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5

CULTURE AND CONSENT

Popular Culture as Sex Education

Where do we learn about sex and consent? Sex and relationships education for many of us continues to be woefully inadequate. A 2016 report by the Sex Education Forum found that, in the United Kingdom, sexual consent—either as a theory or in discussion of real-life scenarios—is not routinely covered in schools, with a third of young people not being taught anything on the subject at all. Additionally, nearly half of young people are not being taught how to tell a healthy relationship from an abusive one.[1] The situation in the United States is even worse, as debates there are dominated by the question of whether sex and relationships education should cover anything beyond "abstinence only until marriage," with

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consent barely making it onto the radar in discussions of what is or should be taught.

Some parents are comfortable doing "the talk," but many are not. In fact young people would prefer for their parents to be much more involved in their sex and relationships education than they currently are, and to be one of the main sources of information about sex while growing up.[2] And even parents themselves say they would like to do more for their children on this topic, and be better at it, but feel they lack the skills and confidence.[3] Where parents do give information, for instance about contraception and safer sex practices, their knowledge is frequently inaccurate or out of date,[4] and there is no reason to believe that they are any better equipped to talk about consent.

And of course we don't stop learning about sex and consent once we leave school or become adults. Yet sex advice books and columns aimed at adults have until recently been remarkably silent on the subject, and even in the wake of the #MeToo campaign, advice can be reductive, contradictory, or confusing.

Realistically, we pick up a lot of our knowledge about how sex works, what consent is, and even safer sex practices from the general cultural environment around us, whether by conversing with friends or browsing the internet. But particularly when it comes to things like learning dominant (or possibly alternative) sexual scripts, popular culture plays a very significant role in our sex

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and relationships education, regardless of whether we are young people or adults.

Because culture serves as our main sex educator, it attracts scrutiny and critique in general, and some specific cultural forms have come under fire. There are concerns about the messages contained in everything from romance novels to hardcore pornography about what normal sex, romance, healthy relationships, and consent look like. Feminist activists over the last few years have also drawn attention to a range of problematic tropes reproduced for instance in romantic comedies and popular Christmas songs.[5] In this chapter, then, we will take a look at the role popular culture plays in shaping our ideas of sex, sexuality, and consent. We will specifically examine romance novels, pornography, and sex advice literature, as well as touch on some of the good, the bad, and the ugly from across other forms of culture.

Pornography

There is a strong and long-lived strand of feminist thought that regards pornography as deeply implicated in the prevalence of sexual and other violence against women. Pornography is seen as inherently degrading and exploitative of women, as normalizing violent sexual practices, and as contributing to the subjugation of women under

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patriarchy. The argument is that the images presented in pornography are both in themselves violent and that those who consume them are likely to want to reenact them. In this way, radical feminists argue, pornography makes men into rapists and women into willing victims.[6]

While this strand of thought has a history going back to the 1970s, the simplistic causal link between pornography and sexual violence has by and large been discredited.[7] A more recent expression of anti-pornography feminism focuses instead on the ubiquity and accessibility of online pornography specifically, and particularly on its alleged effects on children and young people. Campaigners cite cases of very young children being exposed to pornography, of teenagers sharing nude images of themselves, and of the alleged normalization of sexual practices deemed intrinsically "pornographic," such as anal sex, as examples of pornography's contribution to sexual violence.[8] They claim that the ubiquity of pornography in our culture creates an environment where it is difficult for young people to know what normal, healthy sexual practices and relationships look like, which in turn puts pressure on them to consent to acts they may not want. If you grow up thinking that porn sex is normal sex you may not have the tools to negotiate the kind of sex that works for you.

Over the last decade, campaigners subscribing to these views have had a number of successes in influencing government policy. In the United Kingdom, for instance,

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there is legislation banning the depiction of a number of sexual acts as "extreme pornography." The government also requires big internet service providers to switch parental controls on by default, and has recently implemented a requirement for pornography websites to be able to verify their users' age, thereby compromising users' anonymity. All this is ostensibly in aid of protecting children from the harmful effects of pornography and from using pornography as a source of (bad) sex education and sexual scripts.

Yet even if we accept that pornography is easy to access and that it may give us sexual scripts and act as a source of knowledge about sex for young people who don't have access to other kinds of sex education, the picture is more complicated than the simple anti-pornography argument would have us believe.

Over the last twenty years or so, there has been a shift in cultural studies from talking about "pornography" to talking about "*pornographies*."[9] This reflects a growing understanding that while some materials are explicitly *produced* with the intention to arouse, a wide range of other types of material are *read* as pornography by individuals, and even among the former category, there is an enormous variety of style, content, and circumstances of production. Pornography, for instance, can be written as well as visual. It can be produced by large mainstream studios or small independent producers, including ones with a feminist

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and queer outlook. And audiences who may not be able to access what we traditionally think of as pornography may still make pornographic meanings from materials such as women's magazines, advertising, or lingerie catalogs. We cannot reduce the meanings or effects of all of these diverse materials to simple statements such as "this causes violence" or "this reproduces rape culture and limits individuals' ability to negotiate consent." What, then, are some of the possible alternative meanings we make with pornography, and how might they shape our views and relate to our ability to meaningfully consent to sex?

