain" to find tabloids' "then and now" images of the singer. On the one hand, I was scouring the internet in order to provide conference audiences with visual examples of fat-shaming. On the other hand, the search itself replicated the very problems I was seeking to combat and deconstruct. After all, Google terms are tracked, tallied, and archived, and so every user's search for mentions of Spears's size incrementally boosts the subject as a popular, auto-fillable keyword.¹⁰⁸ I left a trace. And there could be no take backs.

POSTSCRIPT—A LEAK-PROOF PLANET; OR, MAYBE THE LEAST WE CAN DO IS NOTHING

*First we made her into an object of desire,
then into an object of contempt.
Now we want to nominate her
as an object of compassion?
Are you sure you know what the hell we're doing? [. . .]
With one of my voices I shout, Jump, Jump, you little whore!
With another I turn down the lights and say,
Put on some clothes and go home, sweetheart.*

—HOAGLAND, "POOR BRITNEY SPEARS," END OF THE POEM¹⁰⁹

107. Spears, *Through the Storm*, 168.

108. On academic shame in the age of Google, see Benjamin Walton, "Quirk Shame," *Representations* 132 (2015): 121–29.

109. Hoagland, "Poor Britney Spears," emphasis in original.

Does Spears deserve compassion? I think so. Am I sure I know what the hell we're doing when it comes to enabling or rectifying cultures of dehumanizing shame and alienation? Definitely not.

Given the subject matter of leaks, I should have seen an obligatory postscript coming—because leaks and celebrities are the gifts that keep on giving, the never ending purveyors of scandal. Just when I thought I had satisfactorily said my piece about Britney Spears, a new alleged leak entered the news in summer 2017. This time, it featured Spears's non-Auto-Tuned vocals for the 2004 chart-topping jam "Toxic."¹¹⁰ But in contrast to the it's-so-bad uproar over the "Alien" leak, the "Toxic" leak spawned dominant narratives of how surprisingly *good* Spears sounded. Headlines read: "You Have to Listen to Britney Spears Singing 'Toxic' Without Auto-Tune: Mind. Blown" in the *Huffington Post*; "Britney Spears's 'Toxic' Sans Auto-Tune Will Blow Your Mind" in *InStyle Magazine*; and "Britney Spears: Raw Vocals for 'Toxic' LEAKED!" in *The Hollywood Gossip*.¹¹¹ Expressions of praise, delight, and exploding heads came fast. Naturally, skeptics weren't far behind. One doubter remarked that "Toxic without autotune [was] just Toxic being sung by an impersonator of Britney."¹¹² Other listeners went so far as to specify that parts of the so-called leaked version featured the voice of Cathy Dennis, who was one of the songwriters of "Toxic" and whose demo recording of the hit is available online for comparison.¹¹³ Skeptics of the skeptics, however, wouldn't hear of such theories, choosing instead to embrace the leak as a full-throated redemption of the "Alien" fiasco three years prior.

Leaks involving Britney Spears's life, voice, and body will keep coming. If not Britney, then someone else. But I wish to end on a more optimistic note by turning our attention toward the one thing in the world that is leak-proof—or, at least, the one thing that's best *imagined* as leak-proof: the world itself. Meaning planet Earth. Barring future frontiers of galactic colonization or alien visitation, we, the earthlings, are stuck with one another for now, and, as the fatalist quip goes, no one's getting out of here alive. Envisioning Earth as a closed system can prompt awareness of individual vulnerability as well as mutual accountability. To think about one's leakable self is to worry about private flourishing. To think about our leak-proof planet is to keep the public good in view.

Here are the first words of economist Amartya Sen's 1981 treatise, *Poverty and Famines*: "Starvation is the characteristic of some people not *having* enough food to eat.

110. "[LEAKED] Britney Spears—Toxic (Raw Vocals)," *YouTube* (6 June 2017), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BPzZR4CMFQo>.

111. Cavan Sieczkowski, "You Have to Listen to Britney Spears Singing 'Toxic' without Auto-Tune," *Huffington Post* (7 June 2017), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/britney-spears-toxic-no-auto-tune_us_59381280e4b01fc18d3f69do; Isabel Jones, "Britney Spears's 'Toxic' Sans Auto-Tune Will Blow Your Mind," *InStyle* (6 June 2017), <http://www.instyle.com/news/britney-spears-toxic-without-auto-tune>; and Simon Delott, "Britney Spears: Raw Vocals for 'Toxic' LEAKED!" *The Hollywood Gossip* (9 June 2017), <http://www.thehollywoodgossip.com/videos/britney-spears-leaked-raw-vocals-for-toxic-better-than-autotune>.

