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I Sing Of Misogyny and Sexual Assault: Rape Culture in Contemporary American Pop Music

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I SING OF MISOGYNY AND SEXUAL ASSAULT: RAPE CULTURE IN CONTEMPORARY
AMERICAN POP MUSIC

by

Chloe Cable

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in the English

Loren Glass
Thesis Mentor

Spring 2017

All requirements for graduation with Honors in the
English have been completed.

Marie Kruger
English Honors Advisor

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Professor Loren Glass
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Rape culture as a term was coined in the 1970s, but it did not become part of the average vernacular until the past decade. While there is some scholarship on the subject, there is very little about its presence in media and pop culture, especially in music. The scholarship that does exist is focused on discussing the existence of rape culture or proving that it has a presence in media rather than contemplating what this means for the United States as a culture. This thesis aims to not only prove that rape culture is prominent in American pop music, but also to take a multi-disciplinary approach at analyzing this trend in order to consider possible consequences.

Part One will argue for the presence of rape culture in American pop music by comparing song lyrics to general themes of rape culture as well as testimonials of sexual assault. Part Two will offer further scrutiny into the culture surrounding the songs analyzed in Part One by discussing them in context of the albums they are a part of, the music videos for them, and the lives of the artists who create them. Part Three will examine possible consequences of the perpetuation of rape culture in American pop music based on discussions of this tendency using different disciplines of study including a gender studies approach, a legal approach, and a psychoanalytical approach.

This thesis is a call to action. While the paper will not go into extensive detail on how to eradicate the problem, it will discuss a few feminist responses that have and have not worked. The main goal of this paper is to bring light to an area of feminist study that has been lacking and to discuss why it is important to recognize the existence of rape culture as well as its presence in popular music.

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Personal Overview

Music has been a huge part of my life since I was little. I can remember sitting in the car with my mom and requesting various songs by the Beatles – usually “Rocky Raccoon” – or “Dancing Queen,” by ABBA. My love of music expanded as I got older, and I became an advocate for the teaching of arts, visual and auditory, in public schools. My high school was constantly facing budget cuts, and it was often the art and music departments that were impacted the most. During my first year at the University of Iowa, I attended LeaderShape Iowa, a weeklong program for emerging leaders at the University. One of the final parts of this program was to consider a vision we had of a perfect world and to come up with tangible steps toward reaching this goal. My vision was of a world that considered art to be as important in schools as academics.

My reasoning for the importance of art in schools was twofold. First, music and art can help students develop focus and attention to detail, and it is great for their mental health. The second reason was that art and music are so important for historians and anthropologists. Much of what we know of ancient cultures is from what we learned through their art and song. Where written documents are lacking, there is a plethora of oral accounts that have been preserved for centuries through the process of hearing them, memorizing them, and passing them on. I believe it is important to teach our youth about art and music and to encourage them to create in order to preserve important aspects of our culture.

I started taking piano lessons when I was six and continued taking lessons until I graduated high school. My teacher allowed all of her students to eventually choose if they wanted to learn pop music or classical. Those who went in the pop direction were usually also singers or songwriters. It was never even a choice for me to pursue classical music. Upon hearing

“Moonlight Sonata” and “Clair de Lune,” I knew I wanted to learn to play them and others like them. Any music I wrote myself wasn’t meant to have lyrics accompany it. My final project took all of my senior year of high school as well as part of my junior year to learn. I was determined to perform “Pavane pour une infante defunte” by Maurice Ravel after we played a version of it in my high school’s wind ensemble. It remains my favorite classical piece.

When people wonder why I did not want to learn to sing and play along, to perform popular songs, my response is that I did not like what was considered popular music – and I still do not. Despite my prior infatuation with the Beatles and ABBA, I no longer enjoy music that is considered pop. This is partly because I am so used to intricate chord structures and am not interested in the typical four-chord template used in pop. Another reason for my dislike of pop music is my discontent with song lyrics. For the most part, contemporary pop music is about partying, drugs, alcohol, and sex. It is not always, but these themes are very common in chart toppers. There’s nothing wrong with this, in theory. There is an underlying issue, however, that hasn’t been addressed until very recently: a lot of these songs are about rape.

It is not obvious for most people. None of these songs say outright, “I’m going to rape her.” Instead an artist will sing about having his way with a girl, how she shouldn’t say no, how he knows that she wants it. What they sing about – a man who controls a woman sexually, who assumes she is consenting to sex because he wants her to – that is in fact rape.

Multiple generations have attempted to end misogyny and rape, and millennials especially have been fighting to prevent sexual assault, to end rape culture, and to promote thinking of consent as the presence of a yes rather than the absence of no (this is called affirmative consent.) We’ve participated in Take Back the Night and the It’s On Us Campaign.

We've asked for trigger warnings to help trauma survivors prepare for possibly triggering material.

Yet we still dance and sing along to "Blurred Lines" and other, similar songs. It is easy to attend advocacy events and call yourself an ally. It is much harder to alter your habits, to address your own biases. "But it's so catchy!" you might argue. If you listen to it by yourself than it is not a problem, right?

Part of overcoming the mindset that sexual assault is acceptable is addressing rape culture and refusing to support anything that promotes it. It is not an easy thing to do. Pop music is enjoyed because it is fun to dance and sing to more so than because it is substantive. Still, it is my hope that by writing this paper, I am positively contributing to a conversation that is just getting started.

Introduction

The intro to “Blurred Lines” by Robin Thicke was met with a spattering of responses, including “no!” “gross!” and “turn it off!” and was immediately switched to another song. I was volunteering with my sorority at a Halloween party for United Action for Youth, and the shouts came from a majority of the middle schoolers and high schoolers in attendance. Those who had been dancing in the middle of the room had stopped in place and turned to glare at the makeshift DJ in the front of the room. “I hate that song,” said the girl standing next to me, “it’s about rape.”

Even though this group of teenagers seemed certain that the song is about rape, about a blurred line between consent and sexual assault, there has been much controversy surrounding the true meaning behind the lyrics. Is this song about rape? If so, why is it still popular with the American public? This paper aims to (1) recognize songs that have themes of rape and contextualize them within the narrative of sexuality in the United States, (2) pinpoint rape culture in music videos, performances, and the lives of the artists who create these songs, and (3) identify consequences of the perpetuation of rape culture in popular music.

In order to explain why the focus is solely on pop music instead of any other musical genre, this paper must first delve into the history of pop and explain its connection to American values. The origin and purpose of pop music is rather difficult to pin down because of the nature of its being “popular.” While pop is technically its own genre, it is a genre that encompasses all music considered to be the most widespread and the most consumed, based on charts like the Billboard Hot 100 and radio station playlists like the Top 40. A definition of pop found in the book *Listen Again: A Momentary History of Pop Music*, describes it as “the catch-all music fan’s term for sticky sounds, inauthentic identity, and commercial crazes... that is heard, loved, and

yet rarely ennobled” (Lhamon 1). Pop music is a genre made up of many genres, each song having a similar thread of structure and theme.

Pop music is surprisingly rigid in its structure and lyrical content, despite being so fluid in its definition. Peter Etzkorn notes in his article “The Relationship between Musical and Social Patterns in American Popular Music” that pop is generally denoted by a standard format: 32-bars divided into four 8-bar sections, the first two of which are similar, the third which contrasts the first two, and the fourth which returns to the structure of the first two (Etzkorn 278). Pop music also features the notorious four chord structure in which the entire song only uses the same four chords in a repeating riff. The four chord structure is often denoted as I-V-iv-IV because this pattern usually involves these specific chords. Examples of this structure can be found in songs like “Hot n Cold” by Katy Perry, “Don’t Stop Believin;” by Journey, “Home” by Philip Philips, “I Was Here” by Beyoncé, “Let It Be” by the Beatles, and many, many others.

This rigidity of structure is based in the genre’s main purpose: to be accessible to the non-musically trained. Etzkorn explains that the difference between serious musicians and pop musicians is the formal training that serious musicians have that steers them away from the four chord structure and towards more varying genres like jazz (Etzkorn 283). Serious musicians then are defined by individual study and interpretation of experience. Pop music, however, is not about the individual but rather about what the society as a whole considers to be the human experience. “The system [of popular music] as such is not the creation of any single individual but represents the *conscience collective* of those who are socially participating in it” (Etzkorn 284). Not only is popular music the most commonly listened to in America, it is reflective of America’s culture and values.

In order to say that American pop music is representative of American culture, one must first define *culture*. Raymond Williams, author of *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*, says culture is “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language... because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines... and systems of thought” (Williams 87). It is thus imperative to clarify how it is defined in this paper. Culture, based on its etymology, could be a synonym of civilization or it could mean “to cultivate.” It could mean material objects when studying *cultural anthropology*, or it could be used symbolically, as it is in *cultural studies* (Williams 91).

This paper respects Williams’ assertions while also considering an anthropological approach. The textbook *Conformity and Conflict: Readings in Cultural Anthropology* refers to culture as “the knowledge that is learned, shared, and used by people to interpret experience and generate behavior” (Spradley). The definition is closer to the one that will be used and the latter half is especially relevant to an argument that will later be made about the potential for themes of rape in pop music affecting the likelihood of listeners committing the act. The definition of culture this thesis will use is both symbolic and material, an overarching term used to convey the traits that define a society. Therefore, to say that American culture is perpetuated in pop music is to say that American trends, values, laws, and social constructs are perpetuated in pop music.

