Pleasures and Perils of the Performance of Music, Masculinity, and Cool

Melinda Mills
Castleton State College

Abstract:

This article considers two songs linked by allegations of copyright infringement. These songs are Robin Thicke's (2013), "Blurred Lines," and Marvin Gaye's (1977), "Got To Give It Up." In this paper, I conduct a lyrical analysis of the songs, to unpack other similarities beyond the musical and stylistic ones. Specifically, I consider the performance of masculinity, as expressed in ways that I argue supports patriarchy and rape culture. I draw comparisons between the songs to show how, despite the anticipated expanding possibilities of masculinities (Connell 1995), some performances or forms of masculinities remain the same. The stability and permanence of hegemonic masculinity accommodates the violence against women expressed in this music. I illustrate and argue that the normalization of violence in the song lyrics constitutes a linguistic violence. This violence makes the construction of new masculinities, and the dismantling of rape culture, that much more of a challenge and an imperative.

Keywords: Hegemonic masculinity, sexuality, music, media, rape culture, violence

Müzik Performansının Zevkleri ve Riskleri, Erkeklik ve *Cool'*[1]

Melinda Mills
Castleton State College

Özet:

Bu çalışma, telif hakkı ihlalleri konusunda birbiri ile alakalı iki şarkıyı dikkate almaktadır. Bu şarkılar, Robin Thicke'nin "Bulanık Çizgiler" (2013) ve Marvin Gaye'nin "Vazgeçmeyi Öğrendim" (1977) isimli eserleridir. Bu araştırmada, şarkıların sözleri üzerinden, müzikal ve stile ilişkin olanlardan farklı, diğer benzerlikleri ortaya çıkarma temelli bir analiz yapılmıştır. Özellikle, erkeklik performansı ve bunun ifade şekillerinin aterkil yapıyı ve rap kültürünü desteklediğini ortaya koydum. Şarkılar arası karşılaştırmada, genişleyen erkeklik ihtimallerinin arttığına dair önkabüle rağmen (Connell 1995), hala erkekliklerin performans ve şekillerinin aynı olduğu gösterilmeye çalışılmıştır. Hegemonik erkekliğin durağanlığı ve devamlılığı, müzikte ifade edilen kadına karşı şiddetle de bağdaşmaktadır. Şarkılardaki şiddetin normalleşmesinin dilsel bir şiddet inşa ettiğini gösterdiğim bu çalışma, bu şiddetin yeni erkekliklerin inşasını ve rap kültürünün dağılmasını –ki bu bir meydan okumadan ve bir zorunluluktan ötedir- gerçekleştirdiğini savunmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Hegemonik erkeklik, cinsellik, müzik, medya, rap kültürü, şiddet

[1] *Cool* popüler, havalı, umursamaz kişiler için kullanılır.

Introduction

In the fall of 2013, Robin Thicke's record label, Sony, was sued by Marvin Gaye's family. The legal case alleged copyright infringement, or unauthorized use of and close similarities between Thicke's overwhelmingly popular summer smash, "Blurred Lines," and Marvin Gaye's, "Got to Give It Up." In the summer of 2013, Thicke song's enjoyed mixed reviews from the consuming public, and conversations were abuzz with debates. Proponents of the artist adamantly defended the song, denying (or refusing) to see the provocation in the lyrics. Opponents, conversely, expressed their disapproval, if not their outrage. How could music companies and media corporations support the circulation of such questionable lyrics and its attendant video? Did the proponents of the artist, song, and lyrics see the possible flaws?

In this paper, I will examine the song, "Blurred Lines," drawing a comparison to Marvin Gaye's, "Got to Give It Up." Then, I will discuss the two songs in terms of the performance of masculinity, and to engage the question of violence against women in the form of a normalized rape culture. Since the two songs are musically linked through the alleged appropriation of one into the other, I use that "borrowing" as the final theme to explore the idea of "thieving" or stealing culturally and physically. That is, I consider how the allegations of thievery relate to *both* the cultural appropriation of Marvin Gaye's music, without his permission, as well as the overarching thievery of women's sexual agency and bodies through lyrics and music that colonize or deny women's bodily autonomy and sexual freedom.

I organize my thoughts around the thematic of images of masculinity as dominating and rapacious masculinity as a potentially threatening thievery of women's liberation, under the guise of such. I link the lyrical content of both songs together to consider the historical legacy of sexual violence, and the cultural productions of masculinity as performed at different historical moments, by men located at different social intersections regarding race and class.

Mediated Masculinities

In her seminal work, *Masculinities,* R.W. Connell (77) explains,

> "At any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted. Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women."

Connell (77) continues to clarify that hegemonic masculinity entices men of various social positions, not "always the most powerful people," to perpetuate it and reap its rewards. This supports the system of patriarchy and male domination, or as Connell (77) posits, "hegemony is likely to be established only if there is some correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power, collective if not individual." Since I focus in this paper on mediated masculinities, and the lyrical content of two songs by men music artists, I borrow from Connell's discussion of hegemonic masculinity. Both Marvin Gaye and Robin Thicke have enjoyed great popularity and success in their respective eras and genres. Both could be said to articulate hegemonic masculinities, in ways that align with the notion that hegemonic masculinity "embodies a 'currently accepted' strategy. When conditions for the defence of patriarchy change, the bases for the dominance of a particular masculinity are eroded. New groups may challenge old solutions and construct a new hegemony. The dominance of *any* group of men may be challenged by women. Hegemony, then, is a historically mobile relation." (Connell 77).

