

SAD GIRL POP

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ABSTRACT

Jeremy Wallach, Committee Chair

I get to write acknowledgments like in a book! That's cool. (Not listed in or by importance.)

Woody. My bean dog. Thank you for cooperating with mom and dad for them to send me photos every day. Your existence and wellbeing mean everything to me. The conclusion chapter couldn't have been written without you sleeping in my lap.

My family, sorry you technically came after bean dog, I'm sure you guys understand. Thank you for all the encouragement and support in pursuing a master's degree. Only you guys know how much of a labor of love this was.

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Dr. Becca Cragin, thank you for your time and dedication to reading multiple prospectuses and drafts. It got there eventually with your help.

Dedicated to Dr. Wallach

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER ONE	14
Brand & Image	16
Album Cover	18
Music and Lyric Analysis.....	19
Conclusion	28
CHAPTER TWO.....	30
Brand & Image	33
Album Cover	34
Music and Lyric Analysis	36
Conclusion	48
CHAPTER THREE	50
Brand & Image	52
Album Cover	54
Music and Lyric Analysis	55
Conclusion	61
CONCLUSION	64
BIBLIOGRAPHY	71

INTRODUCTION

When “Ocean Eyes” by Billie Eilish went viral online, I was 15 years old. At the time, I had only heard “Ocean Eyes” in passing on the radio and was not a fan; I was exiting my rap phase and entering a new phase of classic rock. Eilish was moot for me as someone who was not into popular trends and pop music. I was unaware of her image, branding, and the sad-girl pop music that came from her. That is not the case now. 2021 to 2022 was one of the most challenging years of my life. Despite landing an undergraduate research opportunity and getting to live with my best friend, I was in a deep, dark hole of apprehension about the future. This form of anxiety manifested via anxiety attacks and crying episodes daily. I began listening to Eilish and Gracie Abrams, among other sad girl singer-songwriters, to explore and cope with my anxiety.

Their music has done more for me than I can ever adequately express as a young woman with anxiety that manifests emotionally. Yet despite the gratitude, enjoyment, and comfort I experienced from listening to sad girl pop, I still needed to explain myself when others asked what I liked to listen to. I felt the need to defend myself as someone who is not the stereotypical “sad girl” on social media and that the aesthetic portrays, and most importantly, this got me thinking about Sad Girl Pop for what the music actually means. I argue that Sad Girl Pop is an unconventional resistance to the oppression caused by patriarchy. It is through Eilish, Abrams, and Cain’s effective states of anxiety and depressive experiences shared through songs that allow both the performers and audience to gain control of themselves and the narrative they wish others to perceive.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

In defense of Sad Girl Pop, I will use a mixed-method approach. I will employ autoethnography when appropriate. As I have come to understand it, I will employ affect theory from Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Emotions of Politics* in the music and lyric analysis to provide a reading of how Eilish's and Abrams's music can be read as a form of resistance. These sections of analysis will also be supported by Homi Bhabha's concept of melancholic revolt, Sigmund Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia," and Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight* to provide a feminist perspective of the body and how that leads to rebellion.

Ahmed writes, "It is not difficult to see how emotions are bound up with the securing of social hierarchy: emotions become attributes of bodies as a way of transforming what is 'lower' or 'higher' into bodily traits. So, emotionality as a claim about a subject or a collective is clearly dependent on relations of power, which endow 'others' with meaning and value."¹ The contemporary relation of power supports patriarchy; thus, emotions associated with masculinity are denoted as 'higher,' and those associated with femininity are denoted as 'lower.' This gets boiled down to metaphors of soft and hard and then associated with the gender binary, as the female body is considered soft and invadable. These associations then contribute to the thought process of being into feeling, which is associated with females.

According to Freud, "Melancholia, whose definition fluctuates even in descriptive psychiatry, takes on various clinical forms, the grouping together of which into a single unity does not seem to be established with certainty; and some of these forms suggest somatic rather

¹ Ahmed, Sara. *The cultural politics of emotion*. Routledge, 2013. 2-3.

than psychogenic affections.”² Melancholia might arise from similar losses to grieving, but it suggests a deeper, possibly pathological issue—something more than just the grief of loss. Freud notes that while mourning alters one's attitude towards life, it's not typically viewed as a medical problem that requires treatment, unlike melancholia, which is often seen as a sign of mental illness. Whereas mourning is described as the natural result and process of dealing with loss. Freud argues that there is a relationship between melancholia and mourning. He suggests they are both responses to loss but manifest differently; mourning is generally accepted, whereas melancholia is pathologized, as it is persistent sadness. I am arguing that Sad Girl Pop is a melancholic response to the loss of power and freedom from living in a patriarchal society. Sad Girl Pop artists and listeners are thus melancholic, not mourning.

Bhabha uses Freud's melancholia discourse to suggest a more profound expression in which the speaker's feelings of loss and pain indicate a rebellion against authority. Bhabha suggests repeatedly exposing one's vulnerabilities is a resistance to being silenced or dominated. By sharing their vulnerabilities, the singer-songwriters of Sad Girl Pop are creating resistance, showing that they will no longer be silenced or dominated. One must use Bhabha's notion of the inversion of meaning, which can be understood through his quote, “The melancholic are not ashamed and do not hide themselves, since everything derogatory they say about themselves is at bottom said about somebody else”³ to see this act as a way of challenging the patriarchy. Basically, the inversion of meaning is way to reclaim a term, phrase, or statement to convey a

² Freud, Sigmund. “Mourning and Melancholia.” Essay. In *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement: Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works* XIV, Standard Edition Of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud., XIV:243–58. London: The Hogarth Press, 1914. <https://archive.org/details/FreudMourningAndMelancholia>.

³ Bhabha, Homi. 1992. “Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt.” *Cultural Studies*. Edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler. First ed. New York: Routledge, 65.

different idea. In Sad Girl Pop, this occurs mostly by being sarcastic and ironic. The user hopes to achieve a shift in perspective. To additionally support this, Bhabha points out the societal double standard concerning depression and gender. Depression, when associated with men, is viewed as deep or sensitive, whereas when associated with women, it carries a negative connotation.⁴

History/ Pathologization of Sad Girl

Women's affective states have long been pathologized and stereotyped. The affective state I am focusing on and will provide a brief history of is sadness, which will show how the prior pathologization has developed into the contemporary identity of the sad girl and the consequential correlation to sad girl pop. I will use Fredrika Thelandersson's "21st Century Media and Female Mental Health: Profitable Vulnerability and Sad Girl Culture" to help explain the history and connections. The Enlightenment period brought new ideas and human sciences into the world; according to Thelandersson, Foucault notes that there was a shift from punishment of the criminal's body to punishment of the soul.⁵ It is Foucault's understanding that this shift was the beginning of secluding the ones to be punished, and instead of torturing them, they would be secluded to "cure" them. The "curing" process is grooming individuals to conform to society's hegemonic ideals and structures. It is also during this shift that discipline transfers from outward to inward. This is important for multiple reasons. One is how views of the sad woman are constructed within the new medical sciences of the time, as such women are to be

⁴ Bhabha, 1992. 65.

⁵ Thelandersson, Fredrika. "21st Century Media and Female Mental Health: Profitable Vulnerability and Sad Girl Culture." Palgrave MacMillan, 2023. doi:10.1007/978-3-031-16756-0. 34.

“cured” and understood. Two, according to Homi Bhabha, in “Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt,” “[the] distance between subject and object, inside and outside, that is part of the cultural binarism that emerges from relativism is now replaced by a social process of enunciation.”⁶ This allows for the connections regarding mental health and governmentality and their effects to be seen. The binaries of reason and unreason, civilized and uncivilized, support these connections and are a way of reinscribing the hegemonic patriarchal structure.⁷

Because of this shift, reformers-built asylums to begin treating the mentally ill as patients. The binaries of reason and unreason, mind and body, are now equated to a gender binary, driving oppression that is still prevalent today. Hysteria is primarily associated with women. The word even gets its origin from the Greek and Latin word for uterus or womb, stemming from the belief that hysteria is caused by possessing female reproductive organs.⁸ Freud describes it as “a thing that one highly dislikes, is even disgusted by, it ‘represented a great fear for everyone.’”⁹ Therefore, it appears that by simply being feminine, that one was guilty of being insane.

Instead of drugs, hypnosis, and pressure techniques, Freud and his mentor, Josef Breuer, utilized dialogue with the patient, Anna O, who became the pioneer patient of psychoanalysis treatment. This treatment, led to the origin of Anna O’s symptoms, which stemmed from an

⁶ Bhabha, Homi. “Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt.” 57.

⁷ Thelandersson, Fredrika. “21st Century Media and Female Mental Health: Profitable Vulnerability and Sad Girl Culture.” Palgrave MacMillan, 2023. doi:10.1007/978-3-031-16756-0. 34.

⁸ Thelandersson, Fredrika. “21st Century Media and Female Mental Health: Profitable Vulnerability and Sad Girl Culture.” Palgrave MacMillan, 2023. doi:10.1007/978-3-031-16756-0. 40.

⁹ Thelandersson, Fredrika. “21st Century Media and Female Mental Health: Profitable Vulnerability and Sad Girl Culture.” Palgrave MacMillan, 2023. doi:10.1007/978-3-031-16756-0. 40.

oppressive, traditional upbringing and lack of intellectual stimulation. With this new knowledge, hysteria then became social instead of biological.¹⁰

In 1955, the US began to shift from psychoanalysis to psychopharmaceuticals. Thelandersson shares Jonathan Michel Metzger's history of the shift. He says the shift is not objective and still reinscribes gender roles. Through his research, he traces psychopharmacology from the 1950s to the -90s and shows how drugs were marketed as cures for female-centric issues and ways to keep the nuclear family and gender roles intact. "The model patient for psychopharmaceuticals shifted over time, reflecting changing anxieties about traditional roles, from the frigid or cheating wife in the 1950s to the feminist in the 1960s and 1970s, to the working woman in the 1990s and early 2000s."¹¹

The way women's experiences of sadness have been viewed has evolved. Historically, these experiences were seen as pathologies that led to the asylum, but then they became pathologies that led to the use of psychopharmaceuticals. This pathologization of women's sadness now makes individuals responsible for their mental health in the modern-day neoliberal culture of self-help, making it difficult to achieve equality. Different views about mental health are coming out in contemporary popular culture. These viewpoints, like Sad Girl Pop, embrace mental health and provide radical acknowledgment of mental health experiences. Through spaces like Sad Girl Pop, women can reclaim their mental health, femininity, and emotions.

¹⁰ Thelandersson, Fredrika. "21st Century Media and Female Mental Health: Profitable Vulnerability and Sad Girl Culture." Palgrave MacMillan, 2023. doi:10.1007/978-3-031-16756-0. 40.

¹¹ Thelandersson, Fredrika. "21st Century Media and Female Mental Health: Profitable Vulnerability and Sad Girl Culture." Palgrave MacMillan, 2023. doi:10.1007/978-3-031-16756-0. 51.

Context of Sad Girl

The Sad Girl aesthetic can be traced back to being a response to the firm, empowered, and confident image of women in the early 2010s. Thelandersson cites Lana Del Rey's song "Video Games" as a "stark contrast to the refrain of self-empowerment that dominated pop at the time."¹² Del Rey is controversial, as she has never publicly announced depression or anxiety, but her persona, songs, and music videos portray sadness. Continuing in the same vein of the sad girl aesthetic, Del Rey is problematic for some because of her "classic femme fatale [persona], but without the usual girl power."¹³ Thelandersson cites media studies scholar Catherine Vigier's analysis, "One of the problems is that, after a decade in which women were told that they had

everything it took to get ahead, and that the playing-field was somehow level in our new, post-feminist world, it was disturbing to many to see a woman recast herself as an old-fashioned male fantasy and to seemingly embrace submissiveness, and to dress as if she were nostalgic for the days before women's liberation."¹⁴

The way that Del Rey dresses and does her hair has nothing to do with her being nostalgic for the days before women's rights. It concerns her branding and image as a pop singer. Her apparent submissiveness is not her signing away her freedom as a woman. It should be viewed as an expression of dissatisfaction with always having to be dominant and empowered.

¹² Thelandersson, Fredrika. "21st Century Media and Female Mental Health: Profitable Vulnerability and Sad Girl Culture." Palgrave MacMillan, 2023. doi:10.1007/978-3-031-16756-0. 10.

¹³ Thelandersson, Fredrika. "21st Century Media and Female Mental Health: Profitable Vulnerability and Sad Girl Culture." Palgrave MacMillan, 2023. doi:10.1007/978-3-031-16756-0. 10.

¹⁴ Thelandersson, Fredrika. "21st Century Media and Female Mental Health: Profitable Vulnerability and Sad Girl Culture." Palgrave MacMillan, 2023. doi:10.1007/978-3-031-16756-0. 11.

The “Sad Girl Theory” was born from Del Rey's controversies. Artist Audrey Wollen coined this theory a few years later, stating that public displays of female sadness are a rebellion. The act of posting photos of themselves crying or post-cry is not weak but an act of revolt in an oppressive patriarchal society. This act is also a response to postfeminist sentiments, such as, the shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring, and self-discipline; a focus on individualism, choice, and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; and a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference.”¹⁵ Being a woman, feminine, and/ or feminist does not mean one must always be strong. It is okay and inevitable to show weakness, depression, anxiety, and maybe seek out an ill-conceived relationship. Doing any of those things does not mean one is not a feminist or is letting down the cause. It means that one is human.

It was after this aesthetic took over that society and the media began to be more accepting of talk about mental health. Celebrities like Selena Gomez started to share their stories of mental health struggles, making mental health discourse more normal. (This type of relatability can also be seen as part of a celebrity's brand and image, something I discuss more in chapters two and three.) While this is great and steps in the right direction, multiple contentions exist. One, who gets to be sad? Following from one, is it okay if it's considered a beautiful sadness?

Who gets to be sad? To be straightforward, it is white, cis women who fit typical beauty standards. At least those are the women depicted and discussed in popular culture. Selena Gomez is one exception to this. Heather Mooney has explored the racial dimensions of the sad girl, drawing comparisons to another emotive figure gaining traction on the internet: the Carefree

¹⁵ Thelandersson, Fredrika. “21st Century Media and Female Mental Health: Profitable Vulnerability and Sad Girl Culture.” Palgrave MacMillan, 2023. doi:10.1007/978-3-031-16756-0. 17-18.