Pop made its presence in the United States in the 1950s rather suddenly. Many scholars call this overnight appearance of pop a musical phenomenon. Wilfred Dolfsma, a professor of entrepreneurship, claims that the creation of pop music can be attributed to a combination of sociological and economic factors. Pop was believed to be cheaper and more accessible than other common genres of the time period, which made it more attainable to a younger population. Dolfsma also cites a possible explanation for why the pop music genre was so easily accepted by

the public: “People buy records of famous pop musicians and imagine themselves to be in their place or in the place of the person who features in the song” (Dolfsma 1032). This relationship between the experiences of the narrator of the song and a broad range of listeners was very new compared to the more targeted audiences of Big Band, Jazz, Country, and Swing, which dominated the musical scene prior to the emergence of pop music.

The Billboard Hot 100 made its first appearance around the same time that pop music did, in 1958. It originated as a magazine that ranked artists by popularity. It has since expanded to an online database with many different charts. The original Hot 100 list still exists, but it now has other lists like the Greatest of All Time Billboard 200 Albums, The Greatest of All Time Hot 100 Singles, the Greatest of All Time Adult Pop Songs, and the Greatest of All Time Adult Pop Song Artists. There are also lists dedicated to genres that sometimes appear within pop music, like country and hip-hop. These charts are instrumental to the public’s perception of which artists and albums are considered pop and are based on their overall popularity across the United States.

The Top 40 music format also gained popularity in 1950s, as “a programming style to help radio compensate for television’s absconding with syndicated network shows” (Weisbard 1). Top 40 was created as a way to commercialize music on the radio and therefore has become a clear indicator of which songs and artists are popular based on how well the music is selling. If it is playing on the radio, if it is considered to be among the Top 40, it can be assumed that it is popular among most Americans. Top 40 more so than the Billboard Hot 100 has become a subsection of pop music that is sometimes even referred to as its own genre. When asked what kind of music they like, someone who enjoys pop might say, “I listen to a lot of Top 40.”

Pop music includes many other genres based on the popularity of individual tracks and albums. Some of these genres, like hip-hop and rap, stem from black culture. While race

dynamics do play a large role in rape culture and in gender discrimination, that topic will not be discussed in this thesis. Pop was not only inspired by and made up of , it was also inspired by black culture. Pop music appropriates a lot of its themes and structure from these genres. It is a mainstream, white-centric narration of heterosexual teenage love stories. Pop, for the most part, rejects lyrics that do not appeal to teenagers who wish to be either the singer or the person being sung to.

As Dolfsma states in his article, people listen to pop music in order to relate themselves to the experiences of either the singer or the object of the singer's affections because it is assumed that these white, heterosexual, and cisgender experiences are standard. This raises the question: what ideals are we saying that our culture values through this genre of music? As this thesis will explain, themes of misogyny and non-consensual sex, termed "rape culture," have made their way into music that is considered to be a depiction of American culture. If pop is made up of "songs that sponge up influences from everywhere, strange species of cultural transmission," how do we respond when these songs are being influenced by a negative trend? (Lhamon 2). Furthermore, what are the consequences of this feature if we allow it to prevail?

Part One: Rape Culture and Pop Music

Rape and sexual violence against women have become prevalent themes in contemporary American pop music, though they are often overlooked because they are so ingrained in our society as a whole. American culture is a “rape culture” – one that accepts rape as something normal and expected, that puts the blame on women and female sexuality. Rape culture is not just found in acts of sexual violence, but in American media, which presents rape as sex, sex as masculine power, and female sexuality as deviant. In order to understand that American culture is a rape culture, we must explore the history of sexuality in America.

Sexuality has been stigmatized in America since the beginning of the colonization of the New World. In their book *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman tell the history of American sexuality beginning with the Pilgrims. In 1625, Thomas Morton established a plantation at Plymouth called Marry Mount that embraced sexuality and was considered to be the antithesis of Puritan ideals (D’Emilio 3). Those who lived in Marry Mount sometimes had sex outside of marriage and the inhabitants invited Native Americans, who were considered by the Puritans to be sexually aberrant, to join them there. The Puritans believed that the nature of Marry Mount threatened their livelihoods and imprisoned Thomas Morton, effectively criminalizing sexuality (3). This did not put an end to the idea of a more open and sexual culture, however. Plymouth was founded on Christian morals of family and godliness, but the New World offered new perspectives on sexuality.

As North America continued to be settled by Europeans, a divide in sexual practices appeared between those who lived in the North and those who lived the South. Europeans who moved to both regions brought with them Protestant and Catholic ideals of a family unit, in which sex was an obligation between man and wife to have children (D’Emilio 4). However, the

practices of indentured servitude and slavery in the South and the rural nature of the land set it apart from the North. While both had laws that criminalized sexual acts and an expectation that sexuality should stay within the bounds of holy matrimony, laws were less strict in the South and upheld even less (D'Emilio 12). Furthermore, sexual violence was used as a form of control over servants and slaves: "courts heard charges against masters for "violating" a female servant, making "forcible attempts" on her chastity, exhibiting "lewd behavior," or attempting rape (12).

Children who grew up in an American colony learned about sex from observation (homes were often small and children shared rooms and even beds with their parents) and from what they were told by their parents and the church. They learned that sex should only happen between married people, and they were taught to shame those, especially women, who had sexual relations outside of marriage— "neighbors cursed women with epithets such as whore, adulteress, slut, or 'brasen-faced bawd'" (D'Emilio 17). Men were not called these names, and were instead mentioned to be ignorant or tolerant of their wives' misconduct. This attitude, which we now call "slut shaming," existed back then and is still prevalent now.

The family-oriented sexuality of colonists changed in the late 1700s. Families were no longer as isolated because of the change from self-sufficient farms to commercialized agriculture (D'Emilio 39). This move toward individual choice over patriarchal control shifted society away from a marriage-centered view of sexuality. Along with the economic changes, religious and philosophic movements, like the Enlightenment in Europe, aimed to show the beauty in all kinds of nature and natural acts, including sex. A majority began to recognize the importance of sexual pleasure beyond reproduction and family growth (41). People began to realize that sex did not have to be synonymous with conception.

With the 1800s came an interest in romance. Family and marriage had been economic prior to the turn of the century, but now companionship was believed to be essential in relationships. The working class began to enjoy flirtation and courtship that had before been repressed (D'Emilio 74). Evidence of a more open sexual etiquette can be found in the music of that time, specifically the song "Only in Fun" by Adah Richmonds:

Each afternoon dressed in the fashion
 I promenade out in the street
 O'er everything else I've a passion
 To flirt with the gents whom I meet.
 Of course it is wrong you are saying
 And tell me it should not be done
 It is only a game I am playing
 And it's only, just only in fun (D'Emilio 74).

Because sexuality like this was more common, women who were, for the most part, white middle-class, felt more comfortable going out and flirting, as the song suggests. However, the evolution of sexual decorum heightened the risk for women to be sexually assaulted (D'Emilio 74). Sexual violence against women continued to be a concern, even as the culture around sexuality changed.

Rape has been used as racial control throughout the past centuries. Men used sexual violence as power over women predominantly during the time of the emancipation of slaves in America. When black men were given rights, white men responded by raping black women (D'Emilio 105). Prostitution was used as a kind of sexual slavery of Asian women in the late 1800s. Male control was more common when Asian women were involved than white women,

who sometimes operated independent brothels (137). This white male sexual power over women of color was prominent during the time of desegregation and continues even today.

With the 1900s came Hollywood and the emergence of sex on display. In the 1960s, movies were given ratings based on the level of violence and sexuality they presented— “A’ awarded to acceptable features, ‘B’ to those judged ‘morally objectionable in part for all,’ and a ‘C’ to those whose viewing it condemned” (D’Emilio 281). This change was not altogether progressive, however. The demonstrations of sex found in these were male-centered and showed men as strong and sexual and women as delicate and submissive. This further established a culture of male power over women, which multiple waves of feminism attempted to fight back against.

During the time of second wave feminism in the 1960s, feminists began to recognize what they did not call “rape culture” until the 1970s. Women were constantly seen as sexual objects in media and in advertisements. “Women walking down the street were the targets of stares, catcalls, and whistles. Men would ‘use her body with their eyes,’ wrote Meredith Tax, a Boston feminist,” (D’Emilio 312). This objectification of women and the idea that men naturally have sexual power over women is a fundamental aspect of a rape culture.

Alyn Pearson, author of “Rape Culture: Media and Message,” defines rape culture as a culture in which “women smile more than men, we take up less space, we defer to men as they interrupt our conversations, we apologize before stating an opinion, and we strive day in and day out to perfect our bodies for the male gaze” (Pearson 13). Pearson’s definition is based on the one used in the 1975 documentary *Rape Culture*. According to its original use, rape culture “commodifies women’s sexuality, and debilitates their sexual agency, while simultaneously celebrating men’s dominance over women and ideals of violent masculinity” (Ruth 3). This

definition is still valid, but it has been expanded on in more recent years to explore the influence of rape culture on pop culture and media.