Connell illustrates how hegemony encourages men's consent to male domination in a patriarchy. She argues that the structure of society invites and then rewards men's complicity in the system. For music artists such as Gaye and Thicke, they occupy (occupied, in the case of Gaye) different social locations within this society. Nevertheless, both arguably benefited from their performance of masculinity, as they

engaged in their musical performances. In the next section, I discuss each song in greater depth, offering some interpretations of the lyrical analysis I conducted of each song.

The Performance of Music, Masculinity, and Cool

"Got to Give It Up"

In 1977, Marvin Gaye released his song, "Got to Give It Up." The song opens by describing a man who does not appear to be socially facile. He desires social skillfulness and facility but remains nervous at parties. His bodily yearning motivates him to shake his nerves, or perhaps his dancing diminishes his nerves. Gaye sings, "I got up on the floor and thought, 'Somebody could choose me.' No more standin' there beside the walls. I done got myself together baby and now I'm havin' a ball." The lyrics to this disco song serve as a reminder of the times in which this music was produced, as well as how people understand gender performance in specific historical contexts.

Connell (202) speaks to this point in anticipating emergent expressions of masculinities that might encourage a reconceptualization or broadening of the collective understandings of the gender category and its attendant performances. Connell (202) writes, "The expansion of possibilities is not only a question of growing variety in current sexual practice. There has also been a flowering of utopian thinking about gender and sexuality, a sense of expanded historical possibilities for the longer term." Expressions of masculinities reflect the historical moments in which they are lived, as does the music in which these masculinities are constructed and performed.

The emergent music form of disco spawned its own unique dancing style, fashion, and music culture. That Gaye produced a song within this era that speaks to the vulnerabilities and pleasures of being embodied in his male body gives us a refreshing perspective on how men navigated the party scene and large social landscape in the 1970s. The

publicity of this vulnerability stands in contrast to the perpetually stoic and strong image of hegemonic masculinity.

Additionally, Gaye's lyrics are interesting in showing how a man moves, literally and figuratively, on the dance floor and in social life. The lyrics describe a man, perhaps one lacking confidence in or comfort with himself, moving from a bit reserved or reluctant to a fun-loving, getting-down kind of guy. This transition could be read as a social success story for a man who learns how to embody confidence and can comfortably adapt to any setting. A deeper reading of these lyrics invite consideration of the transformation that occurs throughout the song, and the type of masculinity arrived at by the song's end, and that which is performed and described throughout the song.

One part of this performance is that of "cool." Majors and Billson (1992) explore the performance of "cool" by defining and discussing the "cool pose" in their book of the same name. They explain,

> By cool pose we mean the presentation of self many black males use to establish their male identity. Cool pose is a ritualized form of masculinity that entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, impression management, and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single, critical message: pride, strength, and control. Black males who use cool pose are often chameleon-like in their uncanny ability to change their performance to meet the expectations of a particular situation or audience. They manage the impression they communicate to others through the use of an imposing array of masks, acts, and facades.

As Majors and Billson (1992) note, the cool pose operates as currency and a liability for black men. The cool pose extends or complements hegemonic performances of masculinity that require men to wear a mask. For black men, this mask protects them from secondary status created by a racial hierarchy that positions them lower than white men in this society. "Cool pose …provides a mask that suggests competence,

high self-esteem, control, and inner strength. It also hides self-doubt, insecurity, and inner turmoil." (Majors and Billson 5).

This mask also makes real romantic relationships and intimacy less of a possibility or actuality. The performance of cool interrupts the very relationships that men may desire. Their cool pose prevents them from cultivating wholeheartedness and true intimacy. As Majors and Billson (43) note, "Being cool is paradoxical because the behaviors that afford black males a semblance of social competence and control elsewhere in their lives are the same behaviors that ultimately help run their relationships with women aground."

Applying the cool pose to Marvin Gaye's song, "Got to Give It Up," helps us understand the limitations and contradictions of cool, and of the expectations or pressures of masculinities. They also help illuminate the complexity of black masculinity, as a conflictive or tenuous performance. If black masculinity centers around wearing a mask or not looking vulnerable, what are the dangers that exist in relation to this "cool pose"? To "play it cool" is to pretend not to have feelings or participate in one's self-objectification. What are the ways that the performance of masculinity becomes dangerous? I address these questions in a subsequent section, but turn first to discuss the dimension of dancing as it surfaces in the Gaye song.

The Conundrum of Cool

Another part of the performance of masculinity and cool centers around dance in "Got to Give It Up." Marvin Gaye's song offers a potentially playful flirtation or suggestively dangerous dance between a man and a woman. While some dance scholars argue that dance precedes communication, others view dance as a mode of communication. Thinking about dance as an embodied expressive art adds to the performance of masculinity. As a form of creative and communicative movement, dance can be understood as an improvised and ritualized performance, reflective of the broader culture and society.

It has been said that dancing is like sex, or implies a sexualized dynamic between people. Simon Ottenberg (13-14) posits,

> Dance may involve sexual-like movements and gestures which are acceptable in performance but not otherwise in public non-secular dances which serve ritual purposes. Dance situations may create an air of sexual freedom that encourages liaisons and matings, particularly if the dance is held way into the night and drinking occurs.