Black Girl.¹⁶ In the article, “A Portrait of the Artist as Just, Like, A Really Sad Woman,” Gale Aitken writes, “Of the artists most prominent in the ‘sad girl’ sphere, black women in particular are in the minority. The link between fragility and white womanhood is a historical one and one that is reflected in this group of artists.”¹⁷ This shows sadness only through a white perspective, which marginalizes and is exclusionist. There are a few exceptions, including “Mitski, Japanese Breakfast’s Michelle Zauner, Indigo De Souza, Arlo Parks, and Beabadoobee’s Bea Kristi.”¹⁸ Mooney argues that while the aesthetic of “sad girls” became popular online during 2014-2015, its roots can be traced back to Chicana/Latina culture in 1990s Los Angeles.¹⁹ According to the LA-based graffiti art collective “Sad Girls Y Qué,” the image of the sad girl originates from Chola culture, as portrayed in the 1993 film *Mi Vida Loca*, set in the Echo Park neighborhood of Los Angeles, which was predominantly Latinx at the time. In this context, the sad girl is derived from LA tattoo art, where she is depicted as “a gangster chick with tears running down her face.”²⁰ In an interview with VICE magazine, Anna Bon, one of the members, describes the sad

¹⁶ Mooney, Heather. “Sad Girls and Carefree Black Girls: Affect, Race, (Dis) Possession, and Protest.” *WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly* 46, no. 3–4 (2018): 175–94. <https://doi.org/10.1353/wsqr.2018.0038>.

¹⁷ Sommer, Johanna. “But You Look So Pretty When You Smile: 20th Century Hysteria and its Legacy in ‘Sad Girl Indie’.” (2023).

¹⁸ Sommer, Johanna. “But You Look So Pretty When You Smile: 20th Century Hysteria and its Legacy in ‘Sad Girl Indie’.” (2023). 13.

¹⁹ Sad Girls y Qué Are Breaking Down Machismo with Internet Art.” Calderón-Douglass, Barbara. “Sad Girls y Qué Are Breaking Down Machismo with Internet Art.” *Vice*, October 24, 2014. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/nnqkqm/sad-girls-y-que-is-breaking-down-machismo-and-offering-an-alternative-to-white-feminism-456.

²⁰ Girls y Qué Are Breaking Down Machismo with Internet Art.” Calderón-Douglass, Barbara. “Sad Girls y Qué Are Breaking Down Machismo with Internet Art.” *Vice*, October 24, 2014. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/nnqkqm/sad-girls-y-que-is-breaking-down-machismo-and-offering-an-alternative-to-white-feminism-456.

girl as "any girl who is fed up with society's standards and patriarchy,"²¹ making sure to emphasize that "sad girl" originates in Chicana culture.

Bon's interpretation of the sad girl differs significantly from the broader definition presented by Alderton.²² According to Zoe Alderton, acknowledging our vulnerability should not undermine the feminist movement. She emphasizes that expressing sadness or pain should not diminish our feminist identity. This illustrates the diverse interpretations and adaptability of the concept, showing how the same term can hold different meanings for different communities.

To answer the second question, is it okay to be sad if it is beautiful? It seems that mental illness/ sadness is becoming more acceptable if it is shown as a specific type of beauty. This is supported by the observation that only white cis women can be sad, not Black or Latina or even transfem singers. My point is that transfem singer-songwriter sad girls, like Ethel Cain, are not even talked about in the same light as other sad girl singer-songwriters, and that feels a little transphobic to me. Why is their sadness not as beautiful as a white cis woman's? As I wrote above, it does seem that Sad Girl Pop only shows a white perspective on mental illness and that it reinforces hegemonic ideals for society. This obviously should be worked on to be more inclusive and fight society's hegemonic ideals. However, this should not mean that white women *cannot* be sad. Further, this should mean that any woman can be sad without judgment or romanticization.

²¹ Girls y Qué Are Breaking Down Machismo with Internet Art." Calderón-Douglass, Barbara. "Sad Girls y Qué Are Breaking Down Machismo with Internet Art." Vice, October 24, 2014. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/nnqkqm/sad-girls-y-que-is-breaking-down-machismo-and-offering-an-alternative-to-white-feminism-456.

²² Thelandersson, Fredrika. "21st Century Media and Female Mental Health: Profitable Vulnerability and Sad Girl Culture." Palgrave MacMillan, 2023. doi:10.1007/978-3-031-16756-0.

According to a 2018 research study conducted at the University of California at Irvine. The study “analyzed 500,000 popular songs released in the UK from 1985 to 2015 and classified them according to mood.”²³ Sadness in the music world has since dominated the charts, “The popularity of del Rey’s persona and her sad music influenced and paved the way for the more straightforward sadness of a later artist like Billie Eilish.”²⁴ It would seem that greater candor about mental illness is just one of the countless variables that could possibly account for this shift.

Sad Girl Pop

Sad Girl Pop has been a long time coming—at least this version of it. Female artists like Fiona Apple, Alanis Morissette, and Tori Amos cannot go unmentioned, for they were the sad girls of the 90s. Bonnie Gordon writes how the works of these artists, using Tori Amos as an example, created an opening for females to use their voice to challenge the traditional power structures and gender dynamics against them. This is a space that is both private and public, as song is created both inside the singer and then voiced aloud, outside the body for others to hear. Gordon argues, “It takes the song as a point of departure for an exploration of the complex relationships between voice, sexuality, and interiority-- that is, a person's most intimate feelings and sensations, which seem impossible to express and share.”²⁵ The use of inside and outside is

²³ Thelandersson, Fredrika. “21st Century Media and Female Mental Health: Profitable Vulnerability and Sad Girl Culture.” Palgrave MacMillan, 2023. doi:10.1007/978-3-031-16756-0. 134.

²⁴ Thelandersson, Fredrika. “21st Century Media and Female Mental Health: Profitable Vulnerability and Sad Girl Culture.” Palgrave MacMillan, 2023. doi:10.1007/978-3-031-16756-0. 135.

²⁵ Gordon, Bonnie. “Tori Amos' Inner Voice.” In *Women's Voices Across Musical Worlds*, Jane A. Bernstein, 187-207. Massachusetts: Northeastern University Press, 2003. 187.

essential, as it can be likened to Bhabha's "Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt." In his essay, Bhabha discusses the shift from traditional ways of understanding culture, which often create binaries like high/low, ours/theirs, and inside/outside. He argues that instead of focusing solely on the intention behind cultural elements, audiences should pay attention to the processes of signification and how culture is continually redefined and reshaped through dialogue, and in the case of this thesis, music. Bhabha emphasizes the importance of "third space," a concept that allows for cultural differences to be revalued without simply reversing existing hierarchies. He uses examples from other thinkers, like Cornel West and Stuart Hall, to illustrate how language and cultural expression can articulate identities that are fragmented and influenced by historical contexts. Both West and Hall highlight how political identities are not fixed; instead, they evolve through the interaction of various cultural and social factors. This leads to the idea that cultural identity is fluid and shaped by ongoing dialogues between different groups. Overall, Bhabha advocates for understanding culture as a constant negotiation of meanings rather than a set system of values²⁶, which I think applies beautifully to Sad Girl Pop.

As mentioned above, Lana Del Rey helped Sad Girl Pop find its roots in the 2010s. It was not until Eilish came along that Sad Girl Pop bloomed into a subgenre people are clinging to. However, the listeners are clinging to this newborn form in a different way than before. Pop music has long been associated with escapism. Nate Sloan, host of *Switched on Pop* and assistant professor of musicology at USC Thornton School of Music, says, "But modern listeners — especially young people — are pushing back against that paradigm, celebrating artists like Billie Eilish, Halsey, and girl in red, who don't shy away from the troubles of the world but sublimate

²⁶ Bhabha, Homi. 1992. "Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt." *Cultural Studies*. Edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler. First ed. New York: Routledge, 57-60.

them into their music."²⁷ By sublimating these issues into their music, it helps both the musicians and listeners cope.

The rise of Sad Girl Pop coincides with significant current events, specifically the pandemic and its subsequent effects, as well as America's police brutality, school shootings, and possible death of democracy.²⁸ These events are scary and real; people have turned to music to vent these emotions. A 2018 survey by the American Psychological Association and a 2019 report by the American Psychiatric Association showed that "Gen Z is much less filtered than other generations and more candid about their mental health struggles."²⁹ According to music therapist Jodi Milstein, "They're speaking up for themselves — they're setting limits or setting boundaries. On Instagram and TikTok, people get on there and will say, 'Hey, this happened to me, and I'm not gonna deal with this anymore.' People have been more expressive. You see other people actually talking about [this] stuff, which before you didn't see that."

Cue Billie Eilish.

²⁷ Kaplan, Ilana. 2022. "The Psychology Of "Sad Girl" Pop: Why Music By Billie Eilish, Gracie Abrams, Olivia Rodrigo & More Is Resonating So Widely." GRAMMY.com.

²⁸ Kaplan, Ilana. 2022. "The Psychology Of "Sad Girl" Pop: Why Music By Billie Eilish, Gracie Abrams, Olivia Rodrigo & More Is Resonating So Widely." GRAMMY.com.

²⁹ Kaplan, Ilana. 2022. "The Psychology Of "Sad Girl" Pop: Why Music By Billie Eilish, Gracie Abrams, Olivia Rodrigo & More Is Resonating So Widely." GRAMMY.com.

CHAPTER ONE

Billie Eilish is an iconic member of the 2010s Sad Girl Pop Club. As a leading member of Sad Girl Pop, Eilish uses her platform as one of pop's biggest names to sing about her experiences with depression and anxiety. There have been singers before Eilish, who have tackled these subject, but what she has been able to accomplish as a young, LGBT+ woman within the music industry is revolutionary and extraordinary. This chapter is going to examine Eilish's branding and music sonically, and lyrically to show how her music contributes to Sad Girl Pop; most importantly, these examinations will demonstrate how Sad Girl Pop is a resistant response to the patriarchy.

Billie Eilish first gained attention from the public when she and her brother, FINNEAS, uploaded "Ocean Eyes" to SoundCloud in 2015. "Ocean Eyes"³⁰ was then released a year later, as the lead single off her EP, *don't smile at me*,³¹ released in 2017. Her success as an artist continues to win her accolade after accolade. *WHEN WE ALL GO TO SLEEP, WHERE DO WE GO?*³² won her five Grammys, including all four general field categories—Record of the Year, Album of the Year, Song of the Year, and Best New Artist— in the same year, and she is the youngest artist to accomplish this feat. Since then Eilish has added four additional Grammys to her name.³³ Eilish is also the first person born in the 21st Century to win two Academy Awards

³⁰ "Ocean Eyes," Spotify, track 7 on Billie Eilish, *Don't Smile at Me*, 2017.

³¹ Billie Eilish, *dont smile at me*, Interscope Records, 2017.

³² Billie Eilish, *WHEN WE ALL FALL ASLEEP, WHERE DO WE GO?*, Interscope Records, 2019.

³³ "Billie Eilish: Artist," Artist | GRAMMY.com, accessed April 4, 2024, <https://www.grammy.com/artists/billie-eilish/251741>

for Best Original Song.³⁴ The list goes on and on. Another thing of significance to know is she is focused on raising awareness for a plethora of political issues, like climate change, women's reproductive rights, and gender equity.

Eilish is a complex and interesting figure to study. While one might think she became an overnight sensation, there is much more to the story. She initially gained overnight success from uploading the song "Ocean Eyes" onto SoundCloud. That got her the attention of FINNEAS's manager; together, they talked to Eilish about signing a deal with Apple Music and the now Apple-owned company, A&R company Platoon, which specializes in creating a brand for emerging artists in preparation for signing to a major label. Platoon put Eilish on the lineup to perform at the South by Southwest music showcase in March 2017. Apple additionally made her its' "Up Next" artist and gave her coverage by interviewing her on their Beats 1 radio show.³⁵ Eilish then secured a publicist, which gained her a stylist and connections to the fashion industry, including brands like Chanel, to create her image. The efforts of her publicist, stylist, and music producers attracted the attention of industry figure Justin Lubliner, who signed her to Darkroom and Interscope Records. Lubliner is the one who created Eilish's rollout, focusing on her brand and image after being inspired by rap artists.³⁶

³⁴ "Oscar Nominations 2023 List: Nominees by Category – Oscars 2024 News: 96th Academy Awards," ABC, accessed April 4, 2024, <https://abc.com/shows/oscars/news/nominations/oscar-nominations-2023-list>.

³⁵ Staff Writer, "Becoming Billie: How Apple Music and Spotify Helped Make Billie Eilish Music's New Gen z Superstar," The Music Network, April 2, 2019, <https://themusicnetwork.com/becoming-billie-how-apple-music-and-spotify-helped-make-billie-eilish-musics-new-gen-z-superstar/>.

³⁶ Lyndsey Havens, "Why All Eyes Are on Billie Eilish, the New Model for Streaming Era Success," Billboard, May 9, 2019, <https://www.billboard.com/music/pop/billie-eilish-billboard-cover-story-2019-8510552/>

Brand & Image

What is Eilish's brand? Her image? Social psychologist Jonathan Schroeder says:

“Artists offer exemplary instances of image creation in the service of building a recognizable look, name, and style – a brand, in other words. Successful artists can be thought of as brand managers, actively engaged in developing, nurturing, and promoting themselves as recognizable products in the competitive cultural sphere.”³⁷ People online, describe Eilish's brand as weird, sullen, analytical, confrontational, death-haunting, and strange. Sad and even depressing. Whisper singing. Suicide pop princess. A lot of Eilish's signifiers are not common for the Sad Girl Pop aesthetic, more on that to come. However, this is how Eilish brands herself. It is how a Sad Girl Pop star wanting to resist patriarchy would brand herself.

Eilish does not seem to be playing the music business game; she is playing her own game. Eilish is able to be both, as she writes and helps produce her music with her brother, FINNEAS. Like other artists before her, Eilish has blurred the lines between the personal and professional spheres and selves via social media platforms. This also causes the entertainment business sphere and the business sphere to collapse, resulting in the end of artistic purity. Despite the entertainment business and business collapse, the audience still receives the celebrity's brand, trying to decipher the authenticity for one's self. This shows a shift from a demographic-focused to a psychographic-based marketing approach:

The psychographic is: What thought, and vision do certain individuals reflect regardless of age, creed, color, or race? A demographic is the opposite– what similarities exist between this select creed, color, and race. But with artists today, it's not about the

³⁷ Schroeder, J. E. (2005) “The Artist and the Brand,” *European Journal of Marketing*.

demographic but psychographics. In other words, you can find 18-year-olds, 30-year-olds and 50-year-olds who love Britney for the meanings she's expressing, not the age they are.³⁸

For Eilish this is true. Fans love Eilish for the meanings she's expressing, their age does not seem to be the biggest factor. It is another reason she is different than other singers. She shares her sadness with the world, despite being conditioned to bear it in silence and solitude. She is sharing her sadness despite the history of sadness being pathologized and stigmatized when displayed by women.

