

## Chapter 9. Gender and Technology

Although the subjects of this chapter—gender and technology—may seem at first glance an odd pair, there are a number of ways to explore the relationship between gender and technology; the selections within this chapter represent some of those ways. The opening piece, a research essay written by then University of Connecticut undergraduate student Sarah Davis, explores the role that music and music videos play in perpetuating gender stereotypes, as well as rape culture, which Davis argues, grows out of these stereotypes. Poet Stacey Waite’s piece, “On the Occasion of Being Mistaken for a Man by Security Personnel at Newark International Airport,” includes a speaker reflecting on how the screening technologies at airports that we have come to take for granted raise vexing questions about one’s identity and its relationship to one’s body. Lal Zimman’s blog entry “Facebook, The Gender Binary, and Third Person” explores how Facebook has taken the lead in gendered language activism while Nussbaum’s “Mothers Anonymous” explores UrbanBaby, a New-York based website with an anonymous message-board on which mothers share their darkest fears and biggest secrets about marriage and mothering. Each selection approaches gender through some form of technology, providing ample opportunities for readers to explore how technology is raising new questions about gender, answering others, and underscoring age-old questions.

### Prior to Reading Each Selection in This Chapter

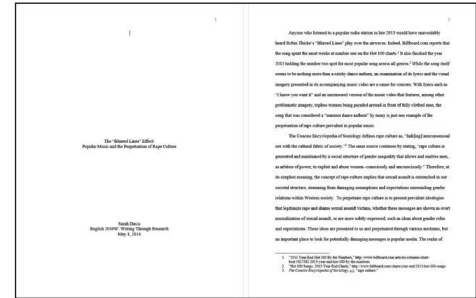
Look at the questions after each reading. What are you expected to do after reading this selection? In other words, what are your purposes for reading? Although you will be asked to apply particular reading strategies in order to complete some of the tasks, others will leave the choice of strategy up to you. Refer to the descriptions of the reading strategies in Chapter 2 and decide which will be most useful in helping you accomplish those tasks. Remember that you will be reading each selection multiple times and, therefore, will have additional opportunities to apply different reading strategies.

## Readings

## The “Blurred Lines” Effect: Popular Music and the Perpetuation of Rape Culture

By Sarah Davis

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Anyone who listened to a popular radio station in late 2013 would have unavoidably heard Robin Thicke’s “Blurred Lines” play over the airwaves. Indeed, Billboard.com reports that the song spent the most weeks at number one on the Hot 100 charts.<sup>1</sup> It also finished the year 2013 holding the number two spot for most popular song across all genres.<sup>2</sup> While the song itself seems to be nothing more than a catchy dance anthem, an examination of its lyrics and the visual imagery presented in its accompanying music video are a cause for concern. With lyrics such as “I know you want it” and an uncensored version of the music video that features, among other problematic imagery, topless women being paraded around in front of fully clothed men, the song that was considered a “summer dance anthem” by many is just one example of the perpetuation of rape culture prevalent in popular music.

*The Concise Encyclopedia of Sociology* defines rape culture as, “link[ing] nonconsensual sex with the cultural fabric of society.”<sup>3</sup> The same source continues by stating, “rape culture is generated and maintained by a social structure of gender inequality that allows and enables men, as arbiters of power, to exploit and abuse women—consciously and unconsciously.” Therefore, at its simplest meaning, the concept of rape culture implies that sexual assault is entrenched in our societal structure, stemming from damaging assumptions and expectations surrounding gender relations within Western society. To perpetuate rape culture is to present prevalent ideologies that legitimize rape and shame sexual assault victims, whether these messages are shown as overt normalization of sexual assault, or are more subtly-expressed, such as ideas about gender roles and expectations. These

1 “2013 Year-End Hot 100 By the Numbers,” <http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/chart-beat/5827382/2013-year-end-hot-100-by-the-numbers>

2 “Hot 100 Songs: 2013 Year-End Charts,” <http://www.billboard.com/charts/year-end/2013/hot-100-songs>

3 *The Concise Encyclopedia of Sociology*, s.v. “rape culture.”

ideas are presented to us and perpetuated through various mediums, but an important place to look for potentially damaging messages is popular media. The realm of television, movies, music, and music videos provides an excellent channel for unsafe ideas about gender relations to reach the public. For one, popular media is an inescapable phenomenon in today's technologically advanced, interconnected world. One cannot simply get away from messages in the media; from the newsstand to the internet to radio stations, we are constantly being shown messages about sexuality and relationships. Because of this constant immersion in media, it is easy to unconsciously internalize potentially harmful messages; messages that help perpetuate rape culture and make the world a more dangerous place for the vulnerable.

The implications of rape culture are alarming. As of April 2014, the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) listed some startling statistics on its website. "Every two minutes, another American is sexually assaulted . . . each year, there are about 237,868 victims of sexual assault," the organization reports.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, nearly half of victims are under the age of eighteen.<sup>5</sup> The statistics also show that in 93% of juvenile rapes, the attacker is someone the victim knows.<sup>6</sup> This implies that the typical rapist is not a criminal hiding in the bushes, but rather someone the victim knows and trusts more than a stranger. Rape culture can play a central role in rape reporting. Rape is the most underreported crime in the country, with 60% of rapes going unreported to law enforcement.<sup>7</sup> It is perhaps easy to correlate this astounding lack of reports with the prevalence of rape culture. If sexual assault is normalized through the prevailing attitudes expressed in the media, it is only logical to suggest that many victims do not realize that they have been sexually assaulted because they have been told that such behavior is normal and expected. Therein lies the problem, especially because victims of sexual assault, whether reported or not, are thirteen times more likely to abuse alcohol, twenty-six times more likely to abuse drugs, and are four times more likely to contemplate suicide than non-victims.<sup>8</sup> If rape culture is being perpetuated through mass media, a victim is arguably less likely to report a sexual assault, which makes them less likely to seek support. This complicates the healing process and puts strain on their self-image and mental health, as well as their relationships with others. It is only logical that in order to reduce the rate of sexual assault, society needs to closely examine the culture it presents that normalizes this crime. One way to do this is to examine the way in which mass media encourages potentially dangerous ideas.