Others suggest that dance can be "performed for entertainment," (Castaldi 2006:44). In discussing Dagan (1997), Castaldi notes the interpretation of dance, under Western eyes. Dagan draws associations between dance and procreation, or the ritualized sexual presentation of self and performance of initiation. Castaldi argues, "'Dance becomes symbolic of the act of knowledge in so far as it embodies a process of sharing energy, that unstable, undetermined vital force that lends unity to the universe and constitutes the 'surreality' of the everyday world" (Castaldi 2006:52).

Here, the heteronormative frame structuring the discussion of dance in its sexualized and ritualistic forms proves useful but limited. When applied to the lyrics in Gaye's song, we can see evidence of the sexual initiation and wooing, as euphemistically described by "grooving." It makes sense that the lyrics in the song progress to involve some sexual pursuit: "As long as you're groovin', there's always a chance. Somebody watching might wanna make romance. Move your body, ooo baby, you dance all night to the groove and feel alright." The lyrics echo Castaldi's point about the social sexual connotations and functions of dance. The lyrics are loose enough to suggest that the "groovin'" that Gaye refers to may be innuendo for sexual foreplay or a reference to sex, but also to dancing.

The disco era has been celebrated (and critiqued) for contributing to the shifting sexual mores of the time, loosening up people's sexual standards and thus their (presumed) sexual behavior. The lyrics above depict that. They capture the linkage between dancing, sexuality, and

sensuality, as well as the collective tensions and anxieties around the expression of this sexuality.

The innuendo in the song remains suggestive, blurring the lines between dancing and sexual activity. The bodily pleasures of dancing may feel akin to that of sexual pleasures, or may be a kind of sexual pleasure, or simply serve as an invitation to sexual pleasure. If dance is an expressive art that can be "defined as a prelinguistic form of communication that allows for the expression of emotions that cannot be domesticated into the linguistic system (raw instincts) because they exceed the signifying capacity of language," can dance movement ever be misinterpreted or become a form of miscommunication?

What if the signals of dancing as an invitation to sexual pleasure, on the dance floor, or beyond, are not clear to all involved? What if the "somebody watching" mistakes a "dancing-as-pleasure" look for an invitation to "make romance"? How do we learn to interpret and understand these distinctions between autonomous embodied pleasures and social ones intended to attract others or to initiate sex? What do these lyrics reveal about the performativity of masculinity through dance? Are the lyrics choreographing grooving as dancing or a dangerous threat of violence to women?

An example of the ambiguity in these dangers surfaces when Gaye sings, "Everybody's groovin' on like a fool but if you see me spread out then let me in. Baby just party high and low. Let me step into your erotic zone. Move it up, turn it 'round, ooo, shake it down." What is her erotic zone? How do we know that what is erotic to him is the same to her? Do these lyrics enforce a phallocentrism, or male dominance? Does the woman want him to do as he desires or as she desires?

These lyrics illustrate men's gender performance as aggressors in sexual pursuit of women and pleasure. This kind of hegemonic masculinity problematically also links this performance to violence. As Connell (1995:83) explains, "A structure of inequality on this scale, involving a massive dispossession of social resources, is hard to imagine without violence. It is, overwhelmingly, the dominant gender who hold

and use the means of violence. Men are armed far more often than women." Connell continues to describe the variations in expressions of violence, including violence expressed from positions of power and domination or marginalization and oppression.

These ideas link to that of Michael Kaufmann (1987), who suggests that violence exists as a triad, with violence directed at men themselves, other men, and women. In the case of the lyrics in "Got to Give It Up," the announcement of the man stepping into the woman's erotic zone proves problematic in that he does not seek her permission. A world without permission creates a world of violence. Anti-violence activists and scholars instead advocate for global educational efforts that encourage "enthusiastic consent," or a consensual "yes!" instead of a coerced "no" (Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth; Friedman and Valenti). Securing or expressing a "yes" mutually means conveying individual interest and clarifying blurred lines. It allows people to facilitate communication in order to activate the language of consent and their sexual agency. Moving from a questionable yes to an enthusiastic one minimizes misunderstandings that stem from presumptions, particularly for those with more power and privilege to do so.

Presuming to know, but not asking, what women want is another way men objectify women, deny women their sexual agency, perpetuate the gender binary that constructs men as always already desiring sexual subjects and women as always already to-be-desired sexual objects. This is problematic for everyone, because it operates as a persistent form of social control. It disciplines our gender expression and sexuality (whether as sexual subjects or objects) and endorses rape culture because women experience these gendered sexual scripts as limitations or frustrations.

According to MacKinnon (45), "Consent is supposed to be women's form of control over intercourse, different from but equal to the custom of male initiative. Man proposes, woman disposes. Even the ideal in it is not mutual." If women cannot control who steps into their erotic zone, what parts of their own bodies and sexualities can women

control? MacKinnon's discussion here reminds us that women are not always in control of women's sexuality: "The deeper problem is that women are socialized to passive receptivity; may have or perceive no alternative to acquiescence; may prefer it to the escalated risk of injury and the humiliation of a lost fight; submit to survive. Also, force and desire are not mutually exclusive under male supremacy." (MacKinnon 48). Put differently, women may or may not want to control themselves, a choice constantly constrained by the controlling force of patriarchal domination and the construction of gender.