There is a great amount of debate about the existence of rape culture. The most common argument against its existence can be found in the newspaper article “Challenging the Rape Culture Myth” by Tim Adams. Those who do not believe in rape culture, or what they call the “rape culture myth,” say that rape culture means that all men are rapists. Their primary defense is “the science shows that it is not a culture of rape or patriarchal permissiveness that is causing sexual assault to be prevalent, but the actions of a small number of men who are able to commit the crime again and again without being prosecuted” (Adams). While this may not be entirely false, it does not necessarily debunk the idea of a rape culture as it has been defined in this paper. Rape culture is not contingent only on the act itself, but its acceptance within American culture and the use of sexuality in general against women.

Examples of rape culture permeate the media. Donald Trump, the forty-fifth President of the United States, was recorded saying that he could do whatever he wanted to women because he was famous. In fact, Trump has been quoted many times making sexist comments. He tweeted “what did these geniuses expect when they put men & women together?” in response to a statistic on unreported sexual assaults in the military (Bahadur). Even though he often denies allegations about him being sexist, and more often than that denies that he said these things in the first place, the evidence of him saying these things is astounding. He was quoted in *Esquire* in 1991 saying, “it doesn’t really matter what [the media] write as long as you’ve got a young and beautiful piece of ass” (Bahadur). The fact that the current President has said comments as heinous as these and still won is direct evidence of rape culture in America.

The definition of rape culture used by Adams and the one that will be used in this thesis are very different. It is also slightly different than the one offered by feminists just after its coining in 1975. While past analyses of rape culture have focused on American society's general predisposition to give men dominance over female sexuality, this paper will use this definition to outline the way that rape culture has manifested itself in pop culture, specifically in popular music. One can draw a direct connection between lyrics in pop songs and the beliefs that create a rape culture. In order to show this, this paper will analyze three chart toppers that have been released in the last five years and were almost immediately criticized for being about rape: "Back To Sleep," "What Do You Mean?" and "Blurred Lines."

In 2015, Chris Brown released a song called "Back To Sleep," the lyrics of which immediately garnered attention in the media. A few news blogs including *The Guardian* reported that Bethany Cosentino, another singer, objected to the lyrics of the song and tweeted that it perpetuates rape culture. The song, which is also known as "Fuck You Back To Sleep," reached the US Billboard top 20 in March. She tweeted about Billboard's review, saying, "How about this for a review: singing about fucking a girl back to sleep/telling her don't say a word is singing about rape + it's disgusting" (Guardian). She was massively criticized for speaking out.

Cosentino's revulsion with the song came primarily from a series of lines in the chorus that suggest the singer wants to have sex and does not care if he has consent:

Just let me rock, fuck you back to sleep girl

Don't say a word no, girl don't you talk

Just hold on tight to me girl

Fuck you back to sleep girl, and rock you back (Brown).

The most problematic line of this song is the one in which he is not letting her say no, or even talk at all. While dissenters might say that this song is not about rape because he is not being violent or explicitly saying that he is going to force her, the nameless woman has a clear lack of agency, and the man is telling her to have sex with him, whether she wants to or not.

In response to those that attacked her for her position on the song, Cosentino said, “4 those of you that don’t understand the definition of ‘consensual sex’ – it’s not TELLING a woman yr gonna wake her up 2 fuck her. BYE” (Guardian). This is clearly exactly what the man in the song is saying to the woman in the song.

These lyrics have been noticed by others as well. In a 2011 campaign called Project Unbreakable, women posted photos of themselves with quotes from their rapists, and there are many similarities. For instance, one woman remembers her rapist saying, “No? Is that all you know how to say?” (Mamamia). Chris Brown sings that the girl should not say “no,” and a survivor was mocked by the man who raped her for saying that.

Justin Bieber has also been accused of recording songs that perpetuate rape culture. *The Huffington Post* published an article about his song “What Do You Mean?” and how it promotes rape culture. The author of this article, Sofia Lyons, hits on a crucial trait of pop songs that include themes of rape culture: it is not always immediate, but for most people, paying attention to the lyrics makes them feel uncomfortable. She says, “With each verse, I felt a sense of uneasiness that I couldn’t quite place. I itched in my skin at the connotation of Bieber’s words, despite the uplifting and summery pop beat with which he sang them” (Lyons). Her perspective is especially important because she is a self-proclaimed “Belieber,” a fan of Bieber who is usually quick to be impressed by his music.

“What Do You Mean?” peaked at number 1 on the Billboard Hot 100, making it Bieber’s first number 1 single. It is a song about a man’s frustrations with a woman’s mixed signals.

According to him, she seems to be saying yes and no at the same time in different ways:

When you nod your head yes

But you wanna say no

What do you mean? Hey-ey

When you don’t want me to move

But you tell me to go

What do you mean?

Oh, what do you mean?

Said you’re running out of time, what do you mean?

Oh, oh, oh, what do you mean?

Better make up your mind (Bieber).

The line “better make up your mind” assumes that she has not already done so. There has been a recent movement in defining consent called *affirmative consent*. This is the idea that consent is the presence of a yes, not the absence of a no. This method leaves no supposed “grey areas” or confusion. Lani Anne Remick says in her article “Read Her Lips: An Argument for a Verbal Consent Standard in Rape,” that the “continuous juggling of the elements of the crime by courts and commentators reflects an urge toward administrative simplicity, a search for an external standard by which to measure the subjective element of nonconsent” (Remick 1105). She is referring to the idea that consent, and by extension, non-consent, is fluid or difficult to identify.

This is a major theme in songs that adhere to a rape culture. There is a thought that, if a man cannot ascertain whether or not the woman is consenting, it is okay to assume that she is.

The blame is then placed on the woman if it turns out that she was not consenting because she was sending “mixed signals.” This is the story being told in “What Do You Mean?” The narrator is frustrated because he cannot tell if she is consenting or not, and wants her to “make up [her] mind” (Bieber). The goal of affirmative consent is to switch this formula around so that the assumption is that consent is not being given, and that no argument can be made that someone’s actions alone can be the deciding factor of whether or not consent is being given.

Affirmative consent is not widely accepted, however, and women are still condemned for supposedly seducing a man and then changing their minds later. Multiple quotes from rapists prove this point: “It wasn’t rape. You were being such a tease,” “You were asking for it” (Mamamia). A common defense used by rapists in court is that the girl never said “no.” Under affirmative consent, this would not negate rape, but under current policies, men often avoid jail time with this excuse. One survivor remembers her rapist saying at a campus hearing, “You never said ‘no’ or ‘stop’” (Mamamia). Many of the frustrations expressed in this song are excuses later used to defend rape.

It is also likely that these “mixed signals” are not there at all; men see what they want to see rather than the truth, and perceive *no* as *maybe*. Another quotation from a rapist supports this theory: “Please I want you so bad. You can’t possibly mean no” (Mamamia). The supposed grey areas in which consent is hard to discern are more likely to be clear lines between consent and rape, but the rapists don’t believe that a woman would ever say no to them.

“Blurred Lines” spent 20 weeks on the Billboard Hot 100 and peaked at number 2 after its release in 2013. The song was surrounded by controversy because of the lyrical phrasing, which many feminists claimed were supportive of non-consensual sex. Thicke argued that the controversy was unfounded, as did Pharrell Williams, who produced the song. Both claimed that

the song was supposed to empower women and say they have a sex drive just like men do. However, there are lyrics that cannot be explained away by claiming the song is meant to be feminist.

The most prominent line that appears in this debate and that is sung multiple times throughout the song is “I know you want it” (Thicke). The song is clearly about sexual pursuit; there is no argument about that on either the artist/producer or the critics’ side. Therefore, in a song about sexual pursuit, a man is saying to a woman “I know you want it.” Is this not exemplary of a man assuming he has control over a woman’s sexuality – the very definition of rape culture? A survivor of sexual assault was told by her rapist, “Come on. You know you want it. Give in to pleasure” (Mamamia). This line is verbatim a phrase said by an attacker to his victim.

Another lyric says “That man is not your mate and that’s why I’m gon’ take you” (Thicke). William’s reasoning for this line was focused on the part of the line that says “that man is not your mate.” He claimed that he meant that she wasn’t the property of any man and that she could make her own sexual choices (“Pharrell”). However, this statement is followed up with the words, “that’s why I’m gon’ take you.” The word “take” when placed in the context of a sexual situation is not one associated with consent. He might believe that this woman is not owned by another man, but that does not necessarily mean he does not want to try to own her himself.

The only situation in which a person could “take” another person sexually in a consensual way is in a BDSM scene. BDSM is an acronym that stands for Bondage, Discipline, Domination, Sadism, Submission, and Masochism. Participants act out *scenes* that are agreed to beforehand. This kind of terminology, the kind that be related to non-consent, might be used in a sexual

scene. That being said, these scenes would be entirely consensual for both parties and the person being “taken” could ask to stop at any time.

The line “that man is not your mate” also parallels multiple situations involving sexual assault. One survivor notes that, when her best guy friend stood up for her, the man who raped her said, “You’re just mad I had her in my bed first” (Mamamia). This song falls in line with a man’s way of thinking that he has the authority to take a woman from another man as if claiming an object rather than an actual person. Women are often thought of as property, something that was noted earlier in the detailing of the history of sexuality in America. Women were controlled by men for a long time, so men believe that they have the right to control women now.