Yes, Eilish has dramatic and shocking outfits and lyrics, but not in the typical way of her predecessors. Her path does not emphasize sex over musical talent. All of this supports that Eilish is resisting the hegemonic patriarchal standards imposed on female celebrities before her, "Overall findings suggest that female popular music stars are objectified, productized brands who are considered high-risk investments, given their relatively short-term careers and the tremendous amount of money it takes to market them successfully."³⁹ The objectification, sexualization, and productized brands that female celebrities are given are what Eilish is trying to combat, beginning with how she dresses. "Referring to Eilish's preference for oversized clothing and refusal to perform for the male gaze, critic Haley Krischer proclaimed, "Ms. Eilish is the anti-Britney Spears, the anti-Katy Perry."⁴⁰ Gender stereotypes do not fit Eilish; they are ancient to her. She does not want the world to know everything about her or her body, so she wears baggy clothing. At least until her short lived glam phase. On red carpets, her outfits are

³⁸ Lieb, Kristin. *Gender, Branding, and The Modern Music Industry*, 2018, 55.

³⁹ Lieb, 2018, 38.

⁴⁰ Holmes, Jessica A. "Billie Eilish and the Feminist Aesthetics of Depression: White Femininity, Generation Z, and Whisper Singing." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 76, no. 3 (2023): 789.

oversized; on stage, she wears hoodies, large athletic shorts, tube socks, and sneakers. The clothes are shapeless. This is her fighting the male gaze.

Album Cover

Eilish fighting the male gaze, her being weird, strange, depressed, and maybe a little hysterical is also showcased on her album cover for *WHEN WE ALL FALL ASLEEP, WHERE DO WE GO?*⁴¹ It's an all-black background, a single spotlight, like the bedroom door opening, illuminating Eilish perched on the side of a messy bed like she is about to jump out of the photo. The bed is made of white sheets and a white duvet. Eilish wears an oversized white t-shirt, white baggy sweatpants, and white tube socks. She is smiling, but it is not a happy, joyful smile. It is a "crazed" smile, leading the viewer's gaze to her eyes, which are only white. This begs the question of what Eilish's intent was. Women are called crazy and hysterical all the time. Something to be aware of is hysteria is predominantly a female disorder.⁴² This way of thinking has its origins in the historical stigmatization of hysteria in women. It serves as a way to exert societal control over women's bodies both medically and culturally. Eilish is trying to depict the themes of her album through this photo. By examining the album cover with feminism in mind, it strongly suggests Eilish is striving to reclaim women's right to be moody, weird, scary, strange, crazy, and even hysterical. These are defining characteristics within the gender continuum of what is allowed, appropriate, or not. By Eilish depicting herself as moody, weird, scary, strange, crazy, and even hysterical, she is reclaiming those things for herself, women, and

⁴¹ Kenneth Cappello, *WHEN WE ALL FALL ASLEEP, WHERE DO WE GO? Album Cover*, March 29, 2019, *Interscope Records*, March 29, 2019.

⁴² Bordo, Susan. 2003. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 32.

her audience within the binaries imposed by the patriarchy. Furthermore, Eilish is expanding this type of cultural rationale through how she brands herself. Within the Sad Girl Pop genre, there is power and resistance in one's sadness, in one not being happy because it is what society wants and what society portrays.

In the spirit of reclaiming things, this is not a typical pop album cover. However, it can be considered a Sad Girl Pop album cover, as it features only Eilish and has a noticeable Sad Girl Pop color palette. There are only two colors, black and white. Two albums with the same color scheme immediately come to mind: *Ultraviolence* by Lana Del Rey and *Good Riddance* by Gracie Abrams.

The background, as mentioned, is black. This could mean she is alone; her depression and anxiety make her feel alone; perhaps she is left in the dark. She likes being in the dark, and there is comfort there.

The white is a light coming from an open door. This is symbolic of peace and comfort. Yes, Eilish is depressed, and because of her depressive state, she has some dangerous thoughts that she sings about as a form of therapy and reflection. Furthermore, she shares her thoughts and experiences with her fans, who may be going through similar things. This promotes peace and comfort for Eilish and her audience. Lastly, Eilish's color selection for the album cover is about being part of the Sad Girl Pop genre and community and, as a result, attempting to resist society's demands to be a happy and unproblematic consumer.

Music and Lyric Analysis

Now, how does Eilish fight patriarchy with her music? Eilish constructs feminine psychological disturbance by altering and envisioning depression sonically. Madness is

championed for males as being authentic, but for females, it is damning. Feminist music scholar Norma Coates says,

In this schema of mental illness, rock is metonymic with “authenticity,” while “pop” is metonymic with artifice. Sliding even further down the metonymic slope, authentic becomes “masculine,” pop is “feminine,” and the two are set up in a binary relation to each other, with the masculine, of course, on top. The common-sense meaning of rock becomes “male,” while “pop” is naturalized as “female.”⁴³

Real men are not pop, and women, *real* or otherwise, do not rock. Sometimes, Eilish’s songs will be piano ballads or have a jarring techno beat, yet they all fall under the pop category. The songs analyzed in this paper are “when the party’s over,”⁴⁴ “ilomilo,”⁴⁵ and “listen before i go”⁴⁶ all of which are on the spectrum of pop. I believe Eilish to be conforming to the stereotype in order to flip it on its head.

Eilish is known for her whisper-like voice. She is sullen and haunting and powerful without raising her voice. This places her in the Sad Girl Pop genre. Sad Girl Pop touches upon various aspects of music and its impact on mental health, focusing on depression and Gen Z. Whisper singing is often associated with the genre, intimacy, and inward rage, and how it is made for independent listening with headphones. Additionally, the idea of ASMR as a form of comfort for depression while also acknowledging how it reinforces gender roles that expect

⁴³ Coates, N. (1997) “(R)evolution Now? Rock and the Political Potential of Gender,” in S. Whiteley (ed), *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender* (pp50-64), London: Routledge.

⁴⁴ “When the party’s over,” Spotify, track 7 on Billie Eilish, *WHEN WE ALL FALL ASLEEP, WHERE DO WE GO?*, 2019.

⁴⁵ “ilomilo,” Spotify, track 11 on Billie Eilish, *WHEN WE ALL FALL ASLEEP, WHERE DO WE GO?*, 2019.

⁴⁶ “listen before i go,” Spotify, track 12 on Billie Eilish, *WHEN WE ALL FALL ASLEEP, WHERE DO WE GO?*, 2019.

women to speak in a soft and caring voice is associated with both Sad Girl Pop and Eilish.⁴⁷

Eilish's first album also rose to prominence during the pandemic. This is important to consider though while both whispering and ASMR highlight the influence of the pandemic on mood and self-regulation, it is impossible to generalize as individual listening preferences, emotional outlooks, and musical conditioning play a significant role in how people perceive and respond to music.

Eilish's brand-- fashion choices, collaborations, music, and lyrics have all attracted a cult following. Schroeder writes, "Reception of the brand is not up to the artist, manager, or consumer. It is up to cultural codes to be decoded based on the music industry, society, and fan norms."⁴⁸ Yes, she is different. She is weird. She is sullen, strange, sad, depressing, the suicide pop princess and the list goes on. What she is doing is working. It is met with success by being broken down for understanding by the music industry, society, and the fans.

It is her lyrics that are sad. It is her lyrics which special attention should be paid. It is essential to be aware and make note of Eilish coming from a place of privilege as a white, now-wealthy woman. It is necessary not to place her as the cause for audience members saying or identifying her as depressed. That is an unethical burden to put on someone so young who does not sing about a specific outcome caused by depression. Furthermore, this does not allow young listeners to figure out and express their own emotions when it comes to mental health. This only perpetuates the cycle of stigma, gatekeeping, and gaslighting. Eilish is diagnosed with clinical depression and Tourette syndrome. She links the origin of her mental condition to a dance injury

⁴⁷ Holmes, Jessica A. "Billie Eilish and the Feminist Aesthetics of Depression: White Femininity, Generation Z, and Whisper Singing." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 76, no. 3 (2023).

⁴⁸ Lieb, Kristin. *Gender, Branding, and The Modern Music Industry*, 2018, 61.

during her childhood that caused her to stop dancing and resulted in self-harm and a depressive state.⁴⁹ Eilish's ownership of her mental battles indicates her creativity and agency as a young female musician. Furthermore, it shows the paradigmatic shift in the public sphere about depression and mental health. Eilish states, "Kids use my songs as a hug. Songs about being depressed or suicidal or completely against yourself— some adults think that's bad, but I feel that seeing that someone else feels just as horrible as you do is a comfort. It's a good feeling."⁵⁰ That is what the Sad Girl Pop genre is about. It is about claiming the pain of being female and how it is liberating and comforting. Sara Ahmed in "The Cultural Politics of Emotions" writes about how emotionality is influenced by who holds power in a society. In our case, it is the patriarchy who holds power. Certain groups are assigned meanings and values based on their emotional expressions or behaviors. These groups are marked as others or subalterns.⁵¹ What Eilish is doing, sharing her depression, thoughts of suicide, being completely against yourself, feeling horrible is how Sad Girl Pop is a resistance to patriarchy. The patriarchy does not want young females to share their pain and suffering, they do not want this to be shared with the world, because it takes away from their power and reputation.

Below are readings of the lyrics to gain a possible understanding of the struggles Eilish has faced as a woman. This is accomplished by using affect theory and Bhabha's metaphor of articulation⁵². Some analysis is used to make connections to gain a full possible story from Eilish's standpoint. An important term for the analysis of Sad Girl Pop being a way of resisting

⁴⁹ Holmes, Jessica A. "Billie Eilish and the Feminist Aesthetics of Depression: White Femininity, Generation Z, and Whisper Singing." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 76, no. 3 (2023): 799.

⁵⁰ Holmes, 789.

⁵¹ Ahmed, 4.

⁵² Bhabha, 1992. 58.

patriarchy is the metaphor of articulation; it is the idea that language functions like politics, which shapes how people identify and relate to broader cultural and political contexts. Bhabha talks about how language is used to shape political identities, especially within marginalized communities.⁵³ Eilish and other female Sad Girl Pop singer-songwriters fall into the category of marginalized communities, based on their gender identities. Eilish is marked further as a subaltern, as she has recently come out as non-straight. Bhabha uses Stuart Hall's viewpoint to write about the critique of the traditional, linear understanding of politics that simplifies the relationship between economics and class. He argues that politics is more complex and should be viewed like multi-faceted language and layered with varied interpretations. Ideology is not fixed but rather a collective of ideas that can evolve depending on context.⁵⁴ To simplify this further, the metaphor of articulation and language in this instance is the lyrics Eilish has written.

Her lyrics are a melancholic account of her identity and experience within a political patriarchal state, where she mourns the possibilities of what could have been if she were born a white man. According to Freud, "Melancholia, whose definition fluctuates even in descriptive psychiatry, takes on various clinical forms, the grouping together of which into a single unity does not seem to be established with certainty; and some of these forms suggest somatic rather than psychogenic affections."⁵⁵ Freud argues that there is a relationship between melancholia and mourning. The relationship being they are both responses to loss; mourning is generally accepted, whereas melancholia is pathologized. Bhabha uses Freud's melancholia discourse to

⁵³ Bhabha, 58.

⁵⁴ Bhabha, Homi. 1992. "Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt." *Cultural Studies*. Edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler. First ed. New York: Routledge, 58.

⁵⁵ Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and Melancholia." Essay. In *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works XIV*, Standard Edition Of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud., XIV:243–58. London: The Hogarth Press, 1914. <https://archive.org/details/FreudMourningAndMelancholia>.

suggest a more profound expression in which the speaker's feelings of loss and pain indicate a rebellion against authority. Bhabha suggests repeatedly exposing one's vulnerabilities is a resistance to being silenced or dominated. By sharing their vulnerabilities, the singer-songwriters of Sad Girl Pop are creating resistance, showing that they will no longer be silenced or dominated. One must use the inversion of meaning to see this act as a way of challenging the patriarchy. To additionally support this, Bhabha points out the societal double standard concerning depression and gender. Depression, when associated with men, is viewed as deep or sensitive, whereas when associated with women, it has a negative connotation.⁵⁶

"When the party's over"⁵⁷ starts out with layers of Eilish harmonizing before singing the first verse. It is not until about a minute before the song that a piano can be heard to accompany Eilish's harrowing vocals. This is one of the saddest songs in Eilish's whole discography. "When the party's over"⁵⁸ is the second single off of her debut album, solidifying her Sad Girl Pop aesthetic and her place in the genre.⁵⁹

This song, at a superficial level, is about Eilish wanting to distance herself from her partner. However, this song means so much more. In verse one, Eilish sings, "Don't you know I'm no good for you?/ I've learned to lose you, can't afford to."⁶⁰ This specific set of lyrics focuses on anxiety and the female body. Ahmed writes, "It is not difficult to see how emotions are bound up with the securing of social hierarchy: emotions become attributes of bodies as a

⁵⁶ Bhabha, 65.

⁵⁷ "When the party's over," on Billie Eilish, *WHEN WE ALL FALL ASLEEP, WHERE DO WE GO?*, 2019.

⁵⁸ "When the party's over," on Billie Eilish, *WHEN WE ALL FALL ASLEEP, WHERE DO WE GO?*, 2019.

⁵⁹ Holmes, 785-829.

⁶⁰ "When the party's over," on Billie Eilish, *WHEN WE ALL FALL ASLEEP, WHERE DO WE GO?*, 2019.

way of transforming what is ‘lower’ or ‘higher’ into bodily traits. So, emotionality as a claim about a subject or a collective is clearly dependent on relations of power, which endow ‘others’ with meaning and value.”⁶¹ The contemporary relation of power supports patriarchy, thus emotions associated with masculinity are denoted as ‘higher’ and those associated with femininity are denoted as ‘lower’. Susan Bordo in *Unbearable Weight* states, “For if, whatever the specific historical content of the duality, *the body* is the negative term, and if woman *is* the body, then women *are* that negativity, whatever it may be: distraction from knowledge, seduction away from God, capitulation to sexual desire, violence or aggression, failure of will, even death.”⁶² A common thread in Sad Girl Pop lyrics and the associated identity is believing that one is not good enough and no good for someone else. They are not worthy of the love, affection, and attention the other is giving them. These thoughts, stem from mental health conditions like anxiety, as well as social ideologies concerning the female body. Bordo claims that women in our contemporary culture have issues of self-worth, self-entitlement, self-nourishment, and comfort within their bodies.⁶³ Eilish talks about this exactly when she sings of being no good for her partner. Her depression and anxiety make her feel this way, undeserving of love, though Freud would point out that Eilish believes her partner to be the deficient one. Furthermore, Eilish singing about already learning to lose is a comment on how, as someone with anxiety and depression, as well as being a woman, society has conditioned her to prepare to fail. To accept her losses and move on. That society says and conditions her to believe that there is nothing she can do about it simply because of her gender and mental disabilities. Eilish writing

⁶¹ Ahmed, Sara. *The cultural politics of emotion*. Routledge, 2013.