With the proliferation of digital technologies and online distribution, there has been a rise in small, independent pornography producers, particularly ones following a queer and/or feminist ethos. Many of these producers emphasize representation of diverse bodies (in terms, for instance, of race, body type, or disability), different genders (including non-binary ones), sexualities, sexual practices beyond the dominant sexual script, consent, and safer sex practices. They have a strong focus on ethics in both what they choose to depict and in their production processes.[10] Interviews with performers emphasizing the consensual nature of the encounters depicted have become commonplace in queer and feminist pornography.

The audiences for this kind of pornography are disproportionately women and non-binary people of a range of sexual orientations, as well as queer men. Studies of

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women consumers of queer and feminist pornography indicate that their experiences with this kind of material are complex. How they relate to it, and the meanings they make with it, depend on their attitudes and expectations but also on social factors, and they may experience contradictory emotions ranging from arousal to disgust, all at the same time.[11] These experiences and emotions are in turn used by women viewers to develop their understanding of their own sexuality. They learn to identify and challenge dominant discourses and sexual scripts in both media and their own lives and develop a better sense of their own sexual agency. In this way, some kinds of pornography can function as a way of negotiating one's place within (or outright challenging) rape culture.[12]

Representation in queer and feminist pornography of diverse practices, communities, and body types also has important effects when it comes to consent. It can help counteract some of the discursive operations of power limiting marginalized people's ability to exercise their sexual agency. Particularly groups who are commonly either desexualized (such as fat women) or hypersexualized (such as black women) can find alternative representation in pornography validating and empowering, giving them more confidence in their day-to-day sexual practice and consent negotiation.[13]

Pornography is neither monolithic, nor universally harmful. Viewing it and engaging with it can be a complex,

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multilayered experience for anyone. Some pornography, for some viewers, may indeed reproduce the dominant sexual scripts that prop up rape culture. Equally though, some types of pornography, for some viewers, can be hugely empowering. It may reflect our identities and experiences, help us explore our sexuality, help us exercise sexual agency and bodily autonomy, and challenge and rewrite dominant scripts of what sex is and how it should work.

It is perhaps ironic, then, that the kind of legislation that anti-pornography feminists campaign for, and that bans "extreme pornography," most severely impacts small and independent producers—the kind more likely to produce queer, feminist, ethical, and consent-focused pornography. The legislation focuses on specific acts: acts that go off the default sexual script, that are more prevalent in queer (and to an extent in feminist) pornography. It casts them as intrinsically deviant and undesirable, regardless of the context of either production or representation. It closes down avenues for challenging default sexual scripts and consensually exploring sexual possibilities beyond that default.[14] This and other similar legislation does not necessarily stop young people—or anyone else—from picking up default sexual scripts from mainstream pornography, and it does nothing to improve education about or understanding of consent.

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An alternative and perhaps more constructive approach to the idea that pornography acts as a major source of knowledge and sexual scripts not just for young people but for many in our society has come in the form of sex and relationships education materials. Rather than seeking to ban or restrict access to pornography, this approach seeks to equip young people with the knowledge and resources to explore their own sexuality safely and consensually regardless of any messages they may pick up from pornography or other media.

In 2018, for instance, *Teen Vogue* published an article on anal sex.[15] Consent, as well as inclusivity of queer and trans identities, is at the core of the article. It starts out with a disclaimer for readers who may be uncomfortable reading about the subject and points them at other *Teen Vogue* content they could read instead. It emphasizes consent issues throughout, including the idea that consent should be negotiated beforehand and can be withdrawn at any time. It goes on to dismantle the idea that penile-vaginal intercourse is the only type of sex one could or should be having. Rather than simply dismissing anal sex as an intrinsically deviant, abusive, or "pornographic" practice, it acknowledges that many people genuinely enjoy it. Finally, the article discusses the practicalities of anal sex, while being careful to use gender-neutral language

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and not make assumptions about who the insertive and who the receptive partner might be. In these ways, it puts images young people may have seen in pornography in the context of real-life sexual experiences and possibilities. It reduces social pressures on them and gives them the space to consider whether some of the sexual practices they see on screen are things they might enjoy without stigmatizing them. It helps young people develop new sexual scripts inclusive of all genders and sexualities in order to negotiate consent and explore their sexuality safely, and with respect for each other's bodily autonomy.