All three of these songs were extremely popular when they were released, despite the content of the lyrics. While the artists have all been criticized for perpetuating rape culture, this has had no negative impacts on their careers. They continue to produce songs like these. Part of the problem is that consumers continue to purchase these songs, despite the controversies surrounding them. They defend the songs, noting that none of them ever use the word rape or explicitly say that they want sex without the woman’s consent. They say that people are reading too far into the lyrics, or that they are just songs and should not be taken too seriously.

These songs remain extremely popular long after they are released, even with the controversies. At the end of 2013, “Blurred Lines” was number 2 on the Billboard Hot 100. At the end of 2015, “Back To Sleep” was number 89 and “What Do You Mean?” was number 33. They ranked on other charts as well. “Back To Sleep” was number 11 on Billboard’s R&B/Hip-Hop Airplay and 33 on Billboard’s Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs. “Blurred Lines” was number 1 on US Digital Sales, Billboard’s Mainstream Top 40, and Billboard’s Radio Songs. “What Do You Mean?” remained on the charts in 2016, ranking 31 at the end of the year for the Billboard Hot

100 and Billboard's Adult Contemporary. Out of the thousands of pop songs released those two years, all three made the top one hundred. It is clear that they retained their popularity despite the feminist uproar.

All of this does not necessarily mean that Robin Thicke, Justin Bieber, and Chris Brown included these themes in their songs on purpose. The trouble with rape culture is that many people still believe it is a myth. America's tendency to promote rape is something that lies under the surface and is accepted simply because it has been ingrained in the culture for so long. It is highly unlikely that songwriters include lyrics like the ones in "Blurred Lines" with the intent to perpetuate rape culture. This controversy, and the fact that the song and the artist are still so highly regarded despite the controversy, are clear indicators of how dangerous rape culture can be if it continues to permeate pop music without acknowledgement.

Part Two: Visualization and Actualization

When analyzing these three songs, one cannot just look at the lyrics themselves. Because top charting pop songs are so popular, they are often accompanied by music videos and stage performances. One must also delve into the lives of the artists who produce these songs. The lives of musical artists are never entirely private. Once they are deemed “popular,” the paparazzi watches their every move. Magazines have headlines about who this musician is marrying or if they are having kids. This means that if a pop artist is arrested or suspected of a crime, it becomes public knowledge very quickly, and it is a sad truth that pop artists are often arrested for multiple crimes, usually drugs and domestic abuse.

“Back To Sleep” has two accompanying music videos, a censored version and a non-censored version. In this case, the censoring is not because of the images, but because of the lyrics. The censored version replaces “fuck” with “sex.” The video itself does not change between versions of the song. The censorship of some of the lyrics is meant to protect a younger audience from material deemed inappropriate for children. This is also why the non-censored version of this song is marked “explicit.”

Based on the lyrics alone – in both the explicit and clean versions – the message is fairly clear and the theme of rape is obvious. When watching the music video, however, the overall meaning of the song is altered. Music videos take away the listener’s ability to visualize the song on their own and instead tells them what kind of story the musician and/or producer wants them to hear. In this case, it is a story of a woman who is enthusiastically consenting to a sexual act, not at all like the story told by the lyrics.

The music video for “Back To Sleep” starts with Chris Brown calling a woman whom the audience assumes is his girlfriend (ChrisBrownVEVO). He seems distressed, like he is running

from something. He asks her if he can come over and tells her that there is a lot going on. These are not lines from the song lines added specifically for the video. Upon arriving at her house, he finds her waiting for him in the kitchen. She is dressed in black, lacy lingerie. The video alternates between footage of them making out on the couch and Chris Brown singing on a stage with two female back-up dancers. It then shows Brown and his girlfriend in the shower together.

Here we must consider the question: are music videos meant to be exact representations of the songs they narrate? They are often criticized for not having a clear relationship to the song. Much like movie versions of books, music videos are often related to the songs but still quite different, in their own way “inspired by” the songs rather than telling general story implied by the lyrics on their own. In this case, the video is creating a completely different image than the one created when the song is listened to without the video.

“Back To Sleep,” when listened to on its own, presents the listener with an image of a man joining a woman in bed, waking her up, and then convincing her to have sex with him. In the music video, the woman is awake and waiting for him. The title of the song, which appears often in the lyrics, is irrelevant in the music video. He is never “fucking” or “sexing” her “back to sleep” (Brown). Instead they are kissing on a couch and in the shower, and she is completely awake and participating. The overall experience of hearing the song and watching the video creates a conflicting message that disguises the problematic intent of the lyrics. Also, the fact that the lyrics were censored in one version but the visuals remained the same also implies a disconnect between the offensiveness of the lyrics and the video.

The music video for “What Do You Mean?” on the other hand, gives the audience a very similar message to the one in the song, at least in the beginning. It is styled similar to an action film. Like the video for “Back To Sleep,” this one begins with the focus on the singer, in this

case Justin Bieber. He exchanges money with another man who gives him a lighter (JustinBieberVEVO). The image then switches to a girl who appears to be watching the clock and waiting for him. She is credited as Xenia Deli.

When he arrives at the door, Xenia does not seem to want to let him in at first. After she does, they kiss and she goes back and forth between pulling him close and pushing him away—a very clear correlation with the lyrics which imply that the girl in the song is not being clear about whether or not she wants to have sex with him. She continues to act this way for the majority of the music video, seeming to want him close and far away at the same time.

It is at this point that the music video derails from the song lyrics. Two masked men break into the apartment and grab Bieber (JustinBieberVEVO). They put a bag over his head and pull him out the door. One of the men gets in a fight with the girl, who is lying on the bed in lingerie, and he puts a bag over her head as well. Bieber and the girl are trapped in a trunk together. He uses the lighter so they can see. They are pulled out of the trunk and tied up, but Bieber uses the lighter to set the ropes on fire and free them. They jump out of a window onto a mat in the middle of a skate park. The guys in the masks walk up and one of them is revealed to be the other guy from the beginning of the video. Bieber gives the lighter back to him and they all laugh and have fun at the skate park. The video ends with Bieber standing alone, staring up into the darkness.

It is difficult to tell the reasoning for this plotline of the music video. The beginning makes sense with the lyrics and portrays the most stereotypical rape culture inspired storyline of a woman being a temptress and not following through with the promises she makes by teasing him. The rest of it is more like an action film, which this music video pretends to be. Like the

video for “Back To Sleep,” the odd storyline masks the theme of sexual assault in the lyrics by making the video about something unrelated.

The music video for “Blurred Lines” also has two versions: an uncensored and a censored version. In this case, there are two versions because of the images rather than the lyrics. The uncensored version features Robin Thicke, T.I., and Pharrell all fully clothed and surrounded by topless women (“Blurred”). Many people have praised this video for being feminist and empowering women to be proud of their bodies. Pharrell said in an interview about the song and video that it was not supposed to degrade women, but support them (“Pharrell”). It is true that women are often shamed for showing their bodies and are told that their bodies should look a certain way (i.e. skinny).

This music video does not support all types of women, however. The ones in the music video are all models or have model-esque bodies. There are three of them, two white and one black. It should also be noted that the black model has fairly light skin, something that the modeling agencies have been attacked for recently. There are few models with dark skin. Khoudia Diop, a model who recently went viral because of her dark tone, was bullied for her skin color growing up and is now celebrated for representing a type of girl that is not usually accepted in the modeling industry. If they really had intended for this music video to be feminist and to push boundaries, they would have included more diversity in their nude women.

There are also no plus-sized models or short models. They are all tall and skinny. Media tells women that the correct way to look is to be tall, skinny, and white. Barbie dolls have also been rejected recently because they present an unnatural body type that young girls think is normal. If this video really were an empowering statement about supporting women’s bodies, it

would not just feature the market-approved presentation of a woman; it would also show women who are often criticized for being too fat, short, or strong.

There is also the issue that these women are being viewed through the male gaze. There is a fair amount of research about the *male gaze*. This is the idea that women are viewed in stories and in media through the filter of men's perception of them. Schultz says in his article "When Men Look at Women: Sex in an Age of Theory," that "two decades of feminist criticism of the visual arts has taught us that our culture's images of women in paintings, films, television, and still photography tell us more about the male imagination than about the reality of women" (Schultz 367). Men often view women primarily as sexual objects because of cultural expectations and pop culture representations rather than the truth.

In the "Blurred Lines" music video the girls do not appear to be dancing around by themselves for fun. Instead they are doing it for the enjoyment of the men in the video. They are not taking control of their own sexuality in a feminist way, like Pharrell's interview would suggest. While the music videos for the other two songs shield their messages, the music video for "Blurred Lines" exasperates the problem by commodifying women's bodies.

Next we must analyze the way these songs are performed. The fan of Justin Bieber that was cited earlier mentioned that the lyrics were disguised with an "uplifting and summery pop beat" (Lyons). All three songs are upbeat and catchy, a trait common among pop songs. The artists also treat them as such: fun songs that the audience can dance to, regardless of the actual lyrics being sung.

Bieber has performed this hit many times in different settings. He has sung "What Do You Mean?" on *The Ellen Show*, *The Tonight Show*, *The X Factor*, and more. Most of his performances include a similar set up: lots of blue/white lights and a group of at least four

dancers. His performance on *The Graham Norton Show* included these features. At the beginning of the performance, there are four female back-up dancers, all tall, fit, and light-skinned (Justin). Later, four male dancers join them on stage and the eight of them dance in synchronization with Bieber. They treat the song like it is any fun dance number, disguising the lyrics just like the music video did.