With all of the potentially dangerous messages sent through the media as a whole, why focus on music and music videos? Aren't movies and television shows equally as responsible for presenting

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4 "Statistics." RAINN, accessed April 29, 2014, <https://www.rainn.org/statistics>

5 Ibid

6 Ibid

7 Ibid

8 Ibid

misogynistic messages? Although movies and television shows should be considered in regards to their potential for damaging or dangerous ideas, a 2009 policy statement released by the American Academy of Pediatrics highlights why music is a particularly successful medium for transmitting messages regarding sexuality. “Music . . . provide[s] a background for romance and serve[s] as the basis for establishing relationships in diverse settings . . . adolescents use music in their process of identity formation and their music preference provides them a means to achieve group identity and integration into the youth culture.”<sup>9</sup> Doesn’t television provide these same functions? According to the Academy, music may be more successful than television at existing as a model for relationships. It is impossible to escape popular music, as its presence is almost everywhere; it is used as background noise in supermarkets and malls, and as technology advances, it is often more easily accessible through downloads and internet radio.<sup>10</sup> Unlike television, one does not have to consciously choose to access music in order to absorb the message being transmitted. The Academy also suggests that music videos are an even bigger cause for concern, as they mix two popular forms of media, meaning that suggestive lyrics are accompanied by visual imagery that brings a potentially harmful message even further into the psyche of an individual who is beginning to take cues about “normal” relationships from any source they can.<sup>11</sup> It is with these ideas in mind that one can look to popular music for possibly harmful messages about women and female sexuality.

What does this have to do with rape culture? As noted previously, a rape culture is one in which sexual assault is normalized through the prevailing social structure. This social structure relies on the widespread prevalence of harmful messages that trivialize sexual assault and present it as a logical or expected part of society. These kinds of messages also make life more difficult for victims of sexual assault, who will often find themselves at the mercy of a social structure that blames them for their own rape. Messages need not be overt to be dangerous. Even underlying psychological messages about gender roles and what is expected behavior in relationships can support problematic ideologies and maintain rape culture.

A 1980 study by Martha R. Burt is worth mentioning, as it is cross referenced throughout many of the more recent studies cited here. Burt’s study looked at cultural attitudes about various myths about rape and examined them in concurrence with other beliefs about gender roles and interpersonal violence.<sup>12</sup> Some of the rape myths used in Burt’s study include ideas that a generally promiscuous woman is the “typical” rape victim, that a woman who dresses in a provocative manner

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9 American Academy of Pediatrics. *Policy Statement—Impact of Music, Music Lyrics, and Music Videos on Children and Youth*. (2009).

10 American Academy of Pediatrics, 1489.

11 American Academy of Pediatrics, 1490.

12 Martha R. Burt, “Cultural Myths and Support for Rape,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 38 (1980):

is asking to be raped, and, perhaps most disturbing, that all women have an unconscious desire to be sexually assaulted.<sup>13</sup> Burt examined these myths in concurrence with other beliefs about gender roles, such as the “proper” roles of men and women in relationships and ideas about female sexual promiscuity in general. The results of the study were disturbing, in that they indicated a prevalent acceptance of myths surrounding rape:

Rape attitudes are strongly connected to other deeply held and pervasive attitudes such as sex role stereotyping, distrust of the opposite sex (adversarial sexual beliefs), and acceptance of interpersonal violence. When over half of the sampled individuals agree with statements such as “A woman who goes to the home or apartment of a man on the first date implies she is willing to have sex” and “In the majority of rapes, the victim was promiscuous or had a bad reputation,” . . . the world is indeed not a safe place for rape victims.<sup>14</sup>

What use is a thirty-four year old study to us in today’s enlightened and technologically advanced culture? Haven’t we advanced beyond such antiquated beliefs about female sexuality and gender roles? The answer is that we unfortunately have not. With explicit sexual content becoming more widespread across all forms of media and the new ease of access to music videos through streaming websites such as YouTube and Vevo, there is more potential for problematic messages to filter through.<sup>15</sup> This means more opportunities for young people to absorb harmful ideas about relationships and sexuality.

What effects does sexual imagery have on perceptions of female sexuality? After all, aren’t people aware that imagery in music videos is just a form of storytelling? A study by Kistler and Lee (2009) sought to determine this by examining the effects exposure to sexual hip-hop videos had on college students’ acceptance of various rape myths. Researchers exposed college students to music videos with either low or high sexual content and then examined the subjects’ acceptance of some of the rape myths previously examined by Burt. The male students exposed to highly-sexual music videos subsequently expressed more acceptance of rape myths and objectification of women.<sup>16</sup> Researchers believe that the lavish and powerful presentations of the male artists in the music video served as cues for male participants, maintaining the idea that women exist solely for the entertainment and sexual fulfillment of men, and therefore, coercing women into sexual activity is acceptable, even expected.<sup>17</sup> It is this expectation of sexual coercion as a normal part of

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13 Ibid, 223.

14 Ibid, 229.

15 *American Academy of Pediatrics*, 1489.

16 Michelle Kistler and Moon J. Lee, “Does Exposure to Sexual Hip-Hop Music Videos Influence the Sexual Attitudes of College Students?” *Mass Communication and Society* 13 (2009): 82.