Traditional gender expectations encourage initiation, assertion, and dominance from men, which in turn work to control women's bodily autonomy and sexuality. Hegemonic heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinity mandates this dominance by men of women. To be a woman, based on this gendered expectation, is to submit to men. This submission includes a sexual kind, and follows this logic: "Sex itself cannot be an injury. Women have sex every day. Sex makes a woman a woman. Sex is what women are for. The sexualized submission of women offers partial explanation for the 'eroticization of dominance and submission.'" (MacKinnon 49). This begins to explain the reciprocal relationship in which "sexuality is violent, so perhaps violence is sexual. Violence against women is sexual on both counts, doubly sexy." (MacKinnon 49).

Because women are treated as sexual objects, "it further follows that acts by anyone which treat a woman according to her object label, woman, are in a sense sexual acts. The extent to which sexual acts are acts of objectification remains a question of one's accounts of women's freedom to life their own meanings as other than illusions, of individuals' ability to resist or escape, even momentarily, prescribed social meanings short of political change." (MacKinnon 49). Drawing the line between the reality and representation of masculinity, between sex and violent, between consent and coercion remains difficult. The dismissive tones registered in reactions that suggest songs are just that ignore or overlook the actuality of linguistic violence (Gay). As Butler and others

argue, words wound. They take on meanings that prove to be injurious or hurtful, even violent.

This scholarship encourages a closer examination of music and lyrics as "just songs" and pushes us to consider a shift from words that wound dismissed as "just words" to *just* words in a world of *just* sex. This would challenge us to see "rape as violence not sex" (MacKinnon), to discourage the perpetual perception of sex and violence as mutually exclusive, and to encourage the more accurate view of them as mutually definitive. By encouraging this education, people would be prompted to engage in and enjoy enthusiastic consensual sexual relationships or acts, and to minimize the blurred lines that frame so much of our mediated realities. I discuss this topic next.

From "Got to Give It Up" to "I Know You Want It"

Behind the allegations of musical appropriation as evidenced in the borrowing from Marvin Gaye's song, "Got to Give it Up," Robin Thicke stands as a symbolic reminder of this process. That Thicke took the liberties to borrow from a musical legend without sufficient permission becomes an ironic metaphor relating to the very song in question. The lawsuit underscores the larger problematic of blurred lines, culturally, socially, and sexually, with Thicke's actions lending themselves to a broader discussion of thievery.

Considerations of the lyrics to the hugely successful, "Blurred Lines," and the legal case regarding Marvin Gaye's song involve some recognition of the sad reality of rape culture. According to Buchwald et el. (2005: xi),

> Rape culture…is a complex of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. It is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent…. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women and presents it as the norm.

One example of this stems from the very legal case involving Thicke himself. Arguably, the US legal system better protects the property and legacy of Marvin Gaye than of victims of sexual violence (MacKinnon 1989). In other words, did the lawsuit against Thicke receive more attention than related instances of sexual violence did during that summer? What does it mean when women, who are so often understood as property, are offered less legal protection than the copyright to a song? What do we learn about masculinity as embedded in and expressed from these institutions? As MacKinnon (53) asks, "What is it reasonable for a man to believe concerning a woman's desire for sex when heterosexuality is compulsory?" That is, when masculinity is always already heterosexual and consent appears always already assured, what blurred lines between consent and coercion could exist?

The blurred lines stem from the uncertainty of Thicke's intent or knowledge of using Gaye's music to shape his own song echo the uncertainty that many people have about the song itself. The lyrical analysis of "Blurred Lines" offers a subjective interpretation of the song, and intends to link the cultural appropriation of Gaye's song to the men's thievery of women's sexual agency, in music and in society. This analysis works to put on display the language present in the songs of Gaye and Thicke, to highlight the normalization of rape culture through the performance of music and masculinity. This masculinity supports the problematic dynamic of linguistic and sexual violence against women. The analysis exposes the extent to which "reality" is constructed through frames of masculinity. It remains as MacKinnon (53) argues,

> One-sided: male-sided…. The one whose subjectivity becomes the objectivity of 'what happened' is a matter of social meaning, that is, a matter of sexual politics. One-sidedly erasing women's violation or dissolving presumptions into the subjectivity of either side are the alternatives dictated by the terms of the object/subject split, respectively.

That men feel a sense of entitlement stemming from male privilege offers partial explanation for men's behavior. In *Proving Manhood,* Beneke (75) argues, "Sex could then be a domain free to express itself without being perceived through the oppressions of gender." Yet, the expressions of masculinity, and the expectations of femininity, found in today's society suggests otherwise.

Let's return to Marvin Gaye's song, "Got to Give it Up." Gaye sings, "You can love me when you want to babe. This is such a groovy party baby. We're here face to face. Everybody's swingin'. This is such a groovy place. All the young ladies are so fine! You're movin' your body easy with no doubts. I know what you thinkin' baby. You wanna turn me out. Think I'm gonna let you do it babe. Keep on dancin'. You got to get it. Got to give it up." The song lyrics move from describing a confident woman who stands in contrast to that of the uncertain man who stands next to the wall, instead of dancing and having fun. Throughout the song, the man gains confidence and begins to pursue one of the many "fine" ladies. He suddenly gains enough confidence and social competence that he becomes knowledgeable about the woman. In claiming to "know what you are thinkin' baby," Gaye asserts male privilege. This privilege shifts to an imposition in the lines, "You wanna turn me out. Think I'm gonna let you do it babe." This imposition then becomes more of a directive: "Keep on dancin'. You got to get it. Got to give it up." These lyrics tack on to "Blurred Lines," not simply because Robin Thicke's gratuitous use of Gaye's music makes it so, but because of the problematic thematic that threads the two together.