⁶² Bordo, Susan. 2003. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 5.

⁶³ Bordo, Susan. 2003. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 57.

and singing about this, however, shifts the narrative into the Sad Girl Pop listeners' hands. By voicing their struggles, Sad Girls can then challenge and expand their patriarchal structure. Bhabha calls this speaking "outside the sentence."⁶⁴ Therefore, the Sad Girls can decide their fate.

Track number 11 is another song that embodies depression and anxious thoughts that intrude and disrupt life. "ilomilo"⁶⁵ starts with a ska beat rhythm that is fun, bouncy, and poppy. At 48 seconds, Eilish's "hurry" and "worried" become choppy. The word "bury" is repeated. The ska beat becomes faster at one minute and 10 seconds. After Eilish sings the last lyric, a twinkling-like sound is repeated until it fades. "ilomilo"⁶⁶ deals with tough themes similar to the songs previously mentioned. In verse two, Eilish sings, "The friends I've had to bury/ They keep me up at night/ said I couldn't love someone."⁶⁷ The theme of not being able to love someone is a consistent thread throughout the whole album and Sad Girl Pop as a genre. Once again, it relates back to Freud's concept of melancholia as well as the perception of the female body. Freud says, "The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-reproaches and self-reviling, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment." Billie has lost friends and is in a state of mourning that has progressed into melancholic territory, via not letting herself love for fear of them dying. By writing about this vulnerability and sharing it via music, Billie is able to attach this train of thought to an effect. "Subaltern rebellions can only provide a nighttime of love ..." Veena Das's

⁶⁴ Bhabha, 56.

⁶⁵ "ilomilo," Spotify, track 11 on Billie Eilish, *WHEN WE ALL FALL ASLEEP, WHERE DO WE GO?*, 2019.

⁶⁶ "ilomilo," on Billie Eilish, *WHEN WE ALL FALL ASLEEP, WHERE DO WE GO?*, 2019.

⁶⁷ "ilomilo," on Billie Eilish, *WHEN WE ALL FALL ASLEEP, WHERE DO WE GO?*, 2019.

response, framed within metaphor and bodily experience, emphasizes that the rebellions of marginalized groups are not just political acts but also deeply emotional and personal experiences—highlighted by the phrase "nighttime of love"⁶⁸ thus, suggesting their struggles are tied to a quest for identity, belonging, and humanity, transcending mere political rebellion to touch upon deeper emotional and cultural dimensions. Essentially, Das argues for a richer understanding of resistance that includes emotional and subjective experiences. Throughout history, women's bodies have been more vulnerable than men's bodies to cultural manipulation. The social manipulation of the female body has become a central strategy in maintaining power relations between genders over the past century, as evidenced by the history of women's suffrage, medicine, and fashion.⁶⁹ Eilish is commenting on the power relations between genders and love.

"listen before i go,"⁷⁰ is a powerful, glacial piano track featuring looming reverberations, sirens at 13 seconds echoing in the background. Other voices can be heard like they are below Eilish at 35 seconds. After the last lyric is hesitantly sung, sirens and screams can be heard echoing in the distance for the last 30 seconds. The last song for analysis deals with suicide. "listen before i go"⁷¹ is haunting and is sung like a suicide letter to Eilish's family and friends. In verse two of "listen before i go"⁷², Eilish sings, "I'm not okay, I feel so scattered/ Don't say I'm

⁶⁸ Quoted in Bhabha, 63.

⁶⁹ Bordo, Susan. 2003. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. N.p.: University of California Press. 143.

⁷⁰ "listen before i go," on Billie Eilish, *WHEN WE ALL FALL ASLEEP, WHERE DO WE GO?*, 2019.

⁷¹ "listen before i go," on Billie Eilish, *WHEN WE ALL FALL ASLEEP, WHERE DO WE GO?*, 2019.

⁷² "listen before i go," on Billie Eilish, *WHEN WE ALL FALL ASLEEP, WHERE DO WE GO?*, 2019.

all that matters.”⁷³ Eilish is entirely transparent about how she is feeling; the word choice of “scattered” implies that she is not whole and is in lots of pieces. Thus, she attaches the effects of not being okay, enough, whole, and feeling sad, anxious, and, ostracized all to that one word to conjure a palpable feeling. Something familiar and unique to the Sad Girl Pop genre, songwriting, and identity expresses how you feel no matter what. Eilish does not want anyone’s pity or for them to worry. She believes that she is not the only person or thing that matters. Her thinking process can be supported by previous examples relating to the female body and observational behavior learned from matriarchal figures. Additionally, the patriarchal society deems women and female presenting people as beneath men and not mattering. Eilish is aware and used to this societal perception and is calling people out by saying “don’t say I’m all that matters” just to say it. This effect is heightened and worsened by conditions like depression and anxiety. In her head, the only possible solution to solve all of what society deems as problems is death.

Conclusion

Eilish has become a leading voice for Sad Girl Pop, using her platform to sing about her experiences with depression and creating a safe space for listeners. This thesis chapter posits that by Eilish sharing her experiences, she empowers others and challenges the patriarchy, which is a process described by Homi Bhabha’s “melancholic revolt.” Eilish is making it known that she does not owe anyone happiness and that she does not have to buy into the status quo sold by capitalistic culture, especially for the period of time in her career that I have examined.

⁷³ “listen before i go,” on Billie Eilish, *WHEN WE ALL FALL ASLEEP, WHERE DO WE GO?*, 2019.

The cultural discourse surrounding depression and being female, two of the prominent themes in Eilish's image and music, is gendered "in paradoxical ways that discredit adolescent women's experiences of depression while pathologizing their emotional distress."⁷⁴ This type of thinking has deep roots in the feminization of hysteria and is a societal hegemonic construct to maintain control over women's bodies both medically and culturally. Not to mention, depression has long been celebrated, accepted, and problematically glamorized when associated with masculinity.⁷⁵ Something Eilish, female Sad Girl Pop, and other female celebrities are not.

This chapter argues for a better understanding of resistance that incorporates emotional experiences, emphasizing the need to validate the struggles of women in the context of mental health and societal expectations. Not all women can and should have to be strong all the time. Thus, the struggles of marginalized groups should encompass both political and deeply personal emotional experiences. This idea reinforces the notion that the fight for identity and belonging transcends politics, touching on emotional and cultural dimensions. Furthermore, this chapter points out the historical vulnerability of women's bodies to cultural manipulation and how this has been a strategy to maintain gendered power relations. To Eilish and others in the Sad Girl Pop community, there is power and resistance in embracing and owning sadness.

⁷⁴ Holmes, Jessica A. "Billie Eilish and the Feminist Aesthetics of Depression: White Femininity, Generation Z, and Whisper Singing." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 76, no. 3 (2023): 799.

⁷⁵ Holmes, Jessica A. "Billie Eilish and the Feminist Aesthetics of Depression: White Femininity, Generation Z, and Whisper Singing." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 76, no. 3 (2023): 799.

CHAPTER TWO

A new inductee has found her community in the Sad Girl Pop club, Gracie Abrams. Gracie Abrams is a name that may seem familiar. Perhaps her surname rings a bell. But her fame is not solely because she is director J. J. Abrams and CEO of Bad Robot Productions, Katie McGrath's middle child. Abrams has been making a name all for herself since launching her music career initially through Instagram and Soundcloud. Acknowledging that she has benefitted from nepotism, Abrams has spoken about how blessed her familial circumstances are, but she has kept her parents at a distance for her career. Eventually, Interscope Records signed her in 2019,⁷⁶ which was only the beginning of her rise to stardom. On July 14th, 2020, Abrams released her first EP, *Minor*,⁷⁷ putting her in the company of Taylor Swift, Phoebe Bridgers, Billie Eilish, and Lana Del Rey.

In November 2021, Abrams released another EP, *This Is What It Feels Like*⁷⁸, which will be the focus of this work. This EP had a headlining tour and was also performed as Olivia Rodrigo's opening act for the Sour Tour. In early 2022, Abrams released her debut album, *Good Riddance*.⁷⁹ This album also had a headline tour in North America and Europe. She was an opening act for various legs of Taylor Swift's The Eras Tour. To top it all off, Abrams was nominated for the Grammy Award for "Best New Artist" on November 10th of 2023.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Daniela Tijerina, "Gracie Abrams Feels It All," Vanity Fair, February 23, 2023, <https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2023/02/gracie-abrams-good-riddance>

⁷⁷ Gracie Abrams, *Minor*, Interscope Records, 2020.

⁷⁸ Gracie Abrams, *This Is What It Feels Like*, Interscope, 2021.

⁷⁹ Gracie Abrams, *Good Riddance*, Interscope Records, 2022.

⁸⁰ Minsker, Evan. "Grammy Nominations 2024: See the Full List Here." Pitchfork, November 10, 2023.

<https://pitchfork.com/news/grammy-nominations-2024-see-the-full-list-here/>

Her songs are like entries in her journal. She shares her deepest, darkest secrets, worst moments, and anxiety-induced spirals. She shares exactly how she feels, telling everyone who comes across her music what it feels like—in her sing-song whisper of a voice, making what she sings like a secret shared between the closest of friends. I would argue that this is how Abrams contributes to Sad Girl Pop being a resistance to patriarchy. She shares the secret of the oppression she feels as a woman under the rule of patriarchy. In her EP, *This Is What It Feels Like*, Abrams divulges her mind's wanderings, specifically those related to and caused by anxiety and girlhood, which this chapter intends to examine via affect theory, Bhabha's melancholic revolt⁸¹, and Freud's melancholia and mourning.

What is anxiety? This is a tricky question to answer and an even harder term to define linguistically, as there are various forms of anxiety, and because of the spectrum of anxiety, it is different for everyone who experiences it. There are overlapping themes within anxiety that can provide a loose definition for this work. Anxiety refers to agency in the nervous system that presents itself in cardiovascular, respiratory, and digestive symptoms. This situation happens when the individual perceives a threat and is unprepared to respond adequately to the stressor. The individual's problem-solving capability and ability to manage the situation are lowered. Anxiety can also present itself when there is no apparent trigger or stimulus and when neither presents an immediate danger. Anxiety as a temporary condition has also been differentiated from anxiety as a more enduring personality feature.⁸² In "The Cultural Politics of Emotions," Sara Ahmed discusses the difference between fear and anxiety. "For example, Rachman argues

⁸¹ Bhabha, Homi. 1992. "Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt." *Cultural Studies*. Edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler. First ed. New York: Routledge, 55-66.

⁸² Lillevoll, Kjersti R., Jane Kroger, and Monica Martinussen. 2013. *Identity Status and Anxiety: A Meta-Analysis*. Routledge. 10.1080/15283488.2013.799432.

that anxiety can be described as the ‘tense anticipation of a threatening but vague event,’ or a feeling of ‘uneasy suspense,’ while fear is described as an emotional reaction ‘to a threat that is identifiable.’⁸³ In other words, fear is built by the circulation of signs and the passing of objects. Freud adds to this by writing about how melancholia relates “to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious.”⁸⁴ In contrast, anxiety gathers more objects to attach to/ fixate upon to overwhelm out of seemingly nowhere. But is anxiety nowhere? Ahmed uses Heidegger to discuss anxiety, saying he emphasizes how it comes from nowhere: “Accordingly, when something threatening brings itself close, anxiety does not ‘see’ any definite ‘here’ or ‘yonder’ from which it comes. That in the face of which one has anxiety is characterized by the fact that what threatens is nowhere.”⁸⁵ Instead of letting anxiety remain unidentifiable and letting it consume her, Abrams utilizes writing about her experiences with anxiety and girlhood under patriarchal oppression. However, instead of composing these feelings vengefully like in rock or punk music, she takes a more emotional approach. She shows that being sad, anxious, and opinionated, is more than okay. That it is not a woman’s job to always be happy or vengeful! Being sad and anxious and sharing those feelings, instead of bearing them alone, is powerful. By doing this, she is shifting power dynamically. Unfortunately, the oppressors don’t exactly see consequences.

⁸³ Ahmed, Sara. *The cultural politics of emotion*. Routledge, 2013. 64.

⁸⁴ Freud, Sigmund. “Mourning and Melancholia.” Essay. In *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works XIV*, Standard Edition Of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud., XIV:243–58. London: The Hogarth Press, 1914. <https://archive.org/details/FreudMourningAndMelancholia>. 245.

⁸⁵ Ahmed, Sara. *The cultural politics of emotion*. Routledge, 2013. 65, 66.

Brand & Image

What is Abrams's brand? Her image? Abrams's branding and image differ from those of other Sad Girl Pop Club members. She affects the "clean girl" aesthetic of a multi-step skincare routine, minus the slicked-back bun, to achieve a minimal makeup, natural, glow look, now associated with the sad girl aesthetic because it mimics a post-cry face. To complete the look of the sad girl aesthetic, Abrams's everyday look comprises what are known as the basics: a baby tee and jeans. For performances, it is common for Abrams to wear menswear, sometimes a suit jacket over a bra with matching dress pants. She is unafraid to wear dresses or her signature accessory, a ribbon hairbow, which displays her femininity. In an interview with L'Officiel, Abrams shared, "Since my year in New York, I've been going for clothes that help me feel comfortable and happy. What matters to me in fashion is how it makes me feel, more than the visual effect."⁸⁶ Abrams's brand is very much the girl next door with a tinge of sadness. She is not dressing to impress, to be sexualized, to be objectified, to make a statement, or to be mysterious, like Eilish. She dresses in a way that allows her to be herself; with authenticity comes comfort.

While this does not necessarily grab attention, authenticity is essential to the Sad Girl Pop genre. Because this genre deals with personal experiences and mental illnesses more often than not, for Sad Girl Pop musicians to claim their emotions despite the patriarchy wanting them to

⁸⁶ Lecoq, Noémie. "Musician Gracie Abrams on Why Music Should be Opinionated," L'Officiel USA, December 8, 2020, <https://www.lofficielusa.com/pop-culture/gracie-abrams-music-interview-billie-eilish-lorde-jj-abrams>.

grin and bear it, they need to appear to be one hundred percent transparent—something Abrams is and has done. Since becoming famous, Abrams has shared her struggles with anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder in interviews and through her songwriting. By resisting oppression felt under the patriarchy, Sad Girl Pop singer-songwriters are strategic intellectuals. Bhabha writes, “Our attention is occupied with the relations of authority which secure professional, political, and pedagogical status through the strategy of speaking in a particular time and from a specific space.”⁸⁷ This emphasizes how authority shapes professional, political, and educational roles. It emphasizes context's importance— time and place—when expressing ideas or arguments. Being a “strategic intellectual”⁸⁸ means being aware of these contextual factors and using them to navigate and influence different spheres effectively, like a patriarchal society. Bhabha highlights the need to understand and leverage one’s position and environment in discussions and interactions to gain respect and authority. Abrams does this through her songwriting and branding.