17 Ibid, 83.

gender interaction that supports the idea of rape culture. Obviously, not every young male adolescent who is exposed to such sexual imagery is going to become a serial rapist, but the potential consequences of such exposure cannot be ignored.

It is not only imagery in music videos that contributes to potentially dangerous ideas. In addition to the Kistler and Lee study, a 2006 study by Bretthauer et al. sought to examine the prevalent messages in popular music, and found disturbing trends in the prevalence of misogynistic themes in lyrics across several genres, including pop and rock as well as hip-hop. From lyrical analysis of songs chosen from the Billboard Hot 100 Charts, researchers identified themes of men and power, sex as top priority for males, objectification of women, and sexual violence occurring across genres.<sup>18</sup> Some of the lyrics analyzed presented “males ordering females . . . the motivation behind the males’ demands often involved obtaining sexual pleasure from women.”<sup>19</sup> Another sub-theme present was male artists presenting women as “something to be won,” with the concept of pursuing a woman as that of a game.<sup>20</sup> Both of these themes play very well into the concept of rape culture. When male artists are seen as powerful figures who expect their demands, especially sexual ones, to be met without question, it supports the idea that a woman cannot rightfully turn down sexual advances without disrupting normal power relations. This falls in line with the results of the Kistler and Lee study, in which male artists presented themselves in ways that asserted their apparent power over women, reinforcing the participants’ acceptance of male dominance. In addition, the idea of “winning” a woman results in the misguided belief that all women initially reject a man’s advances, but those rejections may soon be overcome by persistent attention. This is especially problematic, as adolescents receive the message that a woman who rejects sexual advances is only “playing hard to get.” A denial of consent, therefore, is not taken seriously, which can lead to sexual assault. The main issue here is that these ideas are presented as normal “rules” for relationships. Adolescents hear and absorb these messages and possibly internalize harmful messages about what is expected of them in the world of sexual relationships. This can lead to false ideas about what contributes to unhealthy relationships and can place many teenagers and young adults in precarious situations.

One powerful result of the Kistler and Lee study illustrated that it is not only male artists who participate in the perpetuation of harmful gender expectations. Researchers examined and analyzed lyrics performed by female artists alongside male artists and found disturbing trends even in the lyrics performed by female artists. “A number of female artists adhered to “appropriate” gender roles by fulfilling the male’s demands and by functioning as an object possessed by the

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18 Brook Bretthauer et al., “A Feminist Analysis of Popular Music: Power Over, Objectification Of, and Violence Against Women,” *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy* 18 (2006): 29.

19 Ibid, 38.

20 Ibid, 39.

male . . . in general female artists communicated messages that they were not inherently valuable and did not deserve respect.”<sup>21</sup> This is incredibly problematic in more than one way. Adolescent females learn through the example of female artists that abuse is part of a healthy relationship. If they are told that violence, objectification, and lack of respect are normal, they are less likely to try to leave a damaging relationship, which can take a heavy toll on their own self-concept, and possibly affect their relationships in the future.

Objectification may seem a somewhat less harmful concept than overt sexual violence, but research illustrates the fallacy of such a claim. A study by Loughnan et al. (2013) revealed that undergraduate students at a British university showed less “moral concern” for a sexualized fictional victim versus a non-sexualized one.<sup>22</sup> As noted by Burt and others, a commonly accepted rape myth is that women desire to be sexually assaulted and women can “ask” for rape by dressing or acting in a certain way. The Loughnan study reinforced this idea, as participants assigned more blame to a sexualized victim: “compared with nonobjectified women, the objectified were perceived to be more responsible for being raped.”<sup>23</sup> An unsavory consequence of this is that even seemingly “harmless” objectification can result in negative views of rape victims. The practice of blaming a victim for their sexual assault means that support systems meant to help victims (such as law enforcement and medical personnel) could be inadequate in fulfilling that duty.<sup>24</sup> It also implies that victims will continue to needlessly suffer following their assault when faced with an onslaught of social stigma and misdirected blame. When sexual assault is normalized through sexual content in popular media and victims are blamed for their assaults, rape culture continues to flourish.

This is precisely where the issue lies in popular songs such as “Blurred Lines.” Though there are numerous examples of songs with lyrics suggestive of rape culture, further exploration would require more than can reasonably fit here. It is with this in mind that I chose to focus on the lyrical content and music video imagery of this song alone.

Before delving into the actual lyrics of the song, one must understand where artist Robin Thicke’s mindset sits on the concept of relationships. In an interview that’s been quoted numerous times throughout the media, when asked about the song and its accompanying video, Thicke stated, “People say, ‘Hey, do you think this is degrading to women?’ I’m like, ‘Of course it is. What a pleasure it is to degrade a woman.’”<sup>25</sup> Upon examining the lyrics of the song and viewing the video,

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21 Ibid, 44.

22 Steve Loughnan et al., “Sexual Objectification Increases Rape Victim Blame and Decreases Perceived Suffering.” *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 37 (2013): 455.

23 Ibid

24 Ibid, 490.

25 “Robin Thicke’s Blurred Vision: A Critique of a Rape Anthem in Two Parts.” Last updated August 4, 2013.



one has to acknowledge that Thicke certainly made his view clear, even if he disagrees that the song is a “rape anthem” and even attempts to argue that it is, instead a “feminist anthem.”<sup>26</sup> That Thicke does not seem to see the incredibly problematic aspects of his work illustrates how deeply rape culture is entrenched in society.

