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Sad Girl Pop's Production and Performance: Honest Representation or Glorification of Sadness as Considered "Other" by Disability Studies

I: ABSTRACT

Sad music is not a new concept, and neither is "sad girl pop," an intimate and confessional subgenre between indie and pop produced by young women. However, while sad music and sad girl pop are not new, the way in which sad girl pop's listeners, called "sad girls", have responded to this music over the last decade is (Kaplan 2022, para. 6). "Sad girls" have cultivated an online image that seems to celebrate a state of sadness associated with the genre, causing critics to accuse them of romanticizing depression. Through an examination of Jensen McRae's 2022 album *Are You Happy Now* and with a grounding in disability studies framework, I push back against this assumption, arguing instead that by embracing sadness, which is considered "other" by disability studies, sad girl pop offers its listeners a form of resistance to patriarchal, sexist, and ageist norms. What's more, it offers listeners a sense of community through shared experiences, while also providing catharsis to its artists.

II: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO SAD GIRL POP

Sad girl pop is a label that first emerged in the 1990s but wasn't popularly acknowledged as a subgenre until the mid-2010s with the emergence of artists such as Billie Eilish, Lana Del Rey, and Phoebe Bridgers. Characteristically whispery and intimate, sad girl pop is labeled as such for a few reasons: "sad" is evocative of the genre's trademark "palpable aching and

loneliness" and songs written around themes of heartbreak, self-questioning, and overall dissatisfaction with existence (Kaplan 2022, para. 4). The "girl" in the label refers to the genre's primary demographic: both the genre's producers and consumers are usually white, privileged, and often queer women.[1] Despite being labeled as "pop," sad girl pop is a subgenre that is best described as indie, but draws influences from emo, rock, and pop (Nicholas 2023, para. 1).[2] The genre is varied in production and sound, yet each song shares an essential element: all are written by women for women and largely grapple with the experience of being a woman. Whether that experience focuses on love and relationships or larger commentaries about the world, the music is permeated by a lived sadness that throughout history has been fundamentally feminine.

III: SADNESS & DISABILITY

In fact, according to Fredrika Thelandersson (2018), "mental instability has [always] been culturally female" (4). Consider mental health conditions from the 19th and 20th centuries: hysteria, melancholia, neurasthenia, a crisis of the nerves, madness, etc. (4). These terms were only applied to women, often without justification, explanation, or definitive ties to a true mental condition. They have also throughout history aided to establish the motif of the "mad woman," a figure designed to delegitimize women's emotions and upon which I argue the "sad girl" builds. In reference to the mad woman, these past medical terms were all used as overarching descriptions for what we now consider various forms of diagnosable depression or anxiety disorders, just as the "sad girl's" "sadness" is now similarly used to allude to these disorders.

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[1] Importantly, according to Marion Brown (2010), the female experience is distinctly shaped by race and class, among other factors, so while this discussion is focused primarily on these white, privileged, Western women, the lived experience of others should also be kept in mind for the remainder of this discussion (Brown 2010, 108).

[2] Recent influential artists of the genre include Olivia Rodrigo, who laments lost love with a drive through the suburbs in "driver's license," Gracie Abrams, who questions self worth after witnessing an ex-lover move on in "Blowing Smoke," as well as Lucy Dacus, Tate McRae, Taylor Swift, Mitski, Sasha Sloan, Chelsea Cutler, and many others.

Thus, for this investigation, I will be using a "broad definition of sadness (as encompassing mental illness diagnoses, melancholia, and a general sense of hopelessness and inertia)" to contextualize the "sad girl" within this larger history of dismissal and exaggeration of female sadness (3).