Unlike Bieber's performances of "What Do You Mean?", Chris Brown's performances of "Back To Sleep" tends to be less of a production. Brown is generally alone on stage with a microphone. He does not have back up dancers or fancy dance moves to overpower the song itself. He does not perform this song like it's an upbeat dance number. Instead, he sings it like an impassioned ballad. This is evident in many of his performances, including the one for the iHeart Royalty Release Party. For this performance, he stands alone on stage under red lighting (Chris). He sings directly toward the audience, moving naturally with the song rather than with a choreographed dance. Even though he is not disguising his lyrics, this approach is still problematic because it makes the song out to be a love song.

The live performances of "Blurred Lines" are more like those of "What Do You Mean?" but they have more of a band set up than that of a pop star. Most performances include everyone featured in the song. Robin Thicke invites both Pharrell and T.I. to come perform with him. They often have a band on stage backing them up. Their performance on *The Graham Norton Show* includes the three of them and a band, all of them dancing around to the beat (manormachine100). Robin Thicke is up front with a mic, much like Chris Brown, and while they most likely are, none of the dance moves come off as choreographed. The atmosphere they create, however, is a fun dance party. Like the performances of "What Do You Mean?" they

cover up the lyrics with a large stage production. They sometimes even invite singers who were not part of the original record, like Miley Cyrus and Leah LaBelle.

The live performances and music videos of these songs create additional layers to the listening experience that obscure the problematic nature of the lyrics. This makes one wonder whether or not this move was intentional. When analyzing these lyrics and the messages expressed by them, the idea of *authorial intent* must be considered. In his essay “The Rationale of Copy-Text,” W.W. Gregg states, “if the several extant texts of a work form an ancestral series, the earliest will naturally be selected, and since this will not only come nearest to the author’s original in accidentals, but also... most faithfully preserve the correct readings...” (Gregg 132). Gregg believes that interpretation of a text should always take into account the intent of the author and should focus on the earliest version of the text.

In this case, the earliest versions of these songs that are made available to the public are the written lyrics. Based on Gregg’s assertions, it is the lyrics themselves without the videos or stage performances that should be analyzed when determining the intent behind the words. This way of understanding authorial intent comes from the study of book history, which aims to analyze the history of texts and all of the variables that go into their production. Contrary to Gregg’s ideas about which versions of a text to use to understand the intent of the author, many who study book history dislike the idea of taking into account authorial intent at all. Unless a musician gives an official statement about the intended meaning behind the lyrics, there is no way to be certain of the intent of the author.

One then might decide to instead focus on the way that the audience interprets the meaning, regardless of the author’s intent. An example of the possible disagreements between the intent of the author and the interpretation of the audience is the song “Every Breath You

Take” by The Police. Listeners argued over whether the song was about a devoted lover or the love of God. Sting finally settled the debate and informed his fans that he intended for the song to be about a stalker, about jealousy and ownership (Mikes). Despite this revelation, the song is still widely popular and sung like a love song.

While there is no way to know the original intent behind the lyrics of the three songs discussed in this paper, the way that the music videos and stage performances have been shaped around the lyrics suggests that producers, choreographers, and videographers may have had some idea how the audience might interpret these lyrics. There does seem to be an awareness that they need to hide the themes of misogyny and sexual violence in these songs by using additional media to distract from them.

It is important to note that those who produce songs with themes of rape and misogyny also often treat women this way in real life. It is unnervingly frequent that male pop artists show up in the news because of their abuse of women, most often girlfriends or spouses. As it has been noted previously in this paper, a primary ideology of a rape culture is that women are worth less than men and can be treated as such. It is therefore necessary to take note when these artists use violence against women in their lives, even if this violence does not include sexual assault.

Robin Thicke has not been convicted of sexual violence, but he was accused of threatening to call the police on his ex-wife Paula Patton because of a custody battle. Documents were filed in court claiming that he “willfully, intentionally, and wrongfully changed/fabricated a Court Order specifying custodial timeshare of the couple’s minor child” and “threatened to have [Paula] arrested for kidnapping premised upon the false and fraudulent court order” (Celebretainment). This issue is extremely recent and has yet to be resolved. Thicke’s actions, although not considered physical or sexual abuse, are common in mentally and emotionally

abusive relationships which often go ignored because of a lack of physical evidence. Using custody of children as a tactic to maintain control of a relationship is emotional abuse.

Chris Brown is one of the most well-known pop artists who has been involved in a domestic violence case. The timeline of his mistreatment of women was relayed in an article on *Rolling Stone*'s website. Not only was he accused of assaulting his then-girlfriend Rihanna in 2009, but he pled guilty to this charge (Spanos). Afterward, accusations of his abuse of women continued.

Chris Brown's relationship with Rihanna sparked a lot of controversy, especially when she produced an album that many fans believed was inspired by her relationship with him. In fact, Rihanna's fans often believe that the majority of her music is about Chris Brown, even the newer songs produced years after their relationship ended. Whenever she comes out with a powerful, feminist ballad, many people believe it her way of overcoming the domestic abuse inflicted upon her by Chris Brown.

While Rihanna is often praised for producing songs that empower women, some of her musical collaborations have resulted in songs with problematic messages. For instance, she produced two songs with Eminem in 2010, while she was with Chris Brown. The first one is "Love The Way You Lie ft. Rihanna," which is sung primarily by Eminem and is from the man's perspective. They later came out with "Love The Way You Lie (Part 2) ft. Eminem." This song is primarily sung by Rihanna and is from the woman's point of view.

The songs are about a relationship, one that has been reduced to violence. They feature the same chorus:

Just gonna stand there and watch me burn

But that's all right because I like the way it hurts

Just gonna stand there and hear me cry
But that's all right because I love the way you lie
I love the way you lie (Rihanna).

Even though the first song is from the man's point of view, this chorus is sung by Rihanna in both versions.

Rihanna's lines in both songs portray a woman who is accepting of the abuse she receives. While it is true that it is very difficult to get out of an abusive relationship, and that women should never be shamed for staying with a man who abuses her, a song from a singer who usually produces powerful ballads should not tell the story of a woman who is happy being abused. This is all evidence that women are not innocent in the perpetuation of rape culture in pop music. They also produce songs that accept the abuse of women.

When analyzing all of the factors that surround songs with themes of rape in them, we find that these themes are covered up by misleading storylines in music videos and distracting stage performances that transform these songs into dance numbers or love songs. Some of these artists also have the potential to be violent towards women at the least. Some have even been proven to abuse their girlfriends.

Part Three: Consequences

Throughout all of this discussion about rape culture in pop music, one might wonder, “Why should we think this is such a big deal?” If people do not like the messages in pop music, they could just stop listening to it, right? We do not have to listen these songs or watch these music videos. While all of this is technically true, the inclusion of these themes in a genre that is so reflective of American culture and possibly even influential on American culture could lead to consequences beyond simply disliking songs.

Influence on the Young Woman’s Psyche

In the United States, women are told very early who they are meant to be and who they are meant to look like. Children are forced into gender norms before they are even born; parents throw gender reveal parties, designating their child as female or male by slicing a cake and discovering that the interior is either blue or pink. The baby’s room is then painted blue or pink, based on the designated gender. Parents stock up on baby dolls or toy trucks, wall decals of dinosaurs or flowers—all before the child is born and can decide what toys and colors it prefers.

Gender defines us in everything we do. West and Zimmerman explain this in their article: “In Western societies, the accepted cultural perspective on gender views women and men as naturally and unequivocally defined categories of being with distinctive psychological and behavioral propensities” (West 128). This is why children are treated differently and are raised a specific way based on their sex.

Little girls are given Barbie dolls that are tall, blonde, white, and unnaturally skinny. They play with tea sets and dress up in princess gowns and heels. Any girl that decides she wants to play with more “masculine” toys or dress in clothes meant for boys is termed a *tom boy*. All of this creates an expectation for what a girl is supposed to act like very early on in her life. It

should also be noted that boys are forced into gender norms as well; feminism is meant to combat this issue, to lift women up and to support men who are oppressed for being too feminine. The reason that men are bullied for being feminine is that femininity is looked down on in the first place.

Companies take advantage of gender roles by separating masculine products from feminine products. This is called *market segmentation*. Market segmentation is a business model that targets a particular audience: “a product is developed to appeal to one or a set of personas, sufficient to illustrate key goals and market behavior patterns” (Pires). These personas are generally a certain demographic, for example, gender. Products are separated by gender so that businesses can make more money because people have to buy twice the amount of product. For instance, if a man and a woman live together, they will have to buy two types of razors: one for her and one for him. In reality, there is little difference between razors for women and razors for men besides the color.

Businesses have done this because they believe it is an effective strategy. They decide whether market segmentation is effective using multiple criteria:

Identifiability: Ability to distinguish characteristics that make the segment distinct, to be profile and measured; Differentiability: the segment is conceptually distinguished and expected to respond differently to other segments; Accessibility: The segment can be effectively reached... and served; Measurability: Can measure segment size and purchasing power; Substantiality: Segment size and purchasing power is deemed large and/or profitable enough to justify the targeting effort... (Pires).