For example, in "Blurred Lines," Thicke sings, "But you're a good girl. The way you grab me. Must wanna get nasty. Go ahead, get at me." Much of the discussion about Thicke's "tribute" to Marvin Gaye generated suspicions about his integrity, given the similarities in the style of music. Thicke admitted to wanting to replicate that "grooving" style of music, as the lawsuit alleges he approximated too closely. Notably, no one, to my knowledge, engaged in drawing comparisons between the substantive style of the songs. What are the similarities

between Thicke offering himself up to a "good girl" who "must wanna get nasty" and the lyrics I discuss above in Marvin Gaye's song?

The lyrics in "Blurred Lines" later grapple with the contradiction created by the "good girl/bad girl" dichotomy, which Thicke identifies when he pronounces, "I always wanted a good girl. I know you want it." Or "I know you want it, But you're a good girl. The way you grab me, must wanna get nasty. Go ahead, get at me." Some consumers of this song have *generously* argued that Thicke is supportive of women's sexual agency, but again there is a "blurred line" between men being supportive of women's agency for the men's benefit (sexual pleasure/desire) versus purely being supportive of everyone enjoying their own sexual agency (on their own terms, not someone else's). The lyrics make clear his sexual subjectivity ("go ahead, get at me"), but they deny women the voice to clarify their own desire, which begs the question: "Do the women 'wanna get nasty' or get at him?" These lyrics trouble the "blurred lines" between "good girls" who ostensibly abstain from sex, and "bad girls" who engage in it. The lyrics also blur the line between sexual pursuit and predatory behavior, between consent and coercion. We are not encouraged to see the images as examples of rape culture, which is exactly how rape culture gets reinforced (because it gets normalized).

In "Blurred Lines," Thicke sings, "And that's why I'm gon' take a good girl. I know you want it. I know you want it. I know you want it. You're a good girl. Can't let it get past me. You're far from plastic. Talk about getting blasted. I hate these blurred lines." Anti-rape activists and sexual assault prevention experts would argue that "getting blasted" creates the very blurred lines that frustrate Thicke (Bogle; Kimmel). Legally, one cannot consent to sex if one has been drinking, or "getting blasted" (see Bogle; Buchwald et al.). Not drinking would clarify these blurred lines, but those lyrics might not sell as many records. The public, in other words, might not be convinced by a performance of masculinity where men respect women, seek consent before sexual situations, and refuse sex at all, but especially in situations where consent cannot be offered (when someone is "blasted" or more generally, been drinking).

Throughout the song, and as can be observed in these lyrics, Thicke relies on the false good girl/bad girl dichotomy to pursue his own interests. Ironically, he desires the "good girl" yet wants to "take" her, or have sex with her. This lyric promotes the idea that women should be virginal and virtuous "good girls," that women are "girls," and that men who sleep with "good girls" enjoy both social and sexual rewards of such activity. These lyrics reveal the double standard that penalizes women for being sexualized, even if not sexual, while celebrating men's sexual pursuits and conquests (Bogle; Kimmel).

Thicke casually notes, "Can't let it get past me." This lyric draws attention to the male privilege and sense of entitlement that most white men enjoy in this society. To say that he "cannot" let a woman get past him is to insinuate, if not announce, that he feels a sense of entitlement to sex with a woman who he knows wants it. This feeling of ownership is further crystallized in reference to the woman as "it," a linguistic indication of her objectification. In some instances in the song, the use of "it" veils the suggestive sex he wants, but the "it" that replaces "her" makes the cultural misogyny of this patriarchy transparent and pervasive (or in its pervasion).

The Right to Look?

Timonthy Beneke's (75) discussion of "stolen images," or "men's visual experience of women and women's bodies," becomes more of a matter of "stolen goods," when men feel entitled to physically or sexually experience women and women's bodies. His work is useful here, in helping to frame men's sense of ownership of women. Beneke (77) explains, "Stealing images and glossing the activity are deeply humiliating and isolating for men…as a chronic, fearful, humiliated stance toward women that often pervades men's daily social experience of sexual longing." Beneke posits that men experience sexual looking, or "seeing is touching," from a position of vulnerability. Women who look attractive or invite (men's) attention has been viewed by some men as a weapon that weakens men. Because men are not allowed to be men and

remain men, they must then dominate these women, or seek revenge. Thus, Beneke (80) argues, "'If a man rapes a sexy woman, he is forcing her to have sexual sensation she doesn't want. It is just revenge.'"

Tricia Rose discusses this problem of the objectification of women's bodies, and the consequences of that behavior. Rose (172) argues that this objectification facilitates "male domination over women…. Many men are hostile toward women, because the fulfillment of male heterosexual desire is significantly checked by women's capacity for sexual rejection or manipulation of men." In talking with men music artists, she learns of the "reckless boundaries" of men's desires in relation to women's powerful embodied of to-be-looked-at-ness or desirability. For men, "the greater your desire, the more likely you are to be blinded by it and, consequently, the more vulnerable you will be to female domination" (Rose 172). According to Rose (172), that desire has become increasingly "aggressive, predatory, and consuming."