Album Cover

*This Is What It Feels Like*⁸⁹ is written in dead, brown grass. Would it be too on the nose to say this is symbolic of how Abrams feels? That she is the dead grass. That she feels like the dead, brown, ugly grass, that others want to try to revive, but Abrams just wants you to listen and try to understand her. That’s what I’m getting. That’s what the Sad Girl Pop community, both

⁸⁷ Bhabha, Homi. 1992. “Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt.” *Cultural Studies*. Edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler. First ed. New York: Routledge, 57.

⁸⁸ Bhabha, 1992.

⁸⁹ *This Is What It Feels Like, Album Cover*, 2021, *Interscope Records*, 2021.

artists and listeners want. They do not want the patriarchy to pity them or try to medicate them or make them feel crazy. They want the patriarchy to listen to them and to take them seriously.

The lettering stands out against the backdrop of vibrant, green grass, on which Abrams is. It can be interpreted that the green grass on this album cover the patriarchy that they are the part of society that is thriving and truly living instead of just surviving.

Abrams is lying to the bottom right. Her gaze is averted from the camera, looking at the dead grass instead. This could mean multiple things. One is she is not looking the spectator in the eyes. The spectator could be anyone, but going with the theme, it would be safe to interpret that she is avoiding looking at the camera which subjects her to be an object. Secondly, she could be looking at her fellow members who have been cast out by society for their differences, whatever they may be. This can be interpreted as her showing she is apart and standing with her community, which in this case, would be fellow Sad Girl Pop artists and listeners.

She is wearing a cream-colored sweater that is unbuttoned to show a satin cream bra. The coloring of the top blends in with Abrams's skin. Also, it is similar in color to that of the burnt grass. Once again signifying her as a member of the subaltern. Her left hand is placed along her ribcage that makes your gaze notice her top. This is an interesting choice for both hand placement, as it leads the beholder's eyes to notice her ribs and bra, but also for outfit choice. Based on the amount of skin she is showing and her showing her bra, it appears to be catering to the male gaze. She is wearing a long black skirt. While the skirt covers her legs and ankles, it does not hide her shape. The fabric seems to hug her hips. My interpretation of the signs that makeup her outfit is that she is embracing her body, wearing what she wants, despite what the patriarchal parts of society may say about it. Because the album cover is a photographic expression of what *This Is What It Feels Like* to Abrams, not to the patriarchy.

Music and Lyric Analysis

Abrams's music emphasizes the pop aspect of Sad Girl Pop. Between her whispery voice and vulnerable lyrics, it's as if she is reading her secrets from a diary, providing a melancholy experience. Her discography offers just enough danceability, energy, and liveliness to toggle between the major and minor modes. The three songs analyzed are in a major key. She has stepped up from her humble beginnings of making music in her bedroom and posting videos on Instagram to having professional production. *This Is What It Feels Like* was primarily produced by Blake Slatkin and Aaron Dessner. Dessner has since produced her other two albums.

Even though Abrams now has a production partner, her songs are primarily centered around a single accompanying instrument. This comes from wanting to make her lyrics the prime focus, something on which she has focused and adapted from one of her musical inspirations, Joni Mitchell; in an interview with L'Officiel USA, Abrams shares that her mother would listen to Mitchell all the time while she was growing up.

As I grew older, I began to listen to her words carefully and to feel that she was more emotional than other artists. I then understood that music could be an incredible outlet and it made me want to create music myself. I like her simplicity, she only needs her voice and an instrument. In turn, I wanted to compose from a piano or a guitar, building everything around it without ever losing sight of this central core. For me, a song should be able to perform with the bare minimum.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Lecoq, Noémie. "Musician Gracie Abrams on Why Music Should be Opinionated," L'Officiel USA, December 8, 2020, <https://www.lofficielusa.com/pop-culture/gracie-abrams-music-interview-billie-eilish-lorde-jj-abrams>.

Keeping to the central core of her voice and an instrument is apparent in the three songs selected for analysis.

Abrams does not shy away from sharing her anxious moments, mistakes, and girlhood experiences. I can't separate my music from my opinions," Abrams says. "It reflects my way of thinking. You shouldn't be afraid to talk about what you believe in. I find that very important."⁹¹ Sara Ahmed, in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, discusses how feminists who speak against the hegemonic "truths" acquire the reputation of being emotional, incompetent, and biased.⁹² These dismissals reinforce the belief that feminism is emotional and, thus, also reinforce the hierarchy between thought and emotion. The hierarchy is simple. Thought and reason are identifiable with masculinity, and emotions are identified with femininity and subalternity. The reputation of emotionality and the consequent projection of emotions is exclusionary, making thought and reason a typical boys' club while also preventing the members of said club from being allowed to express emotions considered feminine.⁹³ By writing songs and music that is charged with emotional feminine rage, Abrams and other Sad Girl Pop artists are showing that having emotions and being emotional does not discredit or devalue an individual. Nor does it mean that being a feminist and speaking against hegemonic "truths" makes one incompetent and biased.

Below are readings of the lyrics to help us understand the struggles Abrams has faced as a woman under the patriarchal state's repression. This is accomplished using affect theory, Freud's melancholia and mourning, and Bhabha's melancholic revolt⁹⁴.

⁹¹ Lecoq, Noémie. "Musician Gracie Abrams on Why Music Should be Opinionated," L'Officiel USA, December 8, 2020, <https://www.lofficielusa.com/pop-culture/gracie-abrams-music-interview-billie-eilish-lorde-jj-abrams>.

⁹² Ahmed, Sara. *The cultural politics of emotion*. Routledge, 2013. 168-169.

⁹³ Ahmed, Sara. *The cultural politics of emotion*. Routledge, 2013. 168-169.

⁹⁴ Bhabha, Homi. 1992. "Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt." *Cultural Studies*. Edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler. First ed. New York: Routledge,

“Camden”⁹⁵ is acoustic throughout the song's duration, the sole instrument being a piano.

At two minutes and 30 seconds, Abrams' voice is layered, adding to the song's dynamism.

Around two minutes and 40 seconds, two elements are added, sounding like a drum beat and a cymbal punctuating the end of each lyric. This continues until three minutes and 27 seconds when the song slows down and returns to Abrams's voice and the piano accompaniment.

“Camden,”⁹⁶ is Abrams being completely vulnerable, sharing a common intrusive thought in the first lyric, “I never said it, but I know that I/ Can't picture anything past twenty-five.”⁹⁷ Abrams's inability to picture anything past twenty-five is her inability to convince her brain that she can solve the problems of aging associated with females and make it past that age. Does Abrams recognize that her life as a woman is over at age twenty-five? This is because of the societal expectations to show subsequential signs of being married and beginning to take on a maternal role at that age. In *Unbearable Weight*, Susan Bordo states that because of contemporary culture and technology, culture seems to seek ways to rebel against aging.⁹⁸ To further elaborate on this anxiety that feminism is trying to get rid of, Bordo also states that female icons, like Cher and Jane Fonda, have not made it acceptable to age but have played into the suppressive hegemonic ideal that females should not age,⁹⁹ which certainly does not help the feminist cause. This is something that Abrams and other women cannot ignore. By voicing this anxiety, Abrams is participating in Bhabha's idea of the melancholic revolt by critiquing the

55-66.

⁹⁵ “Camden,” Spotify, track 4 on Gracie Abrams, *This Is What It Feels Like*, 2021.

⁹⁶ “Camden,” Spotify, track 4 on Gracie Abrams, *This Is What It Feels Like*, 2021.

⁹⁷ “Camden,” Gracie Abrams, *This Is What It Feels Like*, 2021.

⁹⁸ Bordo, Susan. 2003. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 4-5.

⁹⁹ Bordo, Susan. 2003. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 26.

established historical narrative regarding women's bodies and aging.¹⁰⁰ Not only is she choosing to share her anxious thought with the world surrounding women's aging and the hegemonic ideals associated with women's supposed roles in society, but by doing so she is showing that it is okay to be scared about aging, and that just because you are a woman or female presenting, does not mean you have to start complying with what society expects of you.

In "Camden," Abrams sings, "I'm only scared of getting bigger," and then, "Most of the girls are getting thinner."¹⁰¹ An unfortunate and common fear and borderline anxiety among girls, is not being thin enough to appease society, as well as comparing oneself to others. Women's appearances are constantly under scrutiny from society, which is dominated by men. Unfortunately, this can lead to harmful habits and conditions that add to an individual's identity. Abrams sings of body image issues, a prevalent problem in contemporary society, which echoes Bordo's research:

But when it comes to the politics of appearance, such ideas are apt and illuminating. In my own work, they have been extremely helpful both to my analysis of the contemporary disciplines of diet and exercise and to my understanding of eating disorders as arising out of and reproducing normative feminine practices of our culture, practices that train the female body in docility and obedience to cultural demands while at the same time being experienced in terms of power and control.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Bhabha, Homi. 1992. "Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt." *Cultural Studies*. Edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler. First ed. New York: Routledge, 66.

¹⁰¹ "Camden," Gracie Abrams, *This Is What It Feels Like*, 2021.

¹⁰² Bordo, Susan. 2003. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 27.

Abrams is scared of getting bigger; this intrusive, anxious thought is only reinforced by other girls getting thinner to obey what culture demands of the female body. Society deems thinness as being in control of yourself, being intelligent and competent, and maintaining a sense of attractiveness while being “healthy,” despite thinness actually being unhealthy. But at what cost? Utilizing Freud’s ideas about melancholia¹⁰³ and Bhabha’s ideas about melancholic revolt¹⁰⁴, it can be understood that Abrams’ feelings of melancholy and anxiety are expressed to resist the oppression of society’s control of women’s bodies. She feels a sense of loss because of the control the patriarchy has over her body and other females’ bodies. By acknowledging that she is constantly battling her mind for control over her body, which stems from what the patriarchy deems acceptable and attractive, Abrams is inviting a dialogue to be had. In true Sad Girl Pop fashion, she leaves open the possibility of that by creating a feminist dialogue, but depicts herself as hopelessly, despondently ensnared in patriarchy’s soul-draining web.

In the outro of “Camden,” Abrams whispers, “I bury baggage 'til it's out of sight/I think it's better if I hide it/I really hope that I survive this.”¹⁰⁵ This is a clear metaphor for melancholic-induced anxiety. Despite not knowing if she will make it through, she wants to hide her problems and not worry anyone about them; it’s not that she is so focused on herself; she does not want to burden others with her needs. This is what the patriarchy wants! Furthermore, it can be surmised that Abrams feels she is not entitled to share her burdens, which is what society wants! To

¹⁰³ Freud, Sigmund. “Mourning and Melancholia.” Essay. In *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works* XIV, Standard Edition Of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud., XIV:243–58. London: The Hogarth Press, 1914. <https://archive.org/details/FreudMourningAndMelancholia>.

¹⁰⁴ Bhabha, Homi. 1992. “Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt.” *Cultural Studies*. Edited

by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler. First ed. New York: Routledge, 65.

¹⁰⁵ “Camden,” Gracie Abrams, *This Is What It Feels Like*, 2021.

highlight the connections between Abrams' outro, anxiety, and feminist studies, Bordo talks of similar anxieties based on embodying femininity: "[a] situation... in which a constellation of social, economic, and psychological factors has combined to produce a generation of women who feel deeply flawed, ashamed of their needs, and not entitled to exist unless they transform themselves into worthy new selves."¹⁰⁶ However, by Abrams sharing these thoughts, she is expressing her suffering and exposing the metaphorical wounds caused by the patriarchy.¹⁰⁷

"Hard to Sleep " is another piano-centric song. At two minutes and 15 seconds, a violin adds to the distress in Abrams's voice. To add to the overall aura of the song, Abrams's breathing is distinct and crisp. Whether intentional or not, it alludes to trying to take deep breaths to calm oneself down, as if one is experiencing an anxiety attack. This could also be to accentuate the breathiness of her voice to fit into the Sad Girl Pop genre.

Abrams depicts an episode of an anxiety spiral that prevents her from sleeping. She sings in verse two, "How I'm overthinking everything I never said/How it's killing me a little to be different, oh."¹⁰⁸ Is Abrams over thinking because she did not say anything about the oppression of being a woman? Or is it related to being an individual with a mental health disability? Perhaps both. Margaret Price, in *Defining Mental Disability*, states "The diagnosis of mental illness can mark a person as 'permanently damaged' so that even a state of wellness can be considered evidence of a person's unwellness."¹⁰⁹ Thus, having a mental illness becomes an identity marker.

¹⁰⁶ Bordo, Susan. 2003. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 47.

¹⁰⁷ Bhabha, Homi. 1992. "Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt." *Cultural Studies*. Edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler. First ed. New York: Routledge, 65.

¹⁰⁸ "Hard to Sleep," Gracie Abrams, *This Is What It Feels Like*, 2021.

¹⁰⁹ Price, Margaret. "Defining mental disability." *The disability studies reader* 4 (2013): 233.

What else is an identity marker? An individual's sex or the way they present is also highly constructed by society. Teresa de Lauretis offers this definition of feminism:

It is instead a developing theory of the female-sexed or female-embodied social subject, whose constitution and whose modes of social and subjective existence include most obviously, sex and gender, but also race, class, and any other significant socio-cultural divisions and representations; a developing theory of the female-embodied social subject that is based on its specific, emergent, and conflictual history.¹¹⁰

To make the connection between anxiety and feminism explicit, Alfred Adler uses the term “inferiority feelings,” which is used as a synonym for anxiety. This concept regards anxiety as being created by feelings of inadequacy. These feelings can be based on discrimination against identity markers, like being born into a minority group. Feminism fights to challenge discriminatory actions against women, feminine-presenting, and others, which hopefully helps to alleviate a percentage of anxieties. Abrams puts all these fears, feelings, and thoughts about being a woman and anxious into songs like “Hard to Sleep” which does help to alleviate her audience members’ anxieties.

For Abrams, it is hard to go to sleep at night or move past these crippling thoughts when being different is such a prevalent occurrence in her head. Quite literally, in the bridge, she lets this phrase fall out of her mouth, “Hard to sleep, could it be/Only me? Only me.”¹¹¹ Anxiety presents itself in weird and different ways. According to Woodgate et al, “Over 95% of youth living with anxiety experience at least one somatic symptom including headache, stomachache,

¹¹⁰ Teresa, de Lauretis. 2007. “*Upping the Anti (sic) in Feminist Theory.*” In *The Cultural Studies Reader*. Edited by Simon During. Third ed. New York: Routledge. 370.