Targeting male and female audiences fit these criteria. They are distinct and different. They are accessible. They can be measured, and they are considered by most people to each be half of the

population (this is challenged when the transgender community is considered as many people do not identify with the gender they were designated at birth, or with any gender at all). The public is used to their products being separated by gender and generally do not consider this to be a problem.

However, not only is the market separated into genders, the products offered are separated by gender expectations. The colors of hair products, razors, and toiletries for women are generally pink and purple. For men, these items are dark blue, grey, and black. Fragrances for women are lavender, vanilla, or different flowers and fruits. Fragrances for men are musky and earthy. It is expected that men use products for men and that women use products for women. If a man were to smell flowery, he would likely be made fun of.

Not only are women forced to buy separate products from men, but these products are often more expensive. Haircare products for women include shampoo, conditioner, hairspray, straighteners, other types of sprays and gels, and blow-dryers. Men generally just use shampoo, conditioner, and a blow-dryer, if that. Often, a man that uses more than this is considered feminine or “high maintenance.”

Market segmentation is everywhere. Lego, a brand that was gender neutral for the longest time, has recently come out with pink Lego sets for girls. Stores are separated into clothing for women, men, boys, and girls. Target decided in the last few years to combine the children’s sections so that clothing and toys were not separated by gender. They received a lot of criticism for this decision.

Many of the gender norms that are forced on girls and boys are not ancient concepts, as many people believe them to be. Preadolescent children used to wear dresses no matter their gender. Someone researching the life of Franklin Delano Roosevelt would be shocked to find

photos of him wearing a white dress as a child (Maglaty). This was the norm in the late 1800s. This idea that only girls can wear dresses stems from an ideology that emerged in the last few centuries that this type of garment is only meant for females and that there is something wrong with a boy if he wants to dress in this way.

In a 2012 article in the New York Times entitled “What’s So Bad About a Boy Who Wants to Wear a Dress?” Ruth Padawer discusses how the American idea that gender is a binary is an ethnocentric one. *Ethnocentrism* is the act of interpreting another culture through the lens of the culture to which you belong. Because gender is thought to be a binary by the majority of Americans, it is often assumed that this ideology is universal. It is not. Padawer mentions that in Samoa there is a third sex called *fa’afafine* (Padawer). Many societal pressures put on youth to act like they are supposed to because of their gender is based on the incorrect assumption that ideas of gender and sex are unified across cultures.

Being transgender is far from a new concept, but it is one that is only recently becoming accepted. In the 20th century, children who expressed interest in acting like a gender different than their own were sent to therapy (Padawer). Boys especially were sent to therapy after expressing as minimal interest in female gender roles like playing with dolls. Girls, on the other hand, were not usually taken to a doctor until they identified themselves as male. This practices emphasizes the misogyny behind this type of gender policing, as it was more accepting for girls to act like boys than for boys to act like girls.

The notion that pink is for girls and blue is for boys began in the mid 1940s during World War II. Before that, pink was for boys because it was considered the baby version of red, which was a masculine color associated with battle. Blue was for girls because it was calm and the Virgin Mary was said to have worn blue. This was noted in a June 1918 article produced by

Earnshaw's Infant's Department: "The generally accepted rule is pink for the boys and blue for the girls. The reason is that pink, being a more decided and stronger color, is more suitable for the boy, while blue, which is more delicate and dainty, is prettier for the girl" (Maglaty). The switch happened when Adolf Hitler designated homosexuals in concentration camps with a pink triangle. Pink became associated with homosexuality, and in order to avoid that association being passed onto young boys, the colors were switched.

There are many different arguments made about nature versus nurture. Do little girls naturally want dolls and the color pink? This history of color association with gender would say otherwise. It is more difficult to tell with dolls. Some people believe that motherhood is naturally instilled in all girls making them prefer dolls. Others believe that they prefer dolls because they are given dolls and see other girls with dolls, so they believe that is what they are expected to want. They also see advertisements in the media of girls playing with dolls and pink things, further enforcing the idea that these expectations are the norm.

As girls continue to grow, they are bombarded with more and more imaging of cultural perceptions of women. They see celebrities in magazines. They see models who are tall, skinny, and beautiful by Western standards. They watch television and see girls in make-up and fancy clothing. They observe as teenage girls in movies fall in love with strong, buff, masculine men. They try to dress like these girls and are told that they look like sluts. They cover up and they are called prudes and teases. They imitate what they see on television, trying to form life-long romances as teens or even pre-teens. A majority of television shows and movies portray teenagers having sex, but those scenes often leave out conversations about birth control or condoms or getting tested for Sexually Transmitted Infections or asking for consent.

These songs in which women are objects that men control, in which consent is fluid with blurred lines and grey areas, are part of the culture in which women grow up. They hear these Top 40 songs on the radio. These songs are played at school dances and at parties. If our ideology is based on nurture rather than nature, if girls are not genetically engineered to like the color pink or to wear dresses, it is also likely that they are not engineered to be subservient to men and to concede to men's sexual desires.

Listening to these songs, just like looking at models in magazines and watching commercials on television, instill these expectations in girls as they grow up. They are nurtured into believing that men can use them sexually without consequence; that men own their bodies. Just like how publications produced by department stores have told us whether baby girls should wear blue or pink, media like pop music tells our youth how they should act and how they should let themselves be treated.

Rape Culture and Media in the Legal Sphere

Having media represent rape culture not only normalizes it, it can promote its continuation. Rape culture in American pop music may lead to more people committing sexual assault. This argument stems from two places. The first is a definition of culture that was used earlier in this paper. This definition claims that culture is "used by people to interpret experience and generate behavior" (Spradley). It is widely agreed by scholars of popular music that the genre interprets the American experience. Couldn't it, then, generate that experience as well?

The second place from which this argument originates is made by Catharine MacKinnon, a lawyer and women's rights activist. MacKinnon is known for condemning pornography as sexist: "Pornography, in the feminist view is a form of forced sex, a practice of sexual politics, and institution of gender inequality" (MacKinnon 197). She believes that pornography instigated

violence against women, and she set out to ban it. She was influential in the creation of anti-pornography ordinances in Minneapolis and Indianapolis. The Minneapolis ordinance was vetoed by the mayor and the Indianapolis ordinance was ruled unconstitutional by the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals (Paban). Even though both failed, they directed a lot of attention toward her argument, which is still considered extremely controversial.

In a lecture that she gave at Harvard Law School in April of 1984, MacKinnon discussed pornography from a feminist perspective:

In pornography, there it is, in one place, all of the abuses that women had to struggle so long even to begin to articulate, all the *unspeakable* abuse: the rape, the battery, the sexual harassment, the prostitution, and the sexual abuse of children. Only in the pornography it is called something else: sex, sex, sex, sex, and sex, respectively.

Pornography sexualizes rape, battery, sexual harassment, prostitution, and child sexual abuse; it thereby celebrates, promotes, authorizes, and legitimizes them (MacKinnon 16-17).

MacKinnon not only believes that sexual abuse of women is prevalent in pornography, but she also believes that pornography fosters this abuse. Her argument combines two areas of constitutional law—obscenity and advocacy for violation of the law—which this paper will define and contextualize in order to evaluate MacKinnon's assertions.

The closest that the Supreme Court of the United States has come to regulating pornography has been by attempting to define it as obscene speech, which, as stated by the Supreme Court in *Roth v. United States* (1957), is not protected by the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. There are two tests that are currently used to decide if material is obscene: The *Miller* test and the *Jenkins* test.

In *Miller v. California*, Miller was convicted of knowingly distributing obscene material, a misdemeanor under a California statute. The Supreme Court created a three prong test to identify obscenity: “(a) whether “the average person, applying contemporary community standards” would find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest; (b) whether the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law; and (c) whether the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value” (Miller). This is still the primary test used to identify obscenity, but it has been criticized for being too vague, especially regarding the idea of “contemporary community standards,” which could be interpreted many different ways.

Jenkins v. Georgia (1974) was a case in which the appellant, Jenkins, was convicted in Georgia for distributing obscene material after showing the movie *Carnal Knowledge*. The Supreme Court reversed his conviction and clarified some of the ambiguity created by the *Miller* test, calling obscenity, “public portrayal of hard core sexual conduct for its own sake, and for the ensuing commercial gain” (Miller). This was technically first said in *Miller*, but was used in *Jenkins* to emphasize the hard-core quality of obscenity.

Whether or not pornography itself is obscene material has not been the focus of the Supreme Court. Instead, the Court usually discusses the obscene nature of pornography through the lens of protecting minors. In cases like *United State v. Playboy Entertainment Group, Inc.* and *Reno v. American Civil Liberties Union*, the Supreme Court was concerned with the possibility of minors stumbling across obscene material either on television or through internet browsing. In *Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coalition*, the Supreme Court found the Child Pornography Prevention Act of 1996 (CPPA) to be unconstitutional because it prohibited not only child pornography, but also simulated child pornography that did not involve actual children

(Ashcroft). For example, a pornographic movie that depicted an underage girl having sex with an adult man could have been seen as child pornography, even if the actress involved was actually over eighteen. This Act was meant to protect children, as were most of the rest of the cases involving pornography.