When Thicke sings about not letting a woman get past him, he is describing his desire but obscuring or ignoring any desire the woman possesses (or not). This underscores Beneke's point that "men experience intrusive images and the process of stealing images as both injurious to their self-esteem and sexually frustrating" (Beneke 81). While stealing images is encouraged in our image-based and media-saturated society, stealing sexuality or thieving women's bodies and sexual agency is equally problematic. According to MacKinnon (50),

> With rape, because sexuality defines gender norms, the only difference between assault and what is socially defined as a noninjury is the meaning of the encounter to the woman. Interpreted this way, the legal problem has been to determine whose view of that meaning constitutes what really happened, as if what happened objectively exists to be objectively determined. This task has been assumed to be separable from the gender of the participants and the gendered nature of their exchange,

> when the objective norms and the assailant's perspective are identical.

That these activities are encouraged in the lyrical linguistic violence of songs makes them harder to confront, and harder to dismantle. The language of rape culture reflected in Gaye's song is much more subtle, and perhaps questionably rapacious at that. Gaye sings, "All the young ladies are so fine! You're movin' your body easy with no doubts." The lyrics point to the aesthetic appeal of women's bodies and the visual pleasure that men might enjoy by consuming women. As Mulvey describes, women have a "to-be-looked-at" quality that encourages men's stealing glances and stolen images (see also Beneke). Visual pleasure, or scopophilia, facilitates men's objectification of women, and enables their visual, and perhaps sexual, consumption of women as well. Women have learned a to-be-looked-at-ness because of the male gaze (Mulvey).

In following Mulvey, Mirzoeff (164) writes,

> In later Freudian analysis, looking has been reconceptualized as the gaze, taking a still more central position in the formation of gender identity. The gaze is not just a look or a glance. It is a means of constituting the identity of the gazer by distinguishing her or him from that which is gazed at. At the same time, the gaze makes us aware that we may be looked at, so that this awareness becomes a part of identity in itself.

Historically, the male gaze reflects a power in looking. However, race and class complicate this gender discourse and the practice of looking for visual pleasure. That is, there are different ways of looking, some of which are considered dangerous and other ostensibly innocuous. White men of means (in terms of social class and status) have been able to embody the male gaze from a powerful position. The position of power deflects or diminishes any suspicions of these ways of looking as "dangerous" ways of looking at women. In contrast, black men have been constructed as dangerous in and of themselves. Their male gaze, by

extension, becomes dangerous as well. Thus, the black male gaze marks a dangerous way of looking (Collins).

Throughout history, the black male gaze has been regarded with fear and considered threatening and menacing. White men with power attempted to regulate and discipline the black male gaze through disciplinary techniques and punishment. By deeming the black male gaze "reckless eyeballing," white men were able to legally regulate black men and their male gaze. Reckless eyeballing was regarded as a criminal act, punishable by death or painful punishment. Laws attempted to manage and control not simply these "dangerous" ways that black men were perceived to be looking at (white) women, but these "dangerous" black men themselves.

In her work, Deborah McDowell (1997) examines "race and the subject of masculinities," focusing in part on the gaze. In her essay that appears in the anthology of the same title, McDowell borrows from Mulvey, crediting her for her pioneering work on visual pleasure. McDowell notes Mulvey's contribution to cultural studies includes giving critics "one of their central axioms: the subject/object dichotomy of seeing/being seen is a gendered accessory to the ideological production of 'masculinity' and 'femininity.'" (McDowell 365). This masculinity typically gets linked to and expressed by the male viewer, and femininity typically gets linked to the female object of the male gaze.

McDowell pushes the conversation that Mulvey's work invites into, by asking a set of questions about cultural studies and masculinity. What happens to men's bodies when they fall under the same male gaze that they are expected to embody and express? What understandings or conclusions do cultural studies scholars want to arrive at, in regards to studying masculinity? Who can study masculinity? In discussing the dynamics of the male gaze, one must also discuss the position of the spectator. How does the researcher get situated in discussion of the gaze and its economy of looking? Does being a brown-skinned biracial researcher produce a reversal of the traditional ways of looking, so as to disrupt or disable the male gaze? Does the feminist researcher studying

the male gaze and the subject/object dichotomy come to look through the eyes of a man, or appropriate the male gaze for investigative purposes? What are the dilemmas inherent in this arrangement, and how does the study of the gaze as a feminist woman researcher trouble the narrative of visual pleasure and the consumption of bodies? Does the research project itself become a sort of gaze directed upon the objects of inquiry, in this case, two men music artists?[i]

These questions support the idea of the panoptic reality of our society, and the constant surveillance that everyone endures, irrespective of our subject positions (Foucault 1997). The intensity or persistence of the gaze and modes of surveillance occur specifically in direct relation to subject positions, not despite them. As such, I draw from McDowell's work, to underscore the importance of encourage women's participation in the production of knowledge about masculinities. As she suggests, academics engage in building muscles metaphorically, if not literally, and one way of ensuring that women compete is by allowing us to discuss this important topics alongside men. In some ways, this inclusion also works to complicate, if not queer, masculinity, by recognizing that women scholars have much to say on the "subject of masculinities" (Stecopoulos and Uebel 1997).