¹¹¹ “Hard to Sleep,” Gracie Abrams, *This Is What It Feels Like*, 2021

head cold or sniffles, sleeplessness, or feelings of drowsiness or sleepiness.”¹¹² Although the modern definition of anxiety is different than the Freudian definition. According to the American Psychology Association, anxiety is feelings of tenseness, worriedness, and somatic symptoms of increased heart rate and blood pressure; it is future-oriented, and has a long-acting response.¹¹³ It is important to note that Freud talks about the inability to sleep due to melancholia showing how rigid the condition is, making it hard for the mind to withdraw the energy needed for sleep. Melancholia acts like an open wound that draws in emotional energy from everywhere, leaving the ego drained and unable to rest.¹¹⁴

Bordo makes an analogy with the poem “The Heavy Bear” by Delmore Schwartz, I utilize it below as an analogy for women with anxiety created by society in conjunction with affect theory. Many affected individuals with anxiety talk about it being an uncontrollable force, which is also supported by this statement, “Even in sleep, “he” is “breathing at my side.” Yet, while I cannot rid myself of this creature, while I am forced to live with “him” in intimacy, he remains a strange, foreign presence to me: “private,” “near,” yet “opaque.”¹¹⁵ The creature, aka the bear, is representative of both the anxiety Abrams faces as a woman, and the oppression felt as a woman under a patriarchal rule. The words, “he,” and “him” are indicative of the actual patriarch. As described above, the patriarchy is unable to escape even in sleep, perhaps this is

¹¹² Woodgate, Roberta L., Ketan Tailor, Pauline Tennent, Pamela Wener, and Gary Altman. 2020. *The experience of the self in Canadian youth living with anxiety: A qualitative study*. N.p.: PLOS ONE. e0228193.

¹¹³ “Anxiety.”

¹¹⁴ Freud, Sigmund. “Mourning and Melancholia.” In *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works XIV*, Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud., XIV:243–58. London: The Hogarth Press, 1914. <https://archive.org/details/FreudMourningAndMelancholia>. 253.

¹¹⁵ Bordo, Susan. 2003. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 2.

why Abrams cannot sleep. Women are forced to live with the oppression every day, which can be equated to the word “intimacy.” Despite, speaking up and challenging the status quo, Abrams and other women are still unable to escape this “presence” of the patriarchy. The word choice, “foreign presence” can be associated with the connotations of worriedness, tenseness, and sense of loss, which is anxiety. Therefore, the conclusion of anxiety being catalyzed by the patriarchy.

“Augusta”¹¹⁶ is a plucky acoustic guitar song that is surprisingly upbeat despite the lyrics. Abrams's music, like Eilish's, sonically explores a characteristic aspect of Sad Girl Pop: the music can be cheerful and optimistic. This is part of reclaiming the labels concerning women being emotional and honest about their experiences. Just because they feel a certain way does not mean they are hysterical or overtly emotional to the point of not being taken seriously. In a way, Abrams's three songs analyzed above using the major key are an ironic statement.

Part of verse one, “Feel like maybe I might go to Boston/Cut my hair in the way that I've wanted.”¹¹⁷ Sometimes, individuals just need a new start, even if it alters their appearance. Understandable. This is a constant for individuals with anxiety due to the stereotypical views and stigmas around mental health. Not to mention, it is also a constant for women in society, as the patriarchy is unhealthily obsessed with controlling females' appearances. By women changing their looks, society may forget the “other” characteristics, like anxiety or depression. If society has these preconceived notions about people with anxiety, it seems reasonable to want to run away and change oneself. A lot of women also echo this notion. De Beauvoir, in “The Independent Woman,” talks of how the concept of femininity is curated by culture, which is then forced onto women, and unfortunately, location barely changes these set circumstances. This is

¹¹⁶ “Augusta,” Spotify, track 10 on Gracie Abrams, *This Is What It Feels Like*, 2021.

¹¹⁷ “Augusta,” Spotify, track 10 on Gracie Abrams, *This Is What It Feels Like*, 2021.

echoed by, “That changes nothing fundamental in the matter: the individual is still not free to do as she pleases in shaping the concept of femininity.”¹¹⁸ Like with anxiety, being feminine is not something one can escape, especially when the axis of the masculine and feminine dichotomy is being unrealistically set. Masculinity represents positivity and neutrality, while femininity is representative of negativity. From the very beginning women are marked as other, as subaltern. It is almost like their identity markers are visible wounds. Bhabha suggests that the natives bearing their wounds visibly serves as a critique of colonialism. He points out how the oppressed are marked by their suffering, which can be seen as both a burden and a form of defiance.¹¹⁹

Abrams repeats for the duration of the chorus of “Augusta,”¹²⁰ “I’m lost.”¹²¹ This is a result of disconnect and uncertainty within the self. It is like de Beauvoir writes in “The Second Sex” that women seek to define themselves and define what being a woman is, something a male never sets out to do because there is no questioning of his sex.¹²² Yet, due to the endless number of questions about what it means to be a woman and the qualities women supposedly lack, there can be a loss of self and, as a result, melancholia as defined by Freud. Pairing this with Bhabha’s melancholic revolt, explains that Abrams openly expressing her vulnerabilities serves a purpose beyond lamentation; Bhabha writes,

¹¹⁸ Beauvoir, Simone de. 2007. “The Independent Woman” *The Cultural Studies Reader*. Edited by Simon During. Third ed. New York: Routledge. 340.

¹¹⁹ Bhabha, Homi. 1992. “Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt.” *Cultural Studies*. Edited

by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler. First ed. New York: Routledge, 55-66.

¹²⁰ “Augusta,” Spotify, track 10 on Gracie Abrams, *This Is What It Feels Like*, 2021.

¹²¹ “Augusta,” Gracie Abrams, *This Is What It Feels Like*, 2021.

¹²² de Beauvoir, Simone. n.d. “Simone de Beauvoir The Second Sex, Woman as Other 1949.” Marxists Internet Archive. Accessed December 1, 2023.

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/ethics/de-beauvoir/2nd-sex/introduction.htm>.

The melancholic discourse, Freud says, is a plain in the old-fashioned sense; the insistent self-exposure and the repetition of loss must not be taken at face value for its apparent victimage and passivity. Its narrative metonymy, the repetition of the piecemeal, outside the sentence, bit by bit, its insistent self-exposure, comes also from a mental constellation of revolt: "The melancholic are not ashamed and do not hide themselves, since everything derogatory they say about themselves is at bottom said about somebody else" (1917). This inversion of meaning and address in the melancholic discourse-when it "incorporates" the loss or lack in its own body, displaying its own weeping wounds is also an act of "disincorporating" the authority of the Master.¹²³

Additionally, depression has traditionally been seen as a positive trait when linked to masculinity, which is problematic and has been glamorized. Depression linked to femininity is not seen as a positive trait, thus, resisting being silenced or dominated by patriarchy, which is frequently tied to societal expectations and authority figures. In discussing her suffering, melancholic individuals may outwardly project their feelings, masking personal pain via musical performance, while simultaneously challenging the very authority that contributes to their distress. Through this process, they assert their existence and individuality in the face of oppressive narratives.

What is more symbolic of losing oneself than admittance to forgetting one's body? In verse three, Abrams admits, "Learned the hard way to forget my body." This line refers to "Camden," where she sings she fears getting bigger. The same anxieties that stem from being a woman in society apply to this lyric. Unfortunately, a patriarchal society wants women to forget

¹²³ Bhabha, Homi. 1992. "Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt." *Cultural Studies*. Edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler. First ed. New York: Routledge, 65.

their bodies and autonomy, as it means they are complying with the patriarchy's hegemonic ideals. It should be argued, however, that by Abrams voicing this she is trying to rectify her actions, therefore, she is letting both other women and the oppressors know that this is not okay.¹²⁴ If Abrams is unsure of her identity, she does not know how to view her body and therefore, a sense of loss can be felt, which is a reason for melancholia according to Freud.¹²⁵ Relating this back to Bhabha, he discusses how cultural identities—shaped by race, gender, class, and generation—can create a sense of unfamiliarity or even conflict. This complexity does not simply reduce to desires or emotional experiences; instead, it signifies a deeper struggle to redefine identity in the context of social changes.¹²⁶ Bordo argues that these disorders associated with the body are not merely the result of a trend but instead reveal some of our society's fundamental problems.¹²⁷ These problems include our historical disregard for the body, our present anxiety about losing control of our futures, and the unsettling implications of contemporary beauty standards when women have more influence and power than ever before, however a lot of this stays the same due to the patriarchal oppression women are under as a reaction to the backlash to women's social progress.

¹²⁴ Bhabha, Homi. 1992. "Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt." *Cultural Studies*. Edited

by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler. First ed. New York: Routledge, 55-66.

¹²⁵ Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and Melancholia." Essay. In *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works XIV*, Standard Edition Of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud., XIV:243–58. London: The Hogarth Press, 1914. <https://archive.org/details/FreudMourningAndMelancholia>.

¹²⁶ Bhabha, Homi. 1992. "Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt." *Cultural Studies*. Edited

by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler. First ed. New York: Routledge, 55-66.

¹²⁷ Bordo, Susan. 2003. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 40.

Conclusion

This chapter explores how sad-girl-pop music, specifically *This Is What It Feels Like* by Gracie Abrams, embodies anxiety and feminism and the related connections between them. Sad-girl-pop is the vessel Abrams uses to share with her listeners that they are not alone and that they will get through their struggles. This notion resonated with a wide audience through her authenticity and raw lyricism, resulting in Abrams being a rising artist and a member of the increasingly popular sad-girl-pop club. Her music provides a safe space for listeners to explore their emotions and experiences related to mental health and feminism.

Through her music, Abrams has become a voice for those who may feel unheard or misunderstood. Examining three songs from *This Is What It Feels Like* shows the societal demands on the female body and the anxieties that come with it. In conclusion, Abrams's experiences highlight the trials and tribulations of women who unfortunately attempt to conform to societal norms and expectations, but along the way find the hegemonic ideals to be oppressive, and therefore destructive and contradictory. Her struggles with anxiety and overthinking demonstrate the toll that societal pressures can take on individuals.

Furthermore, Abrams provides a discussion of the challenges women face in society, which can lead to a loss of self and anxiety related to body image. An example is Abrams's admission of forgetting her body and the anxieties of being a woman in society. At the same time, there is not enough conclusive research about how anxiety affects the sense of self overall; a correlation that demonstrates these disorders are not only the result of a trend of women's social progression but instead reveal some of our society's fundamental problems. These

problems include our historical disregard for the body, our present anxiety about losing control of ourselves and our futures, and the unsettling implications of contemporary beauty standards when women have more influence and power than ever before. Anxiety and feminism are two interconnected issues that affect many women today. Feminism seeks to challenge these harmful societal expectations and promote greater gender equality, which can help alleviate anxiety and other issues faced by women. By empowering women to live on their terms, feminism can help create a more equitable and just society that benefits everyone, including those struggling with anxiety.

CHAPTER THREE

Ethel Cain is a fictional character created by Hayden Silas Anhedönia. (Anhedönia means the inability to feel pleasure. It is unlikely that this is her actual name. It is an interesting thought to think that a character is made under a pseudonym). She is also Anhedönia's famous moniker. Cain and her life story told through *Preacher's Daughter*¹²⁸ will be the focus of this chapter, as well as how it embodies Sad Girl Pop, and the resistance associated with the genre. However, I feel it is essential to set a foundation for how Cain came to be, which means getting to know her creator. Anhedönia was born to a religious family and raised in Florida. Her parents were active church members growing up; her father was a deacon, and her mother was in the church choir. Her mother's involvement in the choir inspired her to begin her musical career at a young age by learning classical piano and singing. While her relationship with religion is complex, she left the church after coming out as gay at 16, and a few years passed before she came out as a transgender woman¹²⁹. Her experiences have traumatized her, and as a result to cope, she uses music to share their impact through her artistry and made her an advocate for several political issues.

¹²⁸ Ethel Cain, *Preacher's Daughter*, Daughters of Cain, 2022.

¹²⁹ Dombal, Ryan. "Ethel Cain Fears No Darkness." Pitchfork, April 20, 2021.

In her adult life, besides making music, Anhedönia has been a model for Givenchy, Miu Miu, and Marc Jacobs¹³⁰, and as of February 6, 2025, has been signed to IMG Models.¹³¹ Her success as a model and her rising fanbase stems from her internet literacy and social media following. Around 2017, Anhedönia began producing and uploading music to SoundCloud under a different name. Ethel Cain then came to Anhedönia almost as soul-possessing. Her first EP, *Carpet Bed*¹³², was released under Cain's name, followed by a second EP, *Golden Age*¹³³. The second EP was met with surprising success, which led to the backing of Wicca Phase Springs Eternal and, subsequently, the discovery of Cain by rapper Lil Aaron, who connected Cain with the publishing company Prescription Songs. Under the new contract, Cain released her third EP, *Inbred*¹³⁴. Her most significant success came with her narrative album, *Preacher's Daughter*.¹³⁵

*Preacher's Daughter*¹³⁶ is a semi-autobiographical album about Ethel Cain. The album tells how Cain lived and met her untimely demise. *Preacher's Daughter*¹³⁷ tackles the themes of the American dream, US gun culture, anti-war sentiments, American religious hypocrisy, and the patriarchy. It is not a happy life, happy ending kind of musical work. Yet, it is because of these themes and the inversion of meaning¹³⁸ conveyed that this work can be classified as Sad Girl Pop. And it received as such. In the case of Cain, her songs are not about mental health issues like those by Eilish and Abrams but about trauma and the effects of societal and political issues.

¹³⁰ D'Souza, Shaad. "I felt like a performing monkey": Ethel Cain on fans, fainting and being 'Miss Alt-Pop Star.'" Guardian. July 6, 2023.

¹³¹ Models, IMG. "IMG Models x Ethel Cain." 6 Feb. 2025.

¹³² Ethel Cain, *Carpet Bed*, Daughters of Cain, 2019.

¹³³ Ethel Cain, *Golden Age*, Self Released, 2019.

¹³⁴ Ethel Cain, *Inbred*, Daughters of Cain, 2021.

¹³⁵ Ethel Cain, *Preacher's Daughter*, Daughters of Cain, 2022. ¹³⁶ Ethel Cain, *Preacher's Daughter*, Daughters of Cain, 2022

¹³⁶ Ethel Cain, *Preacher's Daughter*, Daughters of Cain, 2022.