MacKinnon's argument about pornography is unusual because she is not trying to protect children from obscenity. Instead, she aims to protect women from being violated, no matter their age. The case involving the Indianapolis ordinance that MacKinnon helped create tried to use this argument. In *American Booksellers Association, Inc. v. Hudnut*, the ordinance was found to be unconstitutional based on the *Miller* test. The ordinance defines pornography in a way that is very different from obscenity:

the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women, whether in pictures or in words, that also includes one or more of the following: (1) Women are presented as sexual objects who enjoy pain or humiliation; or (2) Women are presented as sexual objects who experience sexual pleasure in being raped; or (3) Women are presented as sexual objects tied up or cut up or mutilated or bruised or physically hurt, or as dismembered or truncated or fragmented or severed into body parts; or (4) Women are presented as being penetrated by objects or animals; or (5) Women are presented in scenarios of degradation, injury abasement, torture, shown as filthy or inferior, bleeding, bruised, or hurt in a context that makes these conditions sexual; or (6) Women are presented as sexual objects for domination, conquest, violation, exploitation, possession, or use, or through postures or positions of servility or submission or display (American).

The United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit found that this did not satisfy the *Miller* test because it did not speak to prurient interest, to offensiveness, or to community

standards. The intent of the ordinance was not to protect anyone from obscene speech.

The Court of Appeals instead deemed the ordinance to be content based discrimination. In the words of the Court, “Speech treating women in the approved way—in sexual encounters “premised on equality” (MacKinnon, *supra*, at 22)—is lawful no matter how sexually explicit. Speech treating women in the disapproved way—as submissive in matters sexual or as enjoying humiliation—is unlawful no matter how significant the literary, artistic, or political qualities of the work taken as a whole. The state may not ordain preferred viewpoints in this way” (American). The Supreme Court has stated many times that speech cannot be regulated based on the content or viewpoint. It was for this reason that the Court of Appeals found the ordinance in *Hudnut* to be unconstitutional.

Another interesting aspect of this argument is that MacKinnon believes pornography creates a mindset that advocates for sexual abuse of women. Although she never explicitly calls it this, her views of pornography are less centered around obscenity and more the idea that pornography constitutes speech that advocates for violation of the law by promoting the sexual abuse of women. Advocacy of violation of the law is not a category of constitutional law that is usually associated with pornography. Instead, these cases usually appeared in front of the Supreme Court during times of war. A few famous cases of this sort are *Schenck v. United States*, which dealt with leaflets condemning the draft during the Vietnam war that suggested people should evade it; *Abrams v. United States*, which involved multiple offenders distributing leaflets, urging workers to stop making weapons for the war; *Gitlow v. New York*, a case involving a member of the American Communist Party getting convicted for proposing a communist revolution; and *Brandenburg v. Ohio*, which dealt with a leader of a Ku Klux Klan group getting convicted for advocating a crime in a publication.

Even though pornography is very different from the topics of these other cases, it is usually discussed in relation to the First Amendment – as are the others. In the broadest terms, cases that deal with advocacy of violation of the law involve materials that advocate crime, though the Supreme Court has created tests to narrow this definition. In their textbook on Criminal Law and Procedure, Scheb and Scheb II describe advocacy of unlawful conduct:

One of the most basic problems posed by the First Amendment is whether speech advocating unlawful conduct might itself be made unlawful. The Supreme Court first encountered this problem in *Schenck v. United States*, supra, where an official of the Socialist Party appealed a conviction under the Espionage Act of 1917, 40 Stat. at L. 217, 219... The Supreme Court upheld Schenck's conviction, saying that the question in every case is whether the words used are used in such circumstances and are of such a nature as to create clear and present danger that they will bring about the substantive evils that Congress has a right to prevent... The modern Supreme Court has refined the clear and present danger doctrine so that public advocacy may be prohibited only in situations when there is imminent lawless action (Scheb 60).

This description of the act of advocating of illegal acts does not go into detail about the Supreme Court's differentiation between *speech* and *conduct*. Speech is the words, literature, media, etc that is being presented to the public. Conduct is the manner in which the speech is produced and distributed. Conduct is often the deciding factor in these types of cases. In *Schenck*, the man convicted distributed anti-draft literature to draftees, which authorities believed could lead to them resisting the draft. It was the manner in which he distributed the leaflets that made form of speech unconstitutional. If he had handed out these leaflets randomly to the public in general,

including women who were not eligible for the draft and therefore could not illegally resist it, it would not have been a crime.

MacKinnon's argument that pornography encourages the sexual abuse of women could potentially fall into this category of constitutional law, because she is saying that pornography could influence the watcher to violate the law by committing an act similar to the ones in the videos. In *Hudnut*, the Court of Appeals does not discuss this aspect of the law, instead choosing to focus on whether pornography is obscene based on its definition in the ordinance. Based on the current wording of the law, she still probably would have lost the case even if they had viewed it in this way because she focused on the speech aspect of pornography and not the conduct.

The Supreme Court does agree with MacKinnon's assertions that individuals who view pornography might be influenced by its themes and commit sexual abuse themselves – "There is so much to this perspective...we accept the premises of this legislation. Depictions of subordination tend to perpetuate subordination" (American). Could the court have found that pornography advocates crime and chosen to deem the ordinance constitutional for that reason? It would be difficult. Since her argument is attacking the speech itself, they would have needed evidence that crimes were committed *immediately* after viewing pornography and that these crimes were related to and *likely* to follow viewing this material.

Could this type of argument be applied to rape culture in pop music? Could it be argued that songs with these themes advocate rape? It is an incredibly controversial argument to make given the backlash Catharine MacKinnon received for her mirroring thoughts on pornography. Even self-proclaimed feminists argued against MacKinnon on some points. Denise Schaeffer, a political science professor, argues that MacKinnon is partly to blame for the idea that

contemporary feminist theory is radically opposed to liberalism (Schaeffer 699). MacKinnon's far-reaching views created a divide between different groups of feminists and she was not well liked for doing so. Schaeffer is not against all of MacKinnon's views, but she does disagree with MacKinnon's separation of feminism and liberalism.

In her article "The Anti-Essentialism v. Essentialism Debate in Feminist Legal Theory: The Debate and Beyond," Jane Wong does not discuss a separation in the feminist community between feminism and liberalism but instead claims the divide is between essentialism and anti-essentialism. She defines essentialism as "the set of fundamental attributes which are necessary and sufficient conditions for a thing to be [considered] a thing of that type" and she defines legal reform, another key concept in her article, as "an effort to change existing patriarchal law and to empower women and improve their position" (Wong 274). Wong finds that, beginning in the 1980s, many feminist legal theories are criticized for being essentialist.

Catharine MacKinnon's arguments too have been called essentialist. She often denounces the two most common approaches at equality used by feminists, "be the same as men," and "be different from men," and argues that both are incorrect approaches because they use men as a standard (Wong 280). She instead believes that women – an identity which in her writings appears to be a singular one that applies to everyone with that identity the same way – should flip the traditional balance of dominant men and subordinate women to give women power and to expose the way the abuse against them has been silenced. The effort she put forth with *Hudnut* followed this philosophy, as it was an attempt to take away male sexual power over women.

Anti-essentialists have offered one primary reason for why essentialism could be detrimental for progress, which Wong explains in her paper. In essentialism, women are all treated the same and this is impractical as women are not all the same (Wong 282). MacKinnon

is criticized by anti-essentialists because she views all women as being one woman and ignores the differences among them and the intersectionality created by different identities like race, sexuality, social class, etc (283). These critics believe that MacKinnon needs to broaden her idea of who women are and how they need to be treated.

Drucilla Cornell, another critic mentioned by Wong, says that MacKinnon is not only an essentialist, but she also succumbs to derelection. Derelection is “a state of being ‘in which feminine difference cannot be expressed except as signified in the masculine imaginary or the masculine symbolic’” (Wong 283). Cornell believes MacKinnon constructs her definition of woman through the male gaze.

Despite the criticism made against MacKinnon by fellow feminists, her theory about pornography does still have merit. To make a similar argument about rape culture in pop music would be equally as controversial. Still, it is necessary to at least consider the idea. Parts of this argument have been hinted at before in other sections of this thesis. For example, Murphey’s thoughts on kinesthetic rehearsal began to head a bit in this direction when discussing “future pacing” and the relationship between repetitive imagery and future action. Murphey’s and Hyman’s research suggest that themes in pop music, including rape culture, could be integrated into repetitive and involuntary mental imagery when these catchy songs get stuck in peoples’ heads. The Court of Appeals in *Hudnut* also supported this claim, even when they found the ordinance to be unconstitutional. Scholars from many different specialties all seem to agree that popular material can perpetuate and foster negative themes, a conclusion that could extend to rape culture in American pop music.

The Intrusive Song Phenomenon

Another potential problem created by this trend is the way that the human brain interacts with catchy pop songs. Scholars of musical psychology refer to the experience of having a song stuck in your head as the “intrusive song phenomenon.” According to a group of faculty in the psychology department of Western Washington University, “The phenomenon has been labeled many things: an earworm... imagined music... involuntary semantic memories... and involuntary musical imagery” (Hyman 204). The idea of the intrusive song is a combination of these ideas, all of which imply that the experience is at least partly a negative one, especially *earworm* and the use of *involuntary* as a descriptor. Furthermore, these scholars have found that the songs that often get stuck in peoples’ heads are simple and repetitive (Hyman 204). The genre of music that is most known for being simple and repetitive is pop music, with its standard format and four-chord structure. It follows then that pop songs are likely to be intrusive songs that become stuck in the heads of listeners.