This discussion about the male gaze ignores the ways that women might invite the male gaze or not desire it at all. The differential perception of "dangerous" ways of looking also ignores the real and imagined threat of the white male gaze, at the expense of over-focusing or attending to the real and imagined threat of the black male gaze. The power of looking reflects social power, or people's positions within a society. The white male gaze circumvents much of the critique that falls upon the black male gaze because of the collective position of power that white men occupy in this society. As McDowell (365) notes, "The white male never fully relinquishes his hold on spectatorship, nor on its privileges and powers."

Nicholas Mirzoeff echoes this point, in his in-depth examination of the gaze, including the imperial and colonial gaze. In *The Right to Look*,

Mirzoeff (3-4) explores the existent "complex of visuality, or "classifying, separating, and aetheticizing together form." This visuality relates to planes of power and control. He illustrates the many mechanisms of discipline and punishment (Foucault 1977) exacting through the ways of looking and panoptic technologies.

As Mirzoeff (1) notes,

> The right to look is not about seeing. It begins at a person level with the look into someone else's eyes to express friendship, solidarity, or love. That look must be mutual, each person inventing the other, or it fails. As such, it is unrepresentable. The right to look claims autonomy, not individualism or voyeurism, but the claim to a political subjectivity and collectivity.

The link between the gaze and the control of bodies reflects the dilemma embedded in the lyrics of both Gaye's and Thicke's songs. The men, as artists and singers, have the agency to sing about and center their thoughts and ideas, as expressed through song. The women in the lyrics can only be responsive or reactive, not active, objects, not subjects.

Both Gaye and Thicke utilize terms such as "baby" or "girl" in reference to women. While the term is one of endearment, it can also to used as a diminutive. In other words, it can infantilize grown women who are adults. That infantilization denies women their own agency. The infantilization of women further compounds the problem of women lacking control of their lives, as a result of men's domination. Constructing women as children only works to "legitimate" men's attempts to control women. This discursive move remains particularly apparent in Thicke's song.

Not only does Thicke continue to dominate women with discourses that infantilize them through his repetitive use of the term "girl," but he also objectifies women by strengthening the existing stereotypes of them as animalistic. What adds insult to injury is that he also naturalizes this association: "Okay, now he was close, tried to

domesticate you. But you're an animal, baby, it's in your nature." Feminist scholars have created the naturalization of women as animals, primarily because it appears to encourage similar behavior from men. It accommodates a hostility and violence directed toward women by men who dehumanize others (Collins). It endorses rape culture (Buchwald et al.).

In the video and lyrics for "Blurred Lines," we see women degraded, associated with animals, treated with disdain, disrespected, showing up like accessories, outnumbering the men. Recognizing or falsely constructing a woman as an animal reflects the dehumanization and objectification characteristic of a rape culture. Having sexual agency makes one human (a sexual subject); being denied that sexual agency makes one an object. When Thicke sings, "Just let me liberate you. You don't need no papers. That man is not your maker. And that's why I'm gon' take a good girl. I know you want it." From the vantage point of privilege, Thicke can sing about the impossibility of liberating a woman, rather than fully recognizing that an individual liberates herself, not someone else.

These lyrics link back to my earlier point about women's lack of body autonomy. Following MacKinnon (1989), I argue that these lyrics normalize misogyny, and make space for the degradation, dehumanization or objectification of women. Troublesome is the popularity of this song, given the evidence of the normalization of rape culture and violence against women. Thicke wants to liberate a woman from the threat of another man's threats to domesticate her, yet Thicke neglects to see how his own desire to "liberate" a woman are predicated on the pursuit of that woman (objectification), and the fulfillment of his own sexual pleasures (gratification).

This phallocentric way of being and thinking gets reflected in lyrics where the women all but disappear, a point Susan Bordo (1999) makes in her work, *The Male Body*. Other scholars discuss the power of the phallus and the disappearance of women as symptomatic of global patriarchy (see Kimmel).

Conclusions

In *Misframing Men,* Kimmel suggests that a social shift is taking place, creating the space for new masculinities and more gender equity. He writes (2010:15), "At work and at home, in private and in public, women's increasing equality has been an issue to which men have had to respond." Men's responses, as evidenced by the representations of masculinities depicted in the lyrics of songs, have been problematic at best, and dangerous at worst. While Kimmel (2010:15) suggests that men have responded "somewhere between eager embrace of women's equality and resigned acceptance," others would argue men's response continues to be quite hostile, if subtle.

Mediated masculinities remain hegemonic masculinities. Men continue to construct and invest in masculinities that afford them power, privilege, and control, or the illusion of those things. The dangers to men and women are evident, as the representations reflect a violence that everyone endures. To normalize rape culture through lyrics that glorify non-consensual sex or avoid clarifying "blurred lines" is to confirm that it is still a man's world.

Songs such as "Blurred Lines" and "Got to Give It Up" encourage people to interrogate the dominant representations of and messages about masculinity. Perhaps people will consider why masculinities are enhanced, not jeopardized, by the expression of violence against women, and why music lyrics become a successful tool for the normalization of this violence. Despite the anticipation of new masculinities that move away from hegemonic expressions, we see little evidence to suggest such an expansion of masculinities is emergent or incipient. This leaves room for continued conversations about the construction of masculinities that embrace and celebrate gender equity in this current moment.

Works Cited

Beneke, Timothy. *Proving Manhood: Reflections on Men and Sexism. Berkeley: University of California Press*, 1997.