A number of problematic lyrics run throughout the song, either celebrating objectification of women or making references to nonconsensual sexual activity. In the first pre-chorus, Thicke reinforces the idea of women as less-than-human as he sings: “now he was close, tried to domesticate you / but you’re an animal, baby, it’s in your nature.”<sup>27</sup> In addition to this, further in the lyrics the concept of women existing solely for male entertainment: “When you got them jeans on . . . you the hottest [expletive] in this place.” The music video reinforces this constant objectification, with the male artists repeatedly making glances at the bodies of the female models as they walk past. In one particular scene, a topless female model parades past Thicke as he points after her and smirks at the camera.<sup>28</sup> Soon after this, the same model walks quickly past Thicke in the opposite direction, and he follows her around in a manner similar to the actions of a man pursuing an unwilling woman in a dance club. Upon viewing the video in its entirety, one cannot help but notice that the female models are clearly intended as props, parading past the male artists in the background and posing with emotionless expressions atop bicycles. The choice of wardrobe must also be taken into question. The male artists such as T.I. and Thicke himself are dressed in suits, clothing items for decades associated with power and prestige. The female models, however, are, for the most part, clothed in minimal underwear with their bare chests completely exposed. It is clear who is meant to be in charge here, and it is not the half-naked women. As expressed in the results of the Kistler and Lee study, male artists having power over the women in their music videos can have damaging effects on the sexual attitudes of male college students. This means that scenarios of power and dominance such as the one expressed in Thicke’s video can negatively impact male acceptance of sexual assault, thereby perpetuating rape culture.

The main issue with “Blurred Lines,” however, is not its objectification of the female models. Though this is something that absolutely needs to be addressed, especially in the wake of the Loughnan study regarding objectification and victim-blaming, the bigger issue here lies in the incredibly problematic lyrical content; content that reinforces and helps to maintain rape culture and the myths associated with it. The single most repeated lyric in “Blurred Lines” is “I know you want it;” in fact, Thicke repeats this line a total of *eighteen times throughout the entirety of the song*.<sup>29</sup> Accompanying this assertion is also a series of lyrics including, “the way you grab me / must wanna get nasty” and Thicke asserting that he “hates these blurred lines.” What are the

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26 Ibid.

27 AZLyrics, “Robin Thicke Lyrics – Blurred Lines.”

28 “Robin Thicke – Blurred Lines (Unrated Version)...” YouTube video.

29 AZLyrics



blurred lines that he is referring to? Music is, as always, open to interpretation, but considering the other lyrics in the song, particularly the declaration that Thicke “knows” the woman “wants it,” one can interpret that he means he hates the supposed “gray area” between sexual consent and rape. Even if this is not Thicke’s intention, the fact that one can interpret the meaning as such means that he is a participant in the perpetuation of rape culture, whether he believes so or not. Many of the lyrics expressed fall in line with common rape myths. For example, a commonly held belief regarding rape implies that when woman dances in any suggestive manner with a man, the man is able to assume consent to sexual activity. (“The way you grab me / must wanna get nasty”). Another equally common belief is that a woman turns down initial sexual advances only to appear pure, but she will eventually acquiesce after persistent attention (“I know you want it / But you’re a good girl”). Instead of asking the woman, Thicke’s lyrics indicate a false assumption of consent based on rape myths. Instead of destroying the foundation of rape myths that place women in precarious situations and blame them for being raped, Thicke’s lyrics reinforce them, thereby perpetuating rape culture. When rape culture is allowed to flourish, there are real consequences, as illustrated through real-life context.

There are numerous ventures and online projects that allow sexual assault survivors the opportunity to express their feelings in supportive environments. Project Unbreakable is one of these outlets. A photography-based venture that gives sexual assault survivors of any gender an outlet for their feelings in the hope that this can help them heal, the project involves survivors being photographed holding hand-lettered signs featuring quotations from their attackers, their families, or themselves regarding their sexual assault. The project received more attention in the online social justice community after sociological blogging website *TheSocietyPages.org* featured a story that illustrated with terrible clarity the intersection of rape culture and popular music.<sup>30</sup> Entitled “From the Mouths of Rapists: The Lyrics to Robin Thicke’s Blurred Lines,” this particular story features participants in Project Unbreakable whose attackers’ words are eerily reminiscent of the lyrics from Thicke’s hit song. Of the signature lyric, the story reports: “Thicke sings “I know you want it,” a phrase that many sexual assault survivors report their rapists saying to justify their actions, *as demonstrated over and over in the Project Unbreakable testimonials.*”<sup>31</sup> [italics added] Though other testimonials weren’t as directly linked, photos of quotations such as, “*It wasn’t rape; you were being such a tease*” and “*we both know you don’t really mean it when you say no*” illustrate that Thicke’s lyrics come dangerously close to reinforcing the patriarchal power structure that normalizes rape and therefore placing more stigma on sexual assault survivors. The fact that some of

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<sup>30</sup> “From the Mouths of Rapists: The Lyrics to Robin Thicke’s Blurred Lines,” *TheSocietyPages.org*, Accessed April 10, 2014 <http://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2013/09/17/from-the-mouths-of-rapists-the-lyrics-of-robin-thickes-blurred-lines-and-real-life-rape/>

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

the lyrics from the song are close in interpretation to the words of actual rapists should be a cause for concern. Unfortunately, “Blurred Lines” is not the only problematic content to be let off the hook because it’s just a catchy song or it’s just good artistry. Everyone loves a catchy song, and this is why artists are allowed to get away with potentially harmful messages. Individuals sing along to the lyrics in their car or at the gym without fully realizing the seriousness of what is being said. Rape culture is also a cycle; we have a hard time recognizing when something perpetuates rape culture because we are constantly immersed in rape culture. Therefore, problematic attitudes expressed through the media are accepted as normal or logical.