We must also consider sadness through the lens of disability studies, a field of investigation that explores disability's political, social, and cultural contexts, rather than defining it simply as a personal medical affliction. Joseph Straus (2011), a prominent figure in the field, defines disability as "any culturally stigmatized bodily difference" (9). Under this definition, almost all forms of mental health conditions– which have long been taboo, misdiagnosed, misunderstood, and overall stigmatized– can be considered disabilities. Straus continues to classify disability as "the fundamental form of deviant Otherness of which gender, race, and sexual orientation are specific manifestations" (10). Under this definition, femaleness, too, can be understood as a form of disability, which positions disability as a fundamental feature of sad girl pop. The "other," in general, is a central theme to disability studies that arises from the eugenicist notion of the "normal" as desirable and the "other" as inferior (Davis 2017). Contextualizing both sadness and women as "other" explains the social context in which sad girl pop is created, one "that is oppressive to females, sexually charged, and dangerous" and in which women "splinter their authentic selves into subservient, depressed and alienated versions of the self" (Brown 2010, 111). Thus, I will be using both the historically gendered definition of sadness and disability studies' classification of sadness as "other" to frame my further commentary regarding sad girl pop.

IV: CASE STUDY: JENSEN McRAE

To both support my claims and emphasize the direct real world application of this argument, I draw on Jensen McRae as a case study of sad girl pop. McRae was born and raised in the suburbs of Los Angeles and attended USC's Thornton School of Music on full scholarship (Rindner 2024). She describes her sparse, haunting, and reflective music as folk alternative pop, and writes songs that draw on culturally classified female experiences such as sexual assault and body dysmorphia. However, though her music is in many ways a textbook example of the genre, she defies the typical image of an artist writing sad girl pop– a genre saturated with white women– because she is Black.

V: DEPRESSION AND ELITISM

Depression as a clinical diagnosis has historically been considered "a mechanism and condition of white elitism," meaning that sad girl pop, a genre based in aesthetics of sadness, would be intrinsically exclusionary to non-which artists (Holmes 2023, 798). Depression in general has long been exclusionary to non-white people, racistly explained by the "Black-white depression paradox." This paradox explains depression as a product of resilience, and interprets the disparity in diagnosis to a disparity in resilience, caused by Black people's history of hardship and White people's lack thereof (Holmes 2023, 798). Yet, considering depression as a mechanism of resilience allows the medical system to continue to ignore Black people's suffering by writing it off as insufficiently severe comparative to their ability to "handle" hardship. What's more, relating depression to resilience positions it as just another, though perhaps more severe, form of being "sad"– preventable, explainable, and with an identifiable cause– which it isn't. For many people, depression is independent of their lived experience and is not related to their perceived state of happiness.

This understanding of depression, as a form of preventable "sadness" tied to privilege, brings up a larger issue: if depression is built around circumstance, particularly bad circumstance, then those who are not in bad circumstance have no legitimate claim to depression. When applied to sad girl pop, many criticize the listeners of sad girl pop for aestheticizing and glorifying sadness as a form of faking the emotion because "sad girls" are in many ways a privileged group that doesn't *appear* to have any real reason to be sad.

VI: CRITICISM: EXAGGERATION, PERFORMANCE, AND GLORIFICATION

Listening to sad music and embracing an aesthetic of sadness are two very different things, and it is clear that "sad girls" do not solely engage with the music as passive listeners. Aided by the ease of sharing information via social media, "sad girls" have cultivated online personalities dependent upon a state of sadness. It is not uncommon to scroll on platforms such as Instagram or Tumblr and find crying selfies layered with a Gracie Abrams audio, a take on the "Get Ready With Me" video trend where the user prepares "To Go Cry", or cultivated feeds captioned by Phoebe Bridgers lyrics. Lauren Fournier (2018), following Amelia Jones, describes such examples as forms of "self-imaging," which is the creation of self-centered content that is motivated by "performing for the camera" (Fournier 2018, 644).