Bogle, Kathleen. *Hooking Up: Sex, Dating, and Relationships on Campus.* New York: New York University Press, 2008.

Bordo, Susan. *The Male Body: A New Look at men in Public and in Private.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999.

Buchwald, Emilie, Pamela Fletcher, and Martha Roth (Eds.). *Transforming a Rape Culture.* Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2005.

Butler, Judith. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Castaldi, Francesca. *Choreographies of African Identities: Negritude, Dance, and the National Ballet of Senegal.* Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006.

Collins, Patricia Hill (2005). *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2005.

Connell, R.W. *Masculinities*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

Dagan, Esther. "Origin and Meaning of Dance's Essential Body Position and Movements." In *The Spirit's Dance in Africa: Evolution, Transformation, and Continuity in Sub-Sahara.* Ed. Esther Dagan. Westmount, Quebec: Galerie Amrad African Arts Publications, 1997. 102-21.

Friedman, Jaclyn and Jessica and Valenti. *Yes Means Yes! Visions of Female Sexual Power and a World Without Rape.* Berkeley: Seal, 2008.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.* Translated from the French by Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books, 1977.

Gay, William (2007). "Supplanting Linguistic Violence" in *Gender Violence*: *Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. (2nd Ed.). Edited by Laura O'Toole, Jessica Schiffman, and Margie Kiter Edwards. New York, NY: NYU Press, 2007. 435-442.

Gaye, Marvin. "Got To Give It Up." Music Recording, 1979.

Kaufmann, Michael. "The Construction of Masculinity and the Triad of Men's Violence" in *Beyond Patriarchy: Essays on Pleasure, Power, and Change.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Kimmel, Michael. *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men.* New York: HarperCollins, 2008.

MacKinnon, Catherine. *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Majors, Richard and Janet Mancini Billson. *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America.* New York: Lexington Books, 1992.

McDowell, Deborah . "Pecs and Reps: Muscling in on Race and the Subject of Masculinities" in *Race and the Subject of Masculinities.* Edited by Harry Stecopoulos and Michael Uebel. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997. 361-385.

Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *An Introduction to Visual Culture.* New York: Routledge, 1999.

Mulvey, Laura. *Visual and Other Pleasures.* Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989.

O'Toole, Laura, Jessica Schiffman, and Margie Kiter Edwards (Eds.) (2nd Ed.) *Gender Violence: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. New York, NY: NYU Press, 2007.

Ottenberg, Simon. "Introduction: Some Issues and Questions on African Dance." In *The Spirit's Dance in Africa: Evolution, Transformation, and Continuity in Sub-Sahara.* Ed. Esther Dagan. Westmount, Quebec: Galerie Amrad African Arts Publications, 1997. 10-15.

Rose, Tricia (1994). *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America.* Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

Stecopoulos, Harry and Michael Uebel (Eds.). *Race and the Subject of Masculinities.* Durham: Duke University Press, 1997.

Thicke, Robin. "Blurred Lines." Music Recording, 2013.

[i] As a practice of method, scholars take care to situate themselves in relation to the subjects (or objects) that we study, but seldom do we elaborate upon the possibilities of our participation in knowledge production perpetuating or supporting the very problems we choose to investigate. That is, pushing beyond the questions of how being a biracial feminist and/or a woman shifts the discourse on the study of masculinity, we arrive at a more nettlesome question: how do we reconcile potentially supporting or participating in the problematic practices that constitute the topic of our research? How does one resolve the resulting cognitive dissonance that this participation, as part of the process of investigation, produces?

To address these questions, I entertain and expose them as they emerge in the process of the research study. While I have been trained to acknowledge and consider the implications of my own subject positions, I received less training about how to handle the questions I posed above. In the process of conducting this analysis, these questions surfaced, inviting me to contemplate the ironies of talking about subject/object relations, and simultaneously undoing and redoing them at once. The expense of abandoning this intellectual and analytical endeavor does not seem to outweigh the benefits of using this research project as a vehicle for examining those questions more fully and closely.

The meta-analysis of the gaze proves powerful in its complexity of visuality. That is, I recognize this methodological conundrum as a productive tension in the production of knowledge. In looking at the ways men look at women, in both textual and visual analysis (of lyrics and video imagery), I am able to acknowledge this looking of my own, as well as theirs. I am also able to question who "originates a gaze" and who is objectified by it (McDowell 365). McDowell notes, "there are those who study and those who are the objects of study. Non-white men dominate the latter camp…. [The] concerns with the 'meaning of blackness for whiteness,' not the meaning of whiteness for black men, typify this pattern in which black men become mainly the passive, and thus feminized, objects of the white male gaze." (McDowell 366). Do brown-skinned women researchers appropriate the male gaze as a method of investigation? Are we guilty of replicating the "right to look" in a way that is powerful, objectifying, or both? Is embodying the male gaze as a feminist woman a paradox, or a

powerfully subversion position to be in, because one is arguably not *being* objectified while studying the process of objectification of women, as a woman?

McDowell writes, "This is as good a place as any to confront the vexing and perhaps inevitable question about my role as a black feminist commissioned to write the afterword to a volume of essays, which otherwise absents that point of view." (363). Her observation connects to my own, in its admission of the importance of expanding masculinities studies to include a plethora of voices, even the unlikely, though no less qualified, ones. Doing so extends our collective understanding of how we collectively make sense of our own gender performances, but especially that of others, including media celebrities.