The media we are shown and consume on a daily basis has an immediate impact on our ideologies and the way we shape our interactions with others. Adolescents are especially vulnerable to this shaping as they are just beginning to engage in romantic and sexual relationships. Young adults often look to their favorite artists and celebrities for cues about what constitutes a normal relationship. By giving music that perpetuates rape culture a free pass, we are explicitly telling rape victims that their concerns are not valid, that their experiences were to be expected, that their pain is not real. We are also teaching frightening lessons to adolescents. Males are told that sexual coercion is acceptable, and that a man has the right to demand sexual activity from a woman, even if no explicit consent is given. In turn, females are told that sexual violence is to be expected, and that a short skirt or a low cut tank top is asking for rape. In order to dismantle rape culture, we need to question music and other media that presents ideas supportive of such a culture. By dismantling rape culture, we can in turn make the world a safer place for those whom the media paints as inferior victims, and empower both men and women to engage in only mutually respectful relationships.

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## Questions about "The 'Blurred Lines' Effect: Popular Music and the Perpetuation of Rape Culture"

### Reading and Writing to Comprehend

1. **Analyze.** What does Davis mean when she writes "When sexual assault is normalized through sexual content in popular media and victims are blamed for their assaults, rape culture continues to flourish?"
2. **Rhetorically read** Davis' essay with a particular eye toward her argument and evidence. What is her argument and what are the types of evidence she uses to support it?
3. **Consider.** Where do you see Davis using rhetorical appeals in her essay? How do these work together to create the overall effect of the essay?

### Reading and Writing to Respond

4. **View** the video "Blurred Lines" on the internet (via YouTube or another site). Write an intellectual response in which you focus primarily on how this video affects your reading of Davis' printed essay, which cites lyrics and describes the video, but not does link to the video (see Chapter 3 for help with intellectual responses). In other words, to what extent does experiencing the text visually change your experience of Davis' essay? *So what?*

### Reading and Writing to Apply and Reflect

5. **Reread** Davis' essay twice in order to apply the Believing/Doubting Game reading strategy. Referring to your annotations from these readings, write a letter to a specific audience of your choice that supports (i.e. "believes") Davis' argument. You may choose to write to a friend, a parent, a professor, or even Robin Thicke, the singer of "Blurred Lines."
6. **Refer** to your annotations indicating your "doubts," then **write** a letter to a specific audience of your choice (see question 5 for some options) explaining these doubts. Now that you have written both letters, **consider** whether one of the letters reveals what you really think. How can you tell?

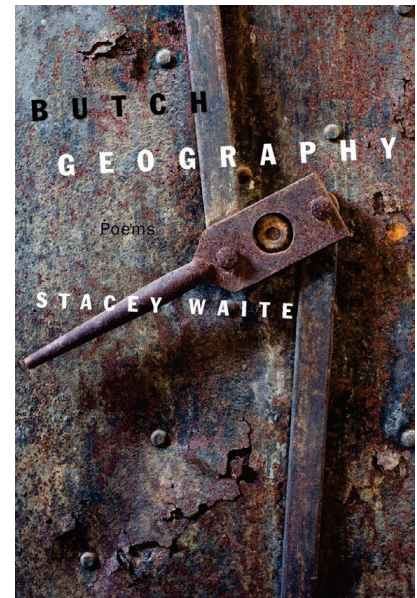
## On the Occasion of Being Mistaken for a Man by Security Personnel at Newark International Airport

By Stacey Waite

This poem, like many others Waite has written, explores the relationships among one's gender, body, and sex. In this particular poem, questions surrounding these relationships emerge when the speaker's body is mistaken or misread for something it is not.

In Waite, Stacey. *Butch Geography*. Tupelo Press, 2013.

It's like being born again, these metal detectors  
are like traveling through the womb, the buzz  
goes off to indicate the birth of trouble.  
And the gender of trouble matters because  
when a woman goes through, Jimmy yells,



“Female Search” and a large woman appears  
from behind her security table. So when I walk through  
and my wallet chain sets off the womb alert,  
I wait. I wait for “Female Search” like I wait for the bus,  
that hopeful and expecting look. But Jimmy takes me  
himself. Jimmy slides his hands down the length  
of my thighs, he pats his palm stiffly against my crotch.  
He asks me to remove my boots and jacket.  
And so I do. And at first, the woman in me goes unnoticed.  
But when I hold my arms straight out  
and he traces the outline of my underarms, he makes  
that face, the face I’ve seen before,  
the “holy-shit-it’s-a-woman” face,  
the “pretend-you-don’t-notice-the-tits” face.  
Jimmy’s hands change from a tender sweep  
to a kind of wiping, like he’s trying to rid my body  
of the afterbirth, he is preparing to peel off the skin of my body  
as he would the apple he brings to work for break time.  
Jimmy stares hard at the metal detector,  
with a kind of respect like the arch of it became holy,  
transformed me on my walk through.  
Jimmy is nervous for the following reasons:  
he has just felt the crotch and chest of a woman who he thought was a man,  
he can not decide which way he liked her best,  
his supervisor might notice he has not yelled “Female Search”  
which he knows is grounds for some sort of lawsuit,  
he’s angry, his blue uniform makes him angry  
so that when he is patting her down now, he does it with force,  
he wants her to feel he is stronger than she is,  
he wants the metal detector to stop being a gender change machine  
from which this woman, who is also me, emerges,  
unties her boots slowly, follows all his directions.  
And when Jimmy is done, he nods. He wants me  
to keep him secret, to pretend neither of us had ever been born.