Brand & Image

Cain's presence on social media has allowed her to create a distinctive brand. Dark colors, grainy film photographs, *Little House on the Prairie* dresses, and religious paraphernalia are Cain's key signature items. As stated by Kristin J. Lieb in *Gender, Branding, and The Modern Music Industry*, "The pace of communication, accelerated by 24-hour television news cycles and the 24-hour social cycle offered by the Internet and widely adopted social media platforms, has compelled celebrities to strategize *continuously* to remain culturally relevant."¹³⁹ Her social media presence has allowed Cain to master The Cultural Diamond by Wendy Griswold¹⁴⁰ unknowingly: the social world, a cultural object, creator, and receivers. In an interview with W Magazine, Anhedonia as Cain states, "I have my cross necklace on, and I have my American flag t-shirt on—and I'm not a huge fan of either of them," she adds. "I just keep them as close to my heart as possible, in my own way of staying above them. I think that's why I talk so much about it in my art because it's easier to get the upper hand: I'm not gonna get rid of you, so I might as well have this power over you."¹⁴¹ This mindset relates heavily to Bhabha's concept of melancholic revolt and even his concept of mimicry. Rather than simply being a victim of the oppression of American religious patriarchal society, Cain is physically wearing her revolt against authority akin to exposing one's losses and wounds of the subaltern.¹⁴²

¹³⁷ Ethel Cain, *Preacher's Daughter*, Daughters of Cain, 2022.

¹³⁸ Bhabha, Homi. 1992. "Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt." *Cultural Studies*. Edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler. First ed. New York: Routledge, 65.

¹³⁹ Lieb J. Kristin. *Gender, Branding, and The Modern Music Industry*, 2013. 7.

¹⁴⁰ Griswold, Wendy. *Cultural Diamond*. 2008.

¹⁴¹ Wally, Maxine. "Ethel Cain's America." W Magazine, May 13, 2022.

¹⁴² Bhabha, Homi. 1992. "Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt." *Cultural Studies*. Edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler. First ed. New York: Routledge, 65.

To be honest, Cain does not follow the branding and image of other Sad Girl Pop artists or any pop artists. For one, she is a transgender woman. Unfortunately, people's transphobia gets in the way of accepting that sadness and tough topics expressed through music should be heard and appreciated despite a person's gender identity. Yet, despite the hegemonic mindset people have, Cain sees it as an advantage:

Trans women have a very specific makeup in their brain and their body that makes them the way that they are, and it all comes into play with Ethel Cain. She's tall. She's got sharp features. She's got a low voice. She's got broad shoulders. She looks loving and soft, but she also looks like she could rip her heart out with her bare hands. That's how I feel in my everyday life. Obviously, trans women should be more accepted in society just for the fact that they are human beings. Beyond that, trans women offer such a unique perspective in music. Once we've moved past a point where we no longer feel like we have to fit in we can fully start embracing the unique points of view that we see life through, and that's when I think trans art will really hit a peak. Trans women have something so beautiful to offer, and I love working with other trans artists. Their art just hits in a way that nobody else really does. I don't really think that being trans is one of the most interesting things about me, but it's definitely a unique quality that adds to the pile, and I love it.¹⁴³

Interestingly enough, Cain does not classify herself as a pop artist and does not want to be. She wants to maintain 100% authenticity in her creative process and does not want "to work with someone like Capitol or Atlantic who's going to cram me down into a box."¹⁴⁴ Cain is not the stereotypical Sad Girl Pop musician, which is okay. She offers a different perspective from the other Sad Girl Pop singer-songwriters that I have thus far analyzed.

Album Cover

The album cover for *Preacher's Daughter*¹⁴⁵ has no words to announce it. Ethel Cain sits off center, arm draped, on an end table with a vase of flowers— they seem to be black roses.

Black roses symbolize many things, but I believe they represent resistance and resilience in this case. She is in her Sunday best: a white dress that can only properly be described as a church dress, signified by the high square neckline, short sleeves, and knee-length hem. She is wearing tan-colored tights and white high heels. White, in Christian culture, is associated with purity. Her outfit is the epitome of Southern modesty. This, in its way, averts the male gaze, as her outfit is not sexy or screaming look at me in an objectifying way. Similar to her believing to keep your friends close and your enemies closer, Cain is hiding in plain sight.

The background is wood paneling; this could signify a room in a house or the foyer of a church. Both of these also pair well with the shag carpet. I am leaning more towards the church foyer due to the sparse decor, as there is only one chair and one table with a vase of flowers. Additionally, above Cain is a simulacrum of Jesus Christ. This stereotypical rendition of Jesus is standard in Southern churches. It does appear that Jesus is looking down on Cain, which can be interpreted as Jesus looking down on Cain in disdain. Therefore, Cain could be seen as using Jesus as a symbolic figure for the standard white religious man who oppresses the subaltern.

¹⁴³ Dombal, Ryan. "Ethel Cain Fears No Darkness." Pitchfork, April 20, 2021.

¹⁴⁴ Dombal, Ryan. "Ethel Cain Fears No Darkness." Pitchfork, April 20, 2021.

¹⁴⁵ Delilah Dolimiere, *Preacher's Daughter, Album Cover*, 2022, *Daughters of Cain*.

Music and Lyric Analysis

A lively guitar riff starts “American Teenager,”¹⁴⁶ grasping the listener's attention in a way that makes one want to play air guitar, dance, or roll down one's car windows. This is not a sad guitar riff. At 15 seconds, Cain's voice begins to harmonize with the guitar. She starts singing at 31 seconds. Closely following the onset of lyrics, a syncopated drumbeat can be distinguished; this drumbeat sounds like clapping at a sporting event. Around 50 seconds, an electronic piano/keyboard is added. At 2:15, the electronic piano dulls to emphasize Cain's lyrics. 2:50, the clapping drum beat resumes, building up to a climactic moment in the song. The keyboard and guitar riff fade out to end the song.

At the song's heart, it is about romanticizing the idea of growing up in the American South. The bubbly pop sound almost makes one believe it. By further examining verse one: “Grew up under yellow light on the street/ Putting too much faith in the make-believe/ And another high school football team/ The neighbor's brother came home in a box/ But he wanted to go, so maybe it was his fault/ Another red heart taken by the American dream”¹⁴⁷ it is obvious the romantic ideal is not what Cain means. In fact, “putting too much faith in the make-believe”¹⁴⁸ is her referencing her complicated relationship with religion. Her relationship with religion is multifaceted. She is the daughter of a reverend who has passed away. Her putting too much faith in that relationship, in a sense, was obligatory, and now the reason for her faith is gone. She equates her relationship with God to a high school football team; likening high school sports fandom to small-town

¹⁴⁶ “American Teenager,” Spotify, track 2 on Ethel Cain, *Preacher's Daughter*, 2022.

¹⁴⁷ “American Teenager,” Spotify, track 2 on Ethel Cain, *Preacher's Daughter*, 2022.

¹⁴⁸ “American Teenager,” Spotify, track 2 on Ethel Cain, *Preacher's Daughter*, 2022.

religiosity as naïve enthusiasms. The God she believes in also has taken a neighbor's brother fighting in a war for the American dream. This is interesting because the people and examples she provides are all male. The patriarchal figures of her foundational life are slipping away, and with them gone, it could be surmised she does not know how to act or who to believe. There is a lot to unpack in this verse. Essentially, Cain is experiencing melancholia instead of mourning. It has been 10 years since Cain's father died¹⁴⁹, which is a long period of mourning. Context from the rest of the song suggests that this could be a deeper pathological issue, according to Freud¹⁵⁰. This sense of inconsolable loss is what drives her to depression and, as a result, to turn to alcohol.

The pre-chorus: "And I feel it there/ In the middle of the night/ When the lights go out/ And I'm all alone again."¹⁵¹ By parsing this out, Cain feels something. Maybe she feels the loss of her father or the loss of her connection to God, or perhaps this loss is unexplainable. This pang of feeling occurs at night when there is no light to guide her out of the darkness of her emotions, which makes her feel isolated. This could be interpreted as a metaphor for melancholia/depression.

¹⁴⁹ Wilken, Silken. "Thoughts and Prayers for Ethel Cain." *Teeth Magazine*. February 17, 2022. ¹⁵⁰ Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and Melancholia." Essay. In *On the History of the Psycho- Analytic Movement Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works XIV*, Standard Edition Of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud., XIV:243–58. London: The Hogarth Press, 1914. <https://archive.org/details/FreudMourningAndMelancholia>.
¹⁵¹ "American Teenager," Spotify, track 2 on Ethel Cain, *Preacher's Daughter*, 2022.

To complicate matters even more, the chorus: “Say what you want, but say it like you mean it/ With your fists for once, a long cold war/ With your kids at the front/ Just give it one more day, then you're done, done/ I do what I want, crying in the bleachers/ And I said it was fun/ I don't need anything from anyone/ It's just not my year/ But I'm all good out here.”¹⁵² Cain is feeling a deep sense of sadness brought on by the death of her father, a neighbor, and her faith. With the loss of these figures, she has lost a sense of guidance and her identity because who is she without the male figures telling her what to be? This newfound freedom and identity that she will grow into (“I do what I want, crying in the bleachers/ And I said it was fun”¹⁵³) is probably disputed among the people of her community but is not necessarily said with their chest because of the generational trauma the adults pass along to their children. This concept is directly related to Bhabha's view of how cultural identities created by race, gender, class, and generation can create a sense of conflict within one's self or even unfamiliarity.¹⁵⁴ This sense of conflict and unfamiliarity can be equated to loss, which reinforces Freud's idea of melancholia, which can be why Cain does not need anything from anyone. Instead, she just blames all of her emotional distress on not being her year.

Even more saddening, Cain starts to think Jesus has also left her alone; verse two: “Jesus, if you're listening let me handle my liquor/ And Jesus, if You're there/ Why do I feel alone in this room with You?”¹⁵⁵ The realization adds to her number of losses and trauma, causing her to revolt and turn to alcohol. Freud states, “All this is possible only because the reactions expressed in their behavior still proceed from a mental constellation of revolt, which has then, by a certain

¹⁵² “American Teenager,” Spotify, track 2 on Ethel Cain, *Preacher's Daughter*, 2022. ¹⁵³ “American Teenager,” Spotify, track 2 on Ethel Cain, *Preacher's Daughter*, 2022.

¹⁵⁴ Bhabha, Homi. 1992. “Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt.” *Cultural Studies*. Edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler. First ed. New York: Routledge, 60.

a certain process, passed over into the crushed state of melancholia.”¹⁵⁶ Cain supports Freud’s concept of mental revolting by questioning God, someone in whom she is supposed to have unwavering faith. Because of Jesus’s symbolic representation of the patriarch, it can be interpreted here as Cain’s loss and abandonment by the patriarchy.

“A House in Nebraska”¹⁵⁷ begins with a harrowing piano chord that repeats five times. Cain starts singing at 32 seconds. A violin begins a shrill wail at 2:34 quietly. A guitar joins in climatically at 3:27. Cain’s voice is isolated at 5:26 until the piano chords start again. The guitar riff reprises at 6:26; it sounds like the guitar says “house in Nebraska.”

The last line of the chorus is, “Where you told me even if we died tonight, that I’d die yours.”¹⁵⁸ For context, Cain would meet her partner in an abandoned house at the edge of town. From the chorus, it can be gathered that Cain and her partner would have sex. With this context, Cain is saying her lover told her if they died, that she would die as his since they performed an act of consummation, where man and woman become one. These lyrics can be interpreted as

¹⁵⁵ “American Teenager,” Spotify, track 2 on Ethel Cain, *Preacher’s Daughter*, 2022.

¹⁵⁶ Freud, Sigmund. “Mourning and Melancholia.” Essay. In *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works XIV*, Standard Edition Of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud., XIV:243–58. London: The Hogarth Press, 1914. <https://archive.org/details/FreudMourningAndMelancholia>.

¹⁵⁷ “House In Nebraska,” Spotify, track 3 on Ethel Cain, *Preacher’s Daughter*, 2022.

¹⁵⁸ “House In Nebraska,” Spotify, track 3 on Ethel Cain, *Preacher’s Daughter*, 2022.

ironic through Bhabha's concept of inverse meaning.¹⁵⁹ The idea of her dying as his or them dying as one sounds romantic. In reality, because of the traditional religious aspects of Cain's life, Cain can now be seen as her lover's property; she went from being her father's to her partner's. Cain does not seem upset by this; if anything, she seems more upset about him leaving. To add to this dilemma, sex in a Christian mindset is taught to be between a married couple. Cain and her partner were not married; they were just two young adults in high school. Her partner leaving adds to the layers of religious trauma because she has "sinned", and thus the melancholia associated with the male figures in her life abandoning her is triggered.

Cain does not seem to be coping with another form of loss. In verse two, she sings, "And I lie to her/And say that I'm doing fine/ When really I'd kill myself/ To hold you one more time/ And it hurts to miss you/ But it's worse to know/ That I'm the reason/ You won't come home."¹⁶⁰ Common in Sad Girl Pop songs, artists will admit to lying and wrongdoings, as Eilish and Abrams have done so many times. While Cain admits to lying to her lover's mother, it is also interesting to delve deeper into this social interaction. No matter the situation, individuals, especially women, say they are doing okay or good when asked how they are. This could stem from the deep-rooted history of women's emotions being pathologized. Essentially, Cain is asserting blame on herself, creating more convoluted feelings of ambivalence about her losses. Freud's concept of melancholia also supports this notion, as individuals who are experiencing

¹⁵⁹ Bhabha, Homi. 1992. "Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt." *Cultural Studies*. Edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler. First ed. New York: Routledge, 65.

¹⁶⁰ "House In Nebraska," Spotify, track 3 on Ethel Cain, *Preacher's Daughter*, 2022.

melancholia reinforce ambivalence.¹⁶¹ This is further reinforced when Cain states that she would kill herself to have her partner come back and get to see him again. Her sense of deep suffering is linked to melancholic loss; Freud discusses the inclination towards suicide in individuals experiencing melancholia as a form of sadism. He explains this as the ego has self-love as essential preservation, and when faced with life threats, such as the many forms of loss Cain has experienced, this self-love is projected as fear, which explains why there is a disconnect in understanding of why the ego would want to destroy itself.¹⁶²

Instead of instantly thinking someone with a deep sense of sadness is mentally ill and pathologizing them, we should take a deeper look into the environment they are in; as Freud says, “The person who has occasioned and whom the illness is centered is usually found in the immediate environment.”¹⁶³ Cain’s sadness is centered on the loss of male figures in her life, which has left her with the freedom to explore her identity and herself, thus causing a conflict. This newfound freedom should be seen as a positive, as in verse three: “‘Cause you were the only one I was never scared to tell I hurt.”¹⁶⁴ Cain’s lover was the only one with whom she could be truthful. That speaks volumes about the patriarchal power relationships in her life, and Cain is making a statement of how this reflects society.

¹⁶¹ Freud, Sigmund. “Mourning and Melancholia.” Essay. In *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works XIV*, Standard Edition Of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud., XIV:243–58. London: The Hogarth Press, 1914. <https://archive.org/details/FreudMourningAndMelancholia>.

¹⁶² Freud, Sigmund. “Mourning and Melancholia.” Essay. In *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works XIV*, Standard Edition Of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud., XIV:243–58. London: The Hogarth Press, 1914. <https://archive.org/details/FreudMourningAndMelancholia>.