Jensen McRae acknowledges this performative nature of sad girl pop in "My Ego Dies At The End", in which she wrestles with both defining and losing a sense of self, hence her reference to ego. The key lyric comes while McRae reminisces on pulling away from the important people in her life, singing "Leave my body and the party early/Cry on the train, playin' Justin Vernon" and later wondering "If I don't write about it, was it really worth it?" (McRae 2022). The combination of these lyrics implies that any form of sadness is only "worth it" if it

can be created into something that can be performed for others, while also alluding to the specific "sad girl" aesthetic of crying on the train while listening to Bon Iver.[3] McRae's specific use of Justin Vernon's name, rather than his more widely known band, Bon Iver, also denotes a sense of intimacy with whoever she is performing to, implying that "sad girls" have created an in-group of resonance in which certain terms are generally recognized. Thus, among "sad girls" sadness is transformed into a performative mutual identifier.

Yet, critics of the genre focus on this idea of "performative," arguing that listeners embrace sadness as a form of attention seeking while creating an echo chamber for themselves in which "to be sad and mad is something to strive for, it even becomes cool" (Thelandersson 2018, 6). And, perhaps most threatening, "the sharing of affective content by [individuals]... resonates with other users," which disseminates this aestheticization to others (Thelandersson 2018, 11).

There is, of course, some legitimacy to these claims. Romanticization of suicide and self-harm can not be condoned. But, these claims are also layered with a "generational mistrust about the legitimacy and ubiquity of depression among adolescents" (Holmes 2023, 791). The clear generational gap between listeners and critics of the genre suggests that the criticism is not driven solely by concerns for well-being, but also by the broader age- and gender-fueled tension surrounding female depression.

VII: CLAIMS TO DEPRESSION AND THE LEGITIMACY OF FEMALE SADNESS

As previously discussed in reference to the mad woman, remarking on any form of female emotionality is born from a long tradition of delegitimization, clinicalization, and exaggeration of the female experience. So, as Jessica Holmes (2023) explains, "the stereotype of

[3] Kim Nielsen explores this concept of "productivity" further in her book *A Disability History of the United States*. It is also explored further in Section VII : Resting In Sadness and Female Resistance

the overly moody, hormonal teenage girl on her period has long been weaponized against young women to the extent that emotional distress registers… as simultaneously overstated, gratuitous, and self-indulgent" (Holmes 2023, 802). Critics' claims appear to make the same argument– that by embracing sad girl pop, "sad girls" are engaging in a self-indulgent, attention seeking practice for the sake of glorifying illness. But, these arguments are specifically geared towards young women, evident in the patronizing tone that these articles employ. Critics seem to suggest that these young women are innocent, helpless, and impressionable, while their online actions are a form of grossly exaggerated performance, a tone that falls in line with "the persistent framing of young female pop audiences as 'passive and hysterical'" (Holmes 2023, 802).

The "sad girls" are assumed to be unaware of the supposed harm of their consumption trends, yet, they are also blamed for spreading the harmful aesthetic they perpetuate, a narrative that frames "sad girls" as "both the unwitting victims of pop culture and social media's algorithmic logics and somehow also responsible for creating and perpetuating the very conditions of their suffering" (Holmes 2023, 802). Essentially, critics are implying an impossible hypocrisy: that sad girls' claims to sadness are illegitimate, yet they are at fault for causing their sadness (which again, doesn't exist).

McRae acknowledges this stifling societal atmosphere towards women in her song "Adam's Ribs" which references the biblical story of creation. In this story, Eve was created as a lesser being to Adam from one of his ribs: "This love letter begins/To Adam, from your ribs/So-called intelligent design/Without you, I would die" (McRae, 2022). McRae's lyrics highlight both the historical belief that women depend on men for survival–thus making them inferior– and also questions the justification for the subordination of women, the so-called

"theory" of intelligent design which is neither scientifically proven nor universally accepted.[4,5] From this cultural atmosphere that McRae considers, it seems natural that women might revel in a state of discontentment. In fact, that is the claim that Audrey Wollen makes in her Sad Girl Theory during an interview with Lucy Watson (2015).