## Questions about “On the Occasion of Being Mistaken for a Man by Security Personnel at Newark International Airport”

### Reading and Writing to Comprehend

1. **Apply** and **analyze**. Which reading strategy do you think will best help you understand this poem? Test out your hypothesis and read the poem using that strategy. Then try two more strategies. Which is most productive? Why?
2. **Develop** a difficulty inventory listing. Now that you have read the poem at least three times, are there still elements that you don't understand? Develop a difficulty inventory listing those remaining elements (see Chapter 3 for help with difficulty inventories).
3. **Trace** the speaker's use of pronouns in the poem. Where does the speaker use “I,” “my,” and “me,” and where does the speaker use “her?” *So what?*

### Reading and Writing to Respond

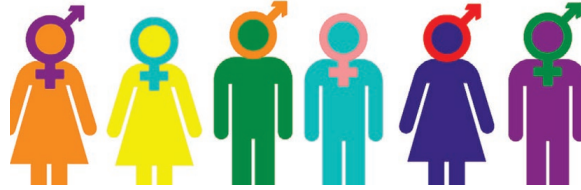
4. **Write** an intellectual response that focuses specifically on the first few lines of the poem in which Waite describes the “birth of trouble” and the “gender of trouble.” One way to read this opening is as an allusion to philosopher Judith Butler's 1990 groundbreaking book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Do some research on Butler and her book. Using the “reading and evaluating online sources” strategy to annotate your sources, describe the extent to which recognizing this allusion helps you to understand what is being addressed in the poem.

### Reading and Writing to Apply and Reflect

5. **Reflect** on how you as a reader approach poetry. What have you been taught to look for when you read poetry? What was your experience like reading this poem using the strategies in this textbook? How was reading this poem different from reading the first selection in this chapter or other prose (non-poetry) selections?

## Facebook, the Gender Binary, and Third-Person Pronouns

By Lal Zimman



This blog post posits that Facebook is a pioneer in moving beyond what Zimman calls the “gender binary.” Although not as powerful as other institutions such as schools, Zimman maintains that Facebook’s cultural cachet can go a long way toward important social change by helping us recognize how our current binary-driven linguistic practices do not adequately represent the complexities of gender and sexuality.

Oxford University Press Blog, September 23rd 2014.

Visit <http://blog.oup.com/2014/09/facebook-gender-binary-third-person-pronouns/>

The death rattle of the gender binary has been ringing for decades now, leaving us to wonder when it will take its last gasp. In this third decade of third wave feminism and the queer critique, dismantling the binary remains a critical task in the gender revolution. Language is among the most socially pervasive tools through which culture is negotiated, but in a language like English, with its minimal linguistic marking of gender, it can be difficult to find concrete signs that linguistic structures are changing to reflect new ways of thinking about the gender binary rather than simply repackaging old ideas.

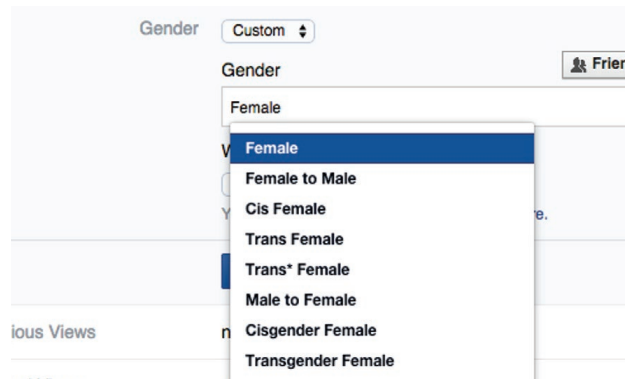


*Sign from Genderblur at Twin Cities Pride 2003. Photo by Transguyjay. CC BY-NC 2.0 via Flickr.*



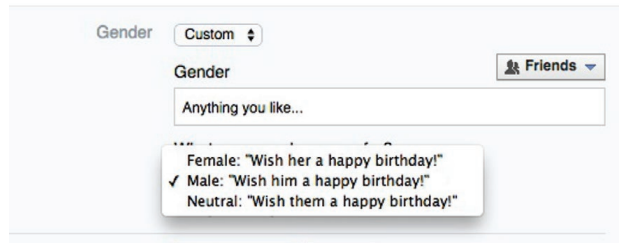
One direction we might look, though, is toward the gendering of third person pronouns, which is what led me to write this post about pronouns on Facebook. Yes, Facebook. The social media giant may not be your first thought when it comes to feminist language activism, but [this year's shift in the way Facebook categorizes gender](#) is among the most widely-felt signs of a sea change in institutional attitudes about gendered third person pronouns. Although Facebook does not have the same force as the educational system, governments, or traditional print media, it carries its own linguistic [cachet](#) established through its corporate authority, its place in the cultural negotiation of coolness and social connection, and its near inescapable presence in everyday life.

In response to long-standing calls from transgender and gender non-conforming users to broaden its approach to gender, Facebook announced earlier this year that it would offer a new set of options. Rather than limiting members of the site to the selection of female or male, an extensive list of gender identities is offered, along with the option of a custom entry, including labels like *agender*, *bigender*, *gender fluid*, *gender non-conforming*, *trans person*, *two-spirit*, *transgender (wo)man* and *cisgender* (i.e. non-transgender) *(wo)man*.



*Screenshot courtesy of Lal Zimman.*

With all of the potential complexity afforded by these categories, Facebook couldn't rely on a simple algorithm of assigning gendered pronouns for those occasions on which the website generates a third person reference to the user (e.g. "Wish \_\_\_ a happy birthday!"). Instead, it asks which set of pronouns a user prefers among three options: *he/him/his*, *she/her/hers*, or *they/them/theirs*. As a result, there are two important ways that Facebook's reconsideration of its gender classification system goes beyond the listing of additional gender categories. The first is the more obvious of the two: offering singular they as an option for those who prefer gender neutral reference forms. The other is simply the practice of asking for a pronoun preference rather than deriving it from gender or sex.