112. Manuster, comment on "Britney Spears—Toxic (Without Auto-Tune)—NEW VOCALS (ALTER-NATE VERSION)," *YouTube* (video uploaded 12 July 2017; comment posted in 2017), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-NrcIXzoVQ>.

113. See "Cathy Dennis—Toxic (Demo for Britney Spears)," *YouTube* (10 January 2011), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bhwn-7Pm9Bg>.

It is not the characteristic of there *being* not enough food to eat.”¹¹⁴ Although a framework of resource entitlement sounds self-evident, the writer Uttara Choudhury reminds us that these “opening lines of [Sen’s] study startled the world” upon initial publication.¹¹⁵ Maybe the startling power had to do with the force of the sentences’ double deixis: with one hand, Sen pointed implicitly at individual and systemic culprits (the people and organizations inhibiting the fair, humane allocation of food); with the other, he pointed at the entire planet, alerting us to how, in terms of nutrition and caloric sustenance, there has long been an embarrassment of sum provisions, which in turn have been embarrassingly maldistributed. In a prefatory stroke, Sen zoomed in on the procedural minutiae of food waste while zooming way out for a bird’s-eye (or alien-ship’s) view of our global biosphere and its faulty human stewardship. More profoundly, Sen was saying that our world doesn’t have to be this way. Tragically *and* happily, all the food needed to end famine already exists, and has existed for far too long. In the same vein, if we conceive of the world’s interpersonal relationships as a closed and conservationist system, then we cannot afford to blow our outbursts on facetious targets. Is wasting indignation (and weaponizing insult) any more justifiable than wasting food? Can we find worthier investments for the time and energies squandered on petty practices of shaming, dehumanization, and alienation? To adapt Sen’s formulation: alienation is the characteristic of some people not *having* humane affordances; it is not the characteristic of there *being* not enough humanity to go around.

Ecological vocabularies of scarcity need to be tested against the respective costs of human sustenance and dehumanizing offenses. How much does it cost each of us to treat one another with greater dignity and compassion, even a sense of shared destiny? Do we fallaciously apply algorithms and scenarios of material dearth (oil, coal, rare earth elements) to our affective transactions? Think of the Free Hugs Campaign, or advocacy for random acts of kindness, or the J-Lo wisdom that love don’t cost a thing. Initiatives like these ask people to approach peers, strangers, and even opponents with surplus decency rather than anxieties about just returns or the *Schadenfreude* of just desserts. Maybe such generosity is not always the answer. Maybe reparative ideals sometimes feel more desirable than they are achievable. Either way, what passes for outrage these days doesn’t automatically give the outraged a free pass. Saying a song hurts the ears doesn’t mean you’re a good listener or a prodigious musician. Judging someone as slutty, fat, or trashy can reveal more about the adjudicator’s faults than the target’s failings. A 2008 *Jezebel* article summed up the reflexive predicament in its title: “Who’s Crazier: Britney Spears or the Rest of Us for Giving a Shit?”¹¹⁶ The question’s rhetorical pitch implies that we might all be crazy. Or the conciliatory inverse: *none* of us are crazy—certainly not as shamefully, haplessly, inhumanly crazy as the pejorative (oftentimes ableist) label itself indicates.

114. Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 1, emphasis in original.

115. Uttara Choudhury, “Amartya Sen: The Enlightened Economist,” *Braingainmag.com* (2011), <http://www.braingainmag.com/amartya-sen-the-enlightened-economist.htm>.

116. Slut Machine, “Who’s Crazier: Britney Spears or the Rest of Us for Giving a Shit?” *Jezebel* (4 January 2008), <http://jezebel.com/340504/whos-crazier-britney-spears-or-the-rest-of-us-for-giving-a-shit>.

From her days on *Star Search* to her night of head-shaving, from her big breaks to the breakdowns, Spears has been a lightning rod for controversy and thus a divining rod for societies' toxic wells of shaming and blaming. But leaks, misclicks, and wayward emails can happen to anyone. Maybe tomorrow, you accidentally blast to your department's listserv an innocent yet mortifying nude selfie, or an old video of you singing terribly in the shower, or some other private yet harmless artifact never meant for others' eyes and ears. Or maybe at the next academic conference, when you're trying to play a YouTube clip in the middle of a presentation, you inadvertently pull up a minimized browser containing the last porn clip you watched. You might think you're in a waking nightmare. And what then? It could feel like the end of the world . . . until the realization dawns that you are, in fact, *not alone*: that your private apocalypse is one in a million, and that it would be much less apocalyptic if only more members of this million-strong public had the good sense to lend a helping hand or, at the very least, had the grace to do nothing—and to leave you alone.

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