VIII: RESTING IN SADNESS AND FEMALE RESISTANCE

Wollen is an LA-based artist that is partially credited with defining Sad Girl Theory. In Sad Girl Theory, Wollen "proposes that the sadness of girls should be recognised as an act of resistance," (Watson 2015, para. 4). Wollen continues to discuss how ignoring a passive spectrum of protest ignores the lived experience of women. Protest has always been "defined in masculine terms – as something external and often violent, a demonstration in the streets, a riot, an occupation of space," but oftentimes, women are not afforded the liberty or freedom to occupy this kind of space (Watson 2015, para. 4). Thus, she asserts that "girls' sadness is not passive, self-involved or shallow; it is a gesture of liberation, it is articulate and informed, it is a way of reclaiming agency over our bodies, identities, and lives" (Watson 2015, para. 4). By maintaining and reveling in a state of sadness, "sad girls" transform what is assumed to be a glorification of depression into a form of resistance that undermines culturally imposed expectations.

This theory is directly tied to Kim Nielsen's (2012) assumptions about the value of productivity from her book *A Disability History of the United States*. Productivity has always been a part of the American value system, under which it is considered vital to put hard work

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[4] Intelligent design theorizes that some greater being (some form of God) was responsible for the creation of humankind, through Adam and Eve (Glick 2024, para. 1).

[5] McRae also begs "Adam, will you claim me as your own?" as if pleading to be considered equal to Adam, and angrily says "Don't tell me to calm down," about her hierarchical state of existence, referencing a classic line used against women to delegitimize their emotions (McRae, 2022).

into a capitalist system to achieve the American dream. Nielsen explains that "when 'disability' is considered to be synonymous with 'deficiency' and 'dependency,' it contrasts sharply with American ideals of independence and autonomy" which causes distrust towards people with disabilities or those whose productivity is in other ways inhibited (Nielsen 2012, xii). Productivity explains why Wollen's ideas about resting in sadness are so threatening, and it is also why this disruption can be considered such an effective form of protest.

When considering feminine protest, we generally conjure up the image of "empowered feminist," a figure created to showcase what a "normal" feminist should look like: one who advocates loudly for female equality and *actively* engages in protest. But isn't this empowered feminist another form of demanded productivity, even if that productivity is contrary to the system? And doesn't that impose yet another expectation onto women for how they should behave? Wollen responds, saying that she feels "like girls are being set up: if we don't feel overjoyed about being a girl, we are failing at our own empowerment, when the voices that are demanding that joy are the same ones participating in our subordination" (Watson 2015, para 8). Thelandersson (2018) agrees: that for sad girls "the mere act of resting in sadness… might function as an impasse, where the refusal to move forward becomes a protest of the neoliberal demands of becoming a laboring and 'happy' subject" (Thelandersson 2018, 17).

To this I consider the idea of compulsory happiness which assumes that happiness (tied to productivity) is both the desired and normative state of existence (Jones 2018, 25).[6] McRae engages with this concept of compulsory happiness in her song "Happy Girl" (McRae, 2022). McRae begins the song by acknowledging that she has "something to say/Though [she doesn't] know if [she] should," immediately addressing the taboo nature of mental health discussion, but

[6] I adapt compulsory happiness from the concepts of compulsory heterosexuality or compulsory able bodiedness discussed in Matthew Jones (2018) article about crip virtuosity.

also that any deviation from the assumed state of happiness should not be acknowledged (McRae, 2022). McRae continues to repeat in the chorus throughout the song "Know you wanted a happy girl/I can lie if I cannot learn/How to become a happy girl/I can act like a happy, happy girl" (McRae, 2022). With these lyrics, McRae seems to reinforce Wollen's theories: that society expects women to lie or act happy, regardless of their true emotions, because happiness is compulsory, especially for women.

However, Fournier (2018) argues that "sad girls" can not meaningfully engage in this form of protest, because their "conventionally attractive" bodies– those that are white, wealthy, young, oftentimes physically healthy– will always delegitimize their actions by being "complicit with [the] patriarchy rather than subversive in a feminist way" (Fournier 2018, 651). It is for this reason that so many can not understand the discontentment of "sad girls"– they appear healthy and happy, so it seems natural to assume their actions are a performance, especially when not all "sad girls" are clinically or medically sad.