*Screenshot courtesy of Lal Zimman*

Sanctioning the use of singular they as a gender neutral pronoun counters the centuries-old grammarian's complaint that they can only be used in reference to plural third person referents. Proponents of singular they, however, point out that the pronoun has been used by some of the English-speaking world's finest writers and that it was in wide-spread use even before [blatantly misogynistic language policies](#) determined that he should be the gender-neutral pronoun in official texts of the British government. More recently, an additional source of support for singular *they* has arisen: for those who do not wish to be slotted into one side of the gender binary or the other, *they* is perhaps the most intuitive way to avoid gendered third-person pronouns because of its already familiar presence in most dialects of English. (Other options include innovative pronouns like *ze/hir/hirs* or *ey/em/em's*.) In this case, a speaker must choose between upholding grammatical conventions and affirming someone's identity.

THE PRESCRIPTIVE GRAMMARIAN'S PERSONAL PRONOUN SYSTEM			
		NUMBER	
		SINGULAR	PLURAL
PERSON	1st	I	WE
	2nd	YOU	
	3rd	SHE	HE

*Courtesy of Lal Zimman.*

But wait, you might ask – don't we need a distinction between singular and plural they? How are we supposed to know when someone is talking about a single person and when they're talking about a group? Though my post isn't necessarily meant to defend the use of singular they in refer-

ence to specific individuals ([an argument others have made quite extensively](#)), this point is worth addressing briefly if only to dispel the notion that the standard pronoun system is logical while deviations are somehow logically flawed. As the pronoun charts included here illustrate, there is already a major gap in the standard English pronoun system when compared to many other languages: a distinction between singular and plural you. Somehow we get by, however, relying on context and sometimes asking for clarification. Could we do the same with they?

The second pronoun-related change Facebook has made – asking for preferred pronouns rather than determining them based on gender category – is a more fundamental challenge to the normative take on assigning pronouns. According to conventional wisdom, a speaker will select whether to use she or he based on certain types of information about the person being referred to: how their bodily sex is perceived, how they present their gender, and in some cases other contextual factors like their name. To be uncertain about which gendered pronoun to use can be a source of great anxiety, exemplified by cultural artifacts like [Saturday Night Live’s androgynous character from the 1990s known only as Pat](#). No one ever asks Pat about their gender because to do so would presumably be a grave insult, as Pat apparently has no idea that they have an androgynous appearance (were you able to follow me, despite the singular they’s?).

A NON-BINARY PERSONAL PRONOUN SYSTEM			
		NUMBER	
		SINGULAR	PLURAL
PERSON	1st	I	WE
	2nd	YOU	
	3rd	SHE / HE / ZE / EY / PER ...	THEY

*Courtesy of Lal Zimman.*

But transgender and queer communities are increasingly turning this logic on its head. Rather than risk being “mis-pronounced,” as community members sometimes call it, it is becoming the norm for introductions in many trans and queer contexts to [include pronouns preferences along with names](#). For instance, my name is Lal and I prefer he/him/his pronouns. (Even the custom of calling these “male” pronouns has been critiqued on the basis that one needn’t identify as male in

order to prefer he/him/his pronouns.) The goal behind this move is to remove the tension of uncertainty and to avoid potential offense or embarrassment before it takes place. But this is not just a practice for transgender and gender non-conforming people; the ideal is that no one's pronoun preferences be taken for granted. Instead of determining pronouns according to appearance, they become a matter of open negotiation in which one can demonstrate an interest in using language that feel maximally respectful to others.

Facebook's adoption of this new approach to pronouns, despite prescriptive grammarians' objections, suggests that the acceptance and use of singular they is expanding. More than that, it furthers the normalization of self-selected pronouns since even those who are totally unfamiliar with the use of singular they as a preferred pronoun, or the very idea of pronoun preferences, may be faced with unexpected pronouns in their daily newsfeeds.

For those of us at academic institutions with sizable transgender and gender non-conforming communities, the practices discussed here may already be underway on campus. During my time teaching at Reed College, for instance, I found students to be enthusiastic about including pronoun preferences in our beginning-of-semester introductions even in classes where everyone's pronoun preferences aligned with normative expectations.

My goal here isn't to argue that the gender binary is dissolving in the face of new pronoun practices. Indeed, linguistic negotiations of gender and sexual binaries are far too complex to draw such a simple conclusion. However, what I do want to suggest is that we are in the midst of some kind of shift in the way pronouns are used and understood among speakers of English. Describing a more fully complete change of this sort, linguistic anthropologist [Michael Silverstein](#) has explained how religious and political ideology among speakers of Early Modern English resulted in a collapse of the second person pronouns thou (singular, informal) and you (plural, formal). In the present case, rapidly changing ideologies about the gender binary may be pushing us toward a different organization of third person pronouns of the sort illustrated by the non-binary pronoun chart on the previous page.

The effect of Facebook on linguistic practice more broadly has yet to be fully uncovered, but its capital-driven flexibility and omnipresence in contemporary social life suggests that it may be a powerful tool in ideologically-driven language change.

*Headline image credit:* People and gender. [CCo via Pixabay](#).

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Lal Zimman is the co-editor of [Queer Excursions: Rethorizing Binaries in Language, Gender, and Sexuality](#) with Jenny Davis and Joshua Raclaw. Lal Zimman is a Visiting Assistant Professor at Reed College. His research, which brings together ethnographic, sociophonetic, and discourse analytic frameworks, deals with the relationship between gender, sexuality, and embodiment in the linguistic practices of transgender and LGBTQ communities.

## Questions about “Facebook, the Gender Binary, and Third-Person Pronouns”

### Reading and Writing to Comprehend

1. In his blog entry, Zimman writes, “Language is among the most socially pervasive tools through which culture is negotiated, but in a language like English, with its minimal linguistic marking of gender, it can be difficult to find concrete signs that linguistic structures are changing to reflect new ways of thinking about the gender binary rather than simply repackaging old idea.” What does this mean?
2. Zimman concludes with the following: “The effect of Facebook on linguistic practice more broadly has yet to be fully uncovered, but its capital-driven flexibility and omnipresence in contemporary social life suggests that it may be a powerful tool in ideologically-driven language change.” What does Zimman mean by the terms “capital-driven flexibility,” “omnipresence,” and “ideologically-driven?”
3. How do the images in Zimman’s blog entry connect to the printed text? How would you describe the relationship? For example, do the images highlight Zimman’s argument? Help develop his ideas? Represent the voices of others who might disagree with him?