Not only is the intrusive song phenomenon often annoying, it is also potentially harmful based on the content of the songs and the nature of the intrusive song being similar to involuntary memories. Involuntary memories are the opposite of voluntary memories in that they are not under conscious control and can be described as “instances in which memories come to mind spontaneously, unintentionally, automatically, without effort, and so forth” (Mace 2). Intrusive songs are similar in that they are also not conjured consciously. There are other parallels between the two phenomena. Ira E. Hyman Jr. and his colleagues describe these similarities:

Repetitiveness is a defining characteristic of intrusive memories... Experiencing an involuntary memory is often described as similar to reliving the original event. Intrusive

songs may also involve a sense of re-experiencing... intrusive songs appear to include a repetitive quality such that they return frequently to awareness much like some instances of involuntary memories... and intrusive memories... Involuntary memories generally occur in response to cues. Intrusive songs may return in a similar manner (Hyman 206).

The resemblances between these two types of phenomena are problematic for multiple reasons. Primarily, intrusive memories can concern traumatic experiences.

They don't always; John Mace, a faculty member at Eastern Illinois University, sorts involuntary memories into three categories: precious fragments, by-products of other memories, and not so precious fragments. Precious fragments are memories, usually positive ones, that are conjured during everyday activities. Mace quotes a famous example of a precious fragment from novelist Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*: "I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea... a shiver ran through me... and suddenly the memory revealed itself" (Mace 3). In this moment, Proust remembers a moment with his aunt after drinking tea that she had dipped cake into. This recollection, which is clearly a happy one, comes to him during the process of an everyday act that acts as a cue for the memory. Involuntary memories can also come about as by-products of other memories, both involuntary and voluntary. "For example, when one retrieves a memory, sometimes the memory will trigger another related memory, which in turn might trigger another" (Mace 3). These kinds of memories can be positive or negative.

The third category – not so precious fragments – is a major point of concern given the similarities between involuntary memories and intrusive songs. Not so precious fragments are memories that are the result of traumatic experiences. These kinds of involuntary memories are especially common for individuals with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and have been a source of concern for many scholars, including Freud, who actually believed that all involuntary

memories are unpleasant in some way (Mace 4). If intrusive songs are intrinsically similar to involuntary memories, then it is entirely possible that songs with negative traits can be remembered unwillingly just as negative memories are. Based on this research, the likelihood of a pop song that perpetuates rape culture becoming stuck in a person's head and being involuntarily recalled later is very high.

Tim Murphey compares the phenomenon of having a song stuck in your head to experiences when learning new languages and what he calls involuntary visual and kinesthetic rehearsal. Involuntary visual and kinesthetic rehearsal is similar to involuntary memory in that it happens unconsciously. Images appear as a visual din, and people learn and grow through these repetitive mental pictures. Murphey notes, "Artists have told me that when working intensely on a painting, they can't get the image out of their heads, that it stays with them when they leave the studio and comes to them at strange moments" (Murphey 55). This idea is very close to the previous scholars' thoughts on the relationship between involuntary memory and intrusive song.

Murphey also notes that these involuntary images are not always pleasant ones: "Traumatic experiences or horror movies may keep us from sleeping because we involuntarily continue to see them" (Murphey 55). He also briefly introduces the question of what people learn from re-experiencing these horrific images. He postulates that they make us familiar with these troubling thoughts in order to be able to confront similar situations if they arise. An alternative angle, however, is that when this repetition creates familiarization, it also creates normalization.

What if you hear a song for the first time and a lyric takes you by surprise as being particularly racist or misogynistic? What if that song gets stuck in your head? Even though that lyric bothers you at first, it is repeated over and over in your head and you become familiar with it. Maybe after a while you forget that it ever bothered you in the first place. A popular example

of this phenomenon is an episode of *SpongeBob SquarePants* titled “Earworm” in which SpongeBob gets a song stuck in his head and this “earworm” manifests itself as an actual worm. While he finds it annoying, he sings along with the song playing in his head, frustrating other people as well. Murphey’s idea of involuntary images could be problematic when the unconsciously reoccurring images are negative ones that become learned and echoed after multiple repetitions.

Murphey also discusses kinesthetic rehearsal, or the process of learning through motion. This can be involuntary as well – “Involuntary kinaesthetic rehearsal may be manifested in gestures, tics, nail biting, smoking, and perhaps tapping one’s foot to music” (Murphey 56). Kinesthetic rehearsal is common for competitive athletes like divers and gymnasts. When imagining their routines in their heads, they might involuntarily imitate the actions they will soon be doing through smaller, subtler movements. Murphey describes this as “an example of physical synecdoche, a partial action representing and encapsulating the whole, comparable to a phrase of Din which hangs on after a conversation” (56). The primary argument here is that mental images and physical movements are often connected, whether they are intended to be or not.

When listening to music, people often move along with the rhythm of the song without realizing it. They copy movements suggested by the lyrics, both overt and subtle. When listening to “Cupid Shuffle,” “Cha Cha Slide,” “Cotton Eye Joe,” “Macarena,” and “Vogue,” people are likely to dance along with songs based on what the lyrics tell them to do or what the music videos tells them to do. These songs are examples of overt suggestions of movement in music.

There could also be subtler suggestions of action in lyrics. Someone listening to a song that makes light of sexual assault might be unconsciously tempted to imitate that actions that are being repeated in their head. Murphey calls this “neurolinguistic programming... called “future

“pacing”, which asserts that if someone can be shown how to “see” a possibility, then it becomes more possible to realize it” (Murphey 56). This argument is a bit different than his previous ones because the action will come after the images are involuntarily repeated in a person’s head instead of during that time. Still, it could also apply to pop songs with themes of sexual assault. Listening to these songs could instill the “possibility” and later could turn into action.

Conclusion

Rape culture is prevalent in the American media—especially in pop music. Not only in the songs themselves, but in the music videos, stage performances, and lives of the musicians. There are multiple theories regarding the consequences to this tendency, a sample of which have been discussed in this paper—the gender studies approach, the intrusive song phenomenon, and the MacKinnon argument.

Those who have noticed this trend have tried to combat it in multiple ways. A good way to approach the issue is to look at the ways that others have tried to fix this problem, and to determine whether or not they were effective. Some of these attempts have been successful, but many of them have been problematic in their own ways.

As was noted earlier in this paper, Catharine MacKinnon tried to combat rape culture in pornography by limiting it. The First Amendment of the United States Constitution promises free speech that will not be infringed upon by government entities. It is for this reason that MacKinnon's ordinance was rejected by the court system for limiting free speech based on content, since she attacked a certain type of pornography rather than pornography as a whole for being obscene. Trying to limit pop music in this way would garner a similar response.

Another way that feminists have tried to stifle this negative ideology in pop music is to create feminist parodies of these songs and videos. A group of women made a feminist parody of the "Blurred Lines" music video. This song, entitled "Defined Lines," is a critique of roles forced on women by men. The music video features fully dressed women with three scantily dressed, buff men (Auckland). While this does take away the male gaze and puts the women in a place of power, it does not preach for equality. Instead, the roles are reversed—the fear of which is something that has caused feminism to face a lot of backlash.

While the women in this video are the ones in charge, the men are now being repressed by gender norms. They are all fit, much more than the average man. They are all tall and fairly light skinned. While this version fixed the issues presented by women being viewed by the male gaze accompanied by a song about the blurred lines of consent, it replaces the women with men, flipping the situation rather than seeking equality. It also does not fix any of the problems described earlier when this paper analyzed the music video for “Blurred Lines.” The men are also conforming to cultural expectations of them by being skinny, fit, masculine, tall, light skinned, etc. While making a parody is an interesting tactic, it is not the best way to illuminate this issue.

One attempt that has been fairly successful has been using social media to call out artists for perpetuating rape culture. The quotations from survivors that were used in Part One of this paper are from Project Unbreakable. Project Unbreakable was started in 2011 by Grace Brown. She describes the experience:

“I began by photographing survivors of sexual assault, holding a poster with a quote from their attacker. I simply started by photographing people that I knew, and at that point, I had no idea how powerful this project could be... Survivors were contacting me, asking me to photograph them, and submitting their own images if they lived too far away. And I realized that I have the ability to make a huge difference in a world where sexual abuse is shamed and kept quiet. People were finally letting go and taking the power back from words that were once used against them” (Mamamia).

The project was empowering for the survivors and brought to light the similarities between song lyrics in pop music, especially in the song “Blurred Lines,” and the words said by rapists. It

appears that the most successful solutions come from the words of the survivors themselves, speaking honestly about their experiences.

When figuring out how to combat this issue, the first step is knowing that there is something that needs to be fixed. Many people still believe that rape culture is a myth and that feminism is for radical women who hate men. Educating the public on the true definition of feminism, as well as pointing out how gender roles effect the market and how we treat children as they grow up, can shape the way that people understand gender. Going further and teaching the masses about rape culture and the male gaze can open their eyes to the presence of misogyny and non-consent in pop music, as well as other types of media. Once the public recognizes that misogyny and gender discrimination still exist, and that rape culture is a part of this, we can eradicate these themes from our music.

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