It is true that "sad girls" do possess a fair amount of privilege. Yet, this assertion raises an important question: must one be *sufficiently* deviant to be considered deviant at all? And thus, is a disability only acceptable if it demonstrates a verified presence to observers, or meets a certain (visible) threshold of "disabledness"?[7] Regardless of whether Wollen or Fournier present the more compelling argument, there is another reason why sad girls might participate in organized sadness and listen to sad girl pop, unrelated to activism at all.

IX: AFFECTIVE RESONANCE; A SAD GIRLS' COMMUNITY

Though somewhat predictable, according to Oliver Whang (2023), "we listen to music not for an emotional reaction… but for the sense of connection to others. Applied to the paradox

[7] Tobin Siebers (2008) discusses these questions further in his book *Disability Theory*.

of sad music: Our love of the music is not a direct appreciation of sadness, it's an appreciation of connection" (Whang 2023, para. 16). Based on this proposition, "sad girls" are not exclusively romanticizing sadness, but instead romanticizing the shared empathy and sense of connection (to themselves, to the artist, to others within the community) that the sad girl community creates. So, regardless of a true medical diagnosis or not, many of sad girl pop's listeners may simply find some form of identity or sense of self in the music that they listen to.

This hypothesis is supported by Thelandersson (2018), who draws on the medical model of disability, which assumes that disability is a diagnosable medical affliction intrinsic to the individual that is curable through medical means. She argues that this model "leaves those who it fails to help responsible for their own inability to heal. The individual who suffers, and for whom the medication and therapy does not work… assumes fault" (Thelandersson 2018, 12). Sad girl pop offers an alternative method of healing through this sense of community, and "those who fail to be helped by traditional psychiatric discourse can get a chance to be heard, learn that they are not alone, and possibly receive non-medicalized modes of support," (Thelandersson 2018, 18).

McRae echoes this assumption, both in her music and in an interview she had with Grant Rindner (2021). To Rindner she explains that she writes "sad music as a form of catharsis" but that doesn't necessarily mean she's a sad girl; she writes it "because it's just how [her] brain works and [she needs] to get it out" (Rindner 2021, para. 24). Thus, McRae expresses that for many artists of sad girl pop, the art is simply a true expression of self, necessary in processing one's own emotions. McRae continues to say that she creates "something that [she] [believes] in and [finds] to be true, but that also is true for another person and authentic to their experience," echoing the importance of connection to others within the sad girl community that Thelandersson theorizes (Rindner 2024, para. 21).

Along these lines, in her song “Make You Proud” McRae deals with intensely personal topics of self harm, eating disorders, and heartbreak (McRae, 2022). Still, throughout the course of the lyrics McRae consistently addresses herself in the second person, and often delivers forms of advice or lessons, perhaps in the hope not only to address herself, but to also communicate with her larger audience of listeners.

X: FINAL THOUGHTS AND IMPLICATIONS OF CRITIQUES

Based on McRae’s honest approach to music and the comfort that sad girl pop may provide its listeners, it seems harmful to assume that the listeners engage with the genre exclusively to romanticize sadness. Yet, the issue remains that many critics still suggest that sad girl pop is *causing* depression, and that it is the fault of the artists for “making healthy teens wish they were depressed,” (Holmes 2023, 787).

This narrative, that artists can cause depression, raises an interesting question: does the mere act of publicizing or showing disability through the production of art or in daily life glorify it? And if so, what does that imply about the future process of destigmatizing disability? This is a dangerous proposition to consider, one in which disability education becomes stigmatized, and hiding a disability becomes further normalized, placing the entire burden of disability more forcefully on the disabled. Proposing disability as a contagion, one that is spread by the mere act of suggestion, echoes the same fears present in critical race theory, or queer education, and has dangerous implications about the “fault” of disability. So, when considering sad girl pop and its “sad girls,” it is possible that they are not so simplistically “sad” after all.

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