### Reading and Writing to Respond

4. In this blog entry, Zimman writes that the movement to introduce one’s preferred pronouns alongside one’s name is becoming more common and is based on the notion that “no one’s pronoun preference should be taken for granted.” Write an intellectual response in which you describe what you think of this as a widespread practice. Do you engage in it? Do you know others who do? So *what?* (see Chapter 3 for help with intellectual responses).

### Reading and Writing to Apply and Reflect

5. Although not as powerful as the education system or government, Zimman argues that Facebook still wields a great deal of power in part because of its “inescapable presence in everyday life.” Beyond its potential power to affect the use of pronouns, where else do you see Facebook exercising its power? Choose

one example and explore the implications of this, as Zimman does with Facebook's power to affect language.

## Mothers Anonymous

By Emily Nussbaum

This essay explores UrbanBaby, a New-York based website with an anonymous message-board on which women comment about parenting. As Nussbaum recounts, though, the forum offers a space in which women often confess their deepest and darkest feelings about their children, their spouses, and about mothering.

In *The Best of Technology Writing 2007*, edited by Steven Levy, University of Michigan Press, 2007.

Visit <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/bot.5283331.0002.001>

## DIGITALCULTUREBOOKS



The Best of Technology Writing 2007

Steven Levy, Editor

Series: Best of Technology Writing

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## Questions about “Mothers Anonymous”

### Reading and Writing to Comprehend

1. **Rhetorically read and annotate** “Mothers Anonymous” with specific attention to Nussbaum’s argument and the types of evidence she uses to make this argument (see Chapter 3 for help with rhetorical reading).
2. **Consider.** Nussbaum spends some time talking about how many of the women who post on UrbanBaby’s message-board seem nostalgic for certain eras. What does nostalgia have to do with Nussbaum’s argument?
3. **Infer.** Readers can imagine that not all of the posts from UrbanBaby’s message-board are represented in this piece. Why do you think Nussbaum chose to focus on the posts she does? So what?

### Reading and Writing to Respond

4. Using your annotations, **write** an intellectual response in which you address

how important you think anonymity is to UrbanBaby’s message-board (see Chapter 4 for help with intellectual responses).

### Reading and Writing to Apply and Reflect

- Using your intellectual response, as well as your answers to questions 1–3, come up with an example of something that depends on anonymity. You may choose chatrooms or similar spaces on the internet or something that is not associated with technology at all such as groups like Alcoholics Anonymous or anonymous comment cards distributed at restaurants. What role does anonymity play in your chosen example? How important is it? So what?

## Long Writing Assignments Based on Readings in Chapter 9: Gender and Technology

- Multimodal Option.** Using Sarah Davis’ essay “The ‘Blurred Lines’ Effect: Popular Music and the Perpetuation of Rape Culture” as a starting point, develop a multimodal project that “remixes” her essay to include elements that are not print-based. In other words, re-present her essay through multimodal means that help to underscore her argument. Then, write a reflection that addresses the choices you made as you developed your multimodal project. Address how you think your use of multimodal components make her argument that much stronger.
- Reread** and **consider** Sarah Davis’ essay “The ‘Blurred Lines’ Effect: Popular Music and the Perpetuation of Rape Culture” using the RLW strategy. Then, choose a song or other artifact and **develop** an argument that draws on sources (as does Davis’ essay) to expose some aspect of it (see Chapter 4 for help with writing academic arguments) not readily visible. Finally, **write** a reflection that addresses the decisions you made in writing your essay and how they relate to what you noticed about Davis’ essay. Which elements and techniques from Davis’ essay did you find helpful in developing your own essay and which did you choose not to include. Why?



3. **Develop** an argument. Using the selections from this chapter and your annotations on these selections, develop an argument about what a specific technology or set of related technologies are contributing to discussions of gender. How is this technology adding to the discussion? *So what?* Look back at the annotations you already have on the texts to determine how helpful those are. It is likely that you will need to reread the selections by applying a reading strategy that you think will be most effective for completing this particular assignment.
4. **Multimodal Option.** Develop a multimodal project that develops an argument about what a specific technology or set of related technologies are contributing to discussions of gender. How is this technology adding to the discussion? *So what?*
5. *Rebellious Magazine for Women* introduces Stacey Waite’s poem “On the Occasion of Being Mistaken for a Man by Security Personnel at Newark International Airport” as follows: “Stacey Waite’s poetry rebels against and with identity, against and with the body. Waite’s poetry rebels against how outsiders perceive both as working together or against one another.” **Develop** this idea further by returning to Waite’s poem and locating evidence to support this interpretation. How does the poem help you understand what it means to “rebel against and with identity, against and with the body?,” as well as “how outsiders perceive both as working together or against one another?” Are there moments in the poem that might challenge this interpretation? Look back at the annotations you already have on the poem to determine how helpful those are. It is likely that you will need to reread the poem by applying a reading strategy that you think will be most effective for completing this particular assignment.

## Reflecting on Your Reading Strategies and Annotations

Consider the different reading strategies you applied while reading the selections in this chapter. Which were most useful for understanding the text? For reading poetry? For figuring out what you think? For responding to the text? Anticipate future uses of these reading strategies in this class, in other classes, and in other contexts. Also, consider previous courses and contexts in which these strategies would have been helpful.