¹⁶³ Freud, Sigmund. “Mourning and Melancholia.” Essay. In *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works XIV*, Standard Edition Of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud., XIV:243–58. London: The Hogarth Press, 1914. <https://archive.org/details/FreudMourningAndMelancholia>.

¹⁶⁴ “House In Nebraska,” Spotify, track 3 on Ethel Cain, *Preacher’s Daughter*, 2022.

In the outro, “I feel so alone,”¹⁶⁵ Cain wears her heart on her sleeve. Finally, she explicitly expresses how she feels. Yes, she is physically and romantically alone because her partner is leaving. Yet, the repetition of this phrase throughout the outro leads me to believe it has a greater meaning.

Songs four through 12 narrate the rest of Cain’s life. She continues to rebel against both her religion and culture, running away from the police and making her way to California with a man who picks her up on a thoroughfare in Texas, who drugs her, and pimps her out, brainwashing her into believing it is out of love.

The closing song of the album is “Strangers.”¹⁶⁶ It opens with audio from a sermon, “God is telling you and I there is death, for all of us/ But then we find that the scriptures also tell us that we have a/ great promise, that there is a better place for those who believe/ in the Lord Jesus Christ,” accompanied by an electronic piano.

In “Strangers”¹⁶⁷ This man then kills her and eats her. In verse one, “In your basement, I grow cold/ Thinking back to what I was always told/ Don’t talk to strangers, or you might fall in love.”¹⁶⁸ Connecting the sermon from the beginning of the song and verse one, it can be surmised that Cain is trying to say death is inevitable, but those who are religious and believe in Jesus, like Cain, can reside in heaven afterward. This is an odd caveat because Cain did not consider herself to be the epitome of religious faith, as she questioned God’s presence, and her relationship with both God and religion seemed to come from spiritual trauma. Even more so, her religious relationship can be seen as a symbolic representation of her relationship with

¹⁶⁵ “House In Nebraska,” Spotify, track 3 on Ethel Cain, *Preacher’s Daughter*, 2022.

¹⁶⁶ “Strangers,” Spotify, track 13 on Ethel Cain, *Preacher’s Daughter*, 2022.

¹⁶⁷ “Strangers,” Spotify, track 13 on Ethel Cain, *Preacher’s Daughter*, 2022.

¹⁶⁸ “Strangers,” Spotify, track 13 on Ethel Cain, *Preacher’s Daughter*, 2022.

patriarchal society. She tries to abide by the rules but then questions them and gets punished for it. Because she is now dead, she no longer has control over what happens to her. She can only think about how and why this happened to her. Simply, she thinks because she disobeyed, she was killed as punishment. This is a popular motif in popular culture: women who do not get punished or killed to satisfy the patriarchy. They also get punished or killed as a cautionary tale for women and for people who are labeled as others. Popular culture is warning those who wish to survive in a patriarchal society like America to do what they are told.

Conclusion

Ethel Cain, as a fictional character and artistic persona created by Hayden Silas Anhedönia, embodies the complex interplay of personal experience and broader societal critique in the realm of Sad Girl Pop. Her journey from a religious upbringing to embracing her identity as a transgender woman deeply informs her music and the narratives she shares. The writing Cain uses to express her thoughts pairs well with Bhabha's writings on melancholic revolt¹⁶⁹ and the employment of postmodern theory, which talks about the suffering of those marginalized. Cain challenges conventional notions of happiness and fulfillment often associated with the American dream, instead shedding light on the darker realities of trauma, societal pressures, and existential struggles. Her unique brand, characterized by evocative imagery and profound thematic exploration, sets her apart from other artists in the genre. By harnessing the power of social media and cultivating a distinctive presence, Cain navigates the landscape of contemporary music with confidence and purpose. Rather than conforming to mainstream

¹⁶⁹ Bhabha, Homi. 1992. "Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt." *Cultural Studies*. Edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler. First ed. New York: Routledge, 65.

expectations, she asserts her identity and experiences, transforming perceived disadvantages into strengths.

Ultimately, Ethel Cain represents a fusion of artistry and advocacy, creating a resonant voice for those grappling with similar struggles while inviting listeners to engage with the complexities of life, identity, and resistance. In doing so, she paves the way for greater acceptance and understanding within the music industry, reminding us of the power of authentic expression in the face of adversity. Cain's writing about her life and traumatic experiences should be seen as a warning against not understanding the patriarchy and its many powers to make women compliant. One of its many powers to make women compliant is its heavy use of religion and religious rhetoric. I think because of Anhedönia's traumatic experience with small town patriarchal religion, she wanted to share its extremity. Of course, while she did not get kidnapped and then killed, it is not exactly a far-reaching conclusion to be drawn for others. By sharing this tragic fictional story, she is creating a chance for dialog to begin about religious trauma, familial trauma, and even oppression by the patriarchy. And, in creating an open dialog, she is able to foster a sense of community for others who may be going through something similar. Her recording of her experiences should be seen as a form of empowerment and resistance. Women should not be treated this way or have to abide by rules that do not consider them simply because they are not straight white men.

The album, character, and story Anhedönia wrote, recorded, and produced are a must-listen work of art. Ethel Cain was able to be created to share her story filled with alcohol abuse, sexual abuse, religious themes. Through this new mode of creating music, Cain/ Anhedönia plans to create more music, by sharing the stories of her mother and grandmother, sharing more

of the Cain intergenerational trauma. Although Cain met an untimely and brutal end, she forgave and is at peace.

Here lies Ethel Cain. 1971 to 1991. More than just the preacher's daughter.

CONCLUSION

Closing argument for Sad Girl Pop

I would like to defend Sad Girl Pop. Sad Girl Pop is more than the stereotypes you see online. As someone who initially disdained popular music and trends, I am the best person to provide this research on why Sad Girl Pop is a different experience altogether. Hating popular music does not make you cool—case in point being hating Sad Girl Pop. Sad Girl Pop is not just girls being girls, whining, complaining, and being “ungrateful.” It is certainly not them being dramatic, overly emotional, hysterical, crazy, or pathetic. It is not whisper-singing because they cannot sing loudly or belt. Sad Girl Pop being popular is not because they are not talented. And no, they are not sad all the time, suicidal all the time, or even anxious all the time. Sad Girl Pop artists’ lyrics are sad and should be listened to carefully. Some of their songs sound sad, like the ones examined in this thesis.

For this thesis, it is vital to be aware of the privilege both Abrams and Eilish come from as cis white, wealthy women. However, just because they come from this place of privilege does not mean their experiences are any less valid. Dismissing them because of their various intersectionality is precisely what the patriarchy wants and keeps the cycle of oppression in motion. It is important to note that Cain is also white but offers a differing perspective as a transgender woman. Sad Girl Pop is a different approach to conquering feelings of depression, anxiety, and inadequacy instead of the stereotypical rage of punk and rock music. Sad Girl Pop highlights a woman's multifaceted identity and girlhood in a patriarchal society. It is my interpretation of Billie Eilish’s debut album, Gracie Abrams’s second EP, and Ethel Cain’s debut

album, as explored throughout this thesis, is a vehicle of an unconventional resistance to the oppression felt by those subject to the patriarchy.

It is through Eilish, Abrams, and Cain's affective states of anxiety, depressive, and traumatic experiences shared through songs that allow them to gain control. Their songs do not create a sense of depression and anxiety; instead, they make a welcoming environment for listeners to exist, explore, cope, and connect. I use control as a loose term because I lack a better word. Self-agency and stability could suffice. What I truly mean and am trying to convey throughout this thesis is the feeling of reclamation and those associated with it when Sad Girl Pop singer-songwriters share their trials and tribulations. There is something beautiful and empowering when Eilish, Abrams, and Cain share so candidly about things that have long been stigmatized and written off solely because of their association with femininity.

The act of sharing is an act of resistance in itself. This is illuminated by Homi Bhabha's theory of melancholic revolt. Melancholic discourse is used throughout Bhabha's theory, utilizing Freud's belief that melancholia and conversations surrounding it is more than just sadness or playing victim. It is so much deeper than that, as the speaker's, in this case, Eilish, Abrams, and Cain's feelings of loss, pain, trauma, and oppression indicate a rebellion against the power that is repressing them. Further, is self-exposure and repetition. Bhabha talks about the act of repeatedly exposing one's vulnerabilities and losses, such as anxiety and depression, is more than lamentation. According to Bhabha this is indicative of resistance to no longer being silenced or dominated by authority.¹⁷⁰ The patriarchy does not want those who are considered other,

¹⁷⁰ Bhabha, Homi. 1992. "Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt." *Cultural Studies*. Edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler. First ed. New York: Routledge, 55-65.

subaltern, and those who disagree with hegemonic ideals to have a voice. They want the “others” to grin and bear it because women look prettier with a smile. Sad Girl Pop artists show that being sad, anxious, and opinionated is more than okay. It is not a woman’s job to always be happy or vengeful! Being sad and anxious and sharing those feelings instead of bearing them alone is powerful. Sad Girl Pop singer-songwriters are sharing their sadness by shifting the power dynamic. Unfortunately, the oppressors do not precisely see consequences.

Billie Eilish is an artist who gives the oppressors a run for their money. Eilish has become a leading voice for Sad Girl Pop by using her platform to sing about her experiences with depression and anxiety. She is making it known that she does not owe anyone happiness and does not have to buy into the status quo sold by capitalistic culture. Since the onset of her career, Eilish has been sure to be nothing but herself. Her branding and image have been different, mysterious, and androgynous, except for the era of her sophomore album, *Happier Than Ever*, which was more Hollywood glam and feminine.¹⁷¹ *Happier* could have been sardonic or Eilish trying to break out of the Sad Girl Pop mold. However, since then, Eilish has returned to her baggy clothing to subvert the male gaze, either to maintain a sense of authenticity or to appease fans who wanted the old Billie. To Eilish and others in the Sad Girl Pop community, there is power and resistance in embracing and owning sadness.

At first glance, one may think Sad Girl Pop artists are complying with the hegemonic ideals of the patriarchy, especially when looking at and listening to Gracie Abrams. However, because Abrams’ branding and image are softer and more feminine, it does not mean she should be dismissed as submissive. Her songs should be viewed as a warning against falling into the

¹⁷¹ Billie Eilish, *Happier Than Ever*, Interscope Records, 2021.

traps laid by the patriarchy and its ideas of what a woman should be and want. Examples of this from the songs explored throughout this thesis are, maintaining a certain type of appearance, like staying thin or having long hair. Through sharing these thoughts, she expresses her suffering and the metaphorical wounds caused by the patriarchy.¹⁷² Abrams' music within Sad Girl Pop should be viewed as an interpretation of dissatisfaction with patriarchy and having to be perceived in a specific way.

I would say Eilish is the easiest of Sad Girl Pop singer-songwriters to point out as rebelling against patriarchy. In contrast, to Eilish and Abrams, Cain offers a different perspective as a transgender woman but also brings her "fictional" life story to the table. She is the woman scorned and punished for her actions rebelling against the church and society. Despite this, and the possible critique, she still decides to tell the story through song. This is what and how Sad Girl Pop is a take on resilience and rebellion.

The loss of love, whether self-love, platonic, familial, or romantic love, is at the core of all these songs. Everyone manages loss differently; no matter how you display the emotions associated with loss, something will be said. Sad Girl Pop singer-songwriters cope by pouring their melancholy into songs. While this exposes their experiences to public scrutiny, the positives outweigh the negatives. One positive is that they are creating a sense of unity. The singer-songwriters are sharing that their audiences are not alone. Strength is in numbers and comfort as well. This is scary to the dominant populace (the patriarchy) because of what happens when they become too large of a group to control. What happens if they start to fight back in a different,

¹⁷² Bhabha, Homi. 1992. "Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt." *Cultural Studies*. Edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler. First ed. New York: Routledge, 65.

maybe violent way? It is time for women to be taken seriously, not devalued, because of their emotions. We are all a product of the society we are in. Women have been made this way or at least to be perceived a certain way, and it is time for that to change. Furthermore, Eilish, Abrams, and Cain share the challenges women face in society, which, as discussed in this thesis, can relate to a loss of self.¹⁷³ It should be noted that these disorders reflect some of society's fundamental problems. As explored throughout this thesis, these problems include but are not limited to our historical disregard for the female body, our present anxiety about losing control of ourselves and our futures, and the unsettling implications of contemporary beauty standards when women have more influence and power than ever. This may be indicative of why beauty standards have become so unrealistic. As well as women are still told their happiness hinges on success with heteronormative romance, which is not dependent on academic accomplishments or career advancement, but instead, on physical appearance. Depression, anxiety, and feminism are interconnected issues affecting many women today. From my thesis, I can infer that Sad Girl Pop seeks to challenge and these harmful societal expectations and promote greater gender equality, which can help alleviate anxiety, depression, and other issues faced by women and other minority groups. By empowering women to reclaim their sadness, Sad Girl Pop can help create a more equitable and just society that benefits everyone, including those struggling with anxiety. The cultural impact of the artists' work lies in challenging the binary perceptions of femininity and emotion, redefining what it means to be a woman in the music industry.

¹⁷³ Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and Melancholia." In *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works XIV*, Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud., XIV:243–58. London: The Hogarth Press, 1914. <https://archive.org/details/FreudMourningAndMelancholia>. 253.

Limitations of study

This study was limited by the concept of genre. It is Sad Girl Pop, meaning popular music, but there are several sad girl musicians who would have been great to explore, but unfortunately are categorized in various genres, like Indie, Alternative, and Folk.

Another limitation to this study was that I only wanted to explore Sad Girl Pop singer-songwriters, meaning that I wanted the musicians I analyzed to be the main writer of the songs I examined, as well as, had some role in the production. Unfortunately, that limited my options for possible artists to choose from.

For this thesis, I selected a more well-known Sad Girl Pop artist, Billie Eilish, and one that is up and coming, Gracie Abrams, and a more niche artist, Ethel Cain. The first two singer-songwriters I selected are white, cis females. The third, is a transgender woman. Something else to consider is the fact that these three artists are all American. With this in mind, this limited the perspectives and experiences of the study to some degree.

I would say that this study was mostly limited by the quantity of songs and artists I was able to properly analyze. I chose to do this study for my master's thesis and thought nine songs by three artists would be plenty to analyze. If I had had more songs and artists, I think that would have been overwhelming and taken away from my conclusions.

Directions for future research

There is definitely a future for research on this topic. As I mentioned above, my study was limited based on genre, that they had to be a singer-songwriter, the quantity of songs and

artists. In the future, I would like to expand my study outside of the pop genre. I would want to expand to not just singer-songwriters. Perhaps there is something by just focusing on an artist's whole discography. I would also make sure to include a more diverse selection of artists. Lastly, I think there could be a whole book about sad girl music and that is what I am going to leave this study with.

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