Pornography and its relationship to issues of sexual consent remains a thorny issue. It is a part of our cultural landscape that is here to stay, and like other media it has an effect on how we view sex, consent, and our own sexuality. But it is far from a monolithic cultural phenomenon, and the meanings we make from it are complex and varied. They depend as much on the kinds of pornography we come into contact with as on the other cultural resources we bring with us or have access to. Representations of diversity in independently produced, feminist and queer pornography can also have positive effects on women and queer audiences, strengthening individuals' confidence in their own desires and providing them with new approaches to negotiating consent.

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Romance

Our ideas of what is and is not romantic can shape our behavior in ways that limit our agency, as we saw in some of the examples discussed in chapter 4. Ideas of love and romance are pervasive in our culture, so are there other ways in which they might influence our relationships, the expression of our sexuality, our desires, and our behavior? Romance novels in particular have attracted the attention of feminist scholars and activists for their at times problematic portrayal of sexual and romantic relationships. As romance novels are predominantly aimed at and read by women audiences, the messages they send about what an ideal romantic relationship looks like are a target of feminist scrutiny.

Although queer or LGBT romances have been a niche subgenre within romance novels for decades, and they have become more prominent over the last ten years or so, heterosexual romances make up the bulk of the genre and have as a result garnered the majority of scholarly and activist attention. The first studies of romance novels were written in the 1980s, and were in part a reaction to the "bodice ripper" subgenre of romance novels popular in the 1970s and 1980s, which rightly has a reputation for playing fast and loose with ideas of sexual consent, bodily autonomy, and personal agency. These studies pick up on some of the deeply problematic aspects common to many

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romance narratives, particularly the hero's behavior toward the heroine.[16]

Romance novels, of course, are primarily about the hero and the heroine overcoming various obstacles to the realization of their love and their "happily ever after" ending in marriage (or more recently, a "happy for now" ending in a long-term committed relationship). Obstacles to love are in fact a formula in our culture that predates the contemporary romance novel genre and industry by centuries. For Romeo and Juliet (who did not have a happily ever after), their feuding families were the obstacle. For Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy, it was largely a disparity in social standing and wealth. Yet in many modern romance novels the main obstacle is not external to the relationship. Rather, it is the hero's own behavior toward and treatment of the heroine.

The typical romance novel hero in a bodice ripper is frequently gruff and cold, if not downright aggressive, toward the heroine at the outset of the book. In some instances of the romance novel formula, he will even punish the heroine for her initial rejection of him. So how is this obstacle to the couple's alleged true love overcome? Early romance novel scholars argue that in the course of the novel the heroine learns to reinterpret the hero's harsh behavior. Rather than being motivated by cruelty or indifference, the heroine learns, the hero has secretly loved her all along, and all of his acts toward her were motivated

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by that love. The process of learning and accepting this for the heroine involves an act of self-subversion. She has to challenge her own instincts and interpretations of the hero's behavior in favor of taking his word for what has motivated his cruelty toward her all along.

What messages, then, do the women reading romance novels take away from this? Early popular romance scholars argue that the reader closely identifies with the heroine, and that, as a result, she learns from these books to recode the cruel and aggressive behavior of the men in her own life as a sign of love and affection. According to this view, romance novels help women adapt to (and accept) the demands patriarchy puts on them in their day-to-day lives. In this way, the setting and maintaining of personal boundaries for women—saying "this behavior is not OK" in sexual situations but also in the wider relationship—is discouraged. Abusive behaviors and relationships become not only normalized but are recoded as loving.

And, of course, this trope has wider reach than just romance novels. The idea that "boys will be boys" and show affection to girls by "pulling pigtails"—teasing them and being hurtful—is something children are frequently taught in the playground. Here too, setting and maintaining boundaries is discouraged. So romance novels and the cultural tropes they reproduce are seen as having a negative effect particularly on women's ability to set

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boundaries in their relationships, which would potentially include negotiating or even withholding or withdrawing sexual consent.

More recently, though, scholars have questioned whether the messages romance novels send are quite so bleak, and whether audiences internalize them as unquestioningly as early accounts would suggest. Readers, after all, can make multiple meanings from the same texts. They can reject or dislike the messages of the genre, or they can interpret them in completely different ways. One recent study has argued that, as romance novels are both written and read predominantly by women, they provide a space in which women can collectively grapple with the challenges that patriarchy poses to them in their lives. In this space, they can reimagine men as freed from patriarchy and toxic masculinity and can look for relationship models in which they are true equals with their partners. This argument is both a reinterpretation of some of the older romance novels, and a reflection of more recent trends and developments in the genre.[17]

Another important factor here is that romance reading is a social activity. Even women featured in early pre-internet studies of romance readers found a community within which they discussed the books they enjoyed.[18] With the advent of social media and social reading sites like goodreads.com, romance-reading communities have only become larger and more diverse. Readers share

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recommendations and discuss what they do and do not enjoy. Through social media, they also have unprecedented access to authors. In this way, issues that readers care about, including consent, can be thematized and worked through in a communal setting, and new directions for the genre can be set in collaboration between readers and writers.

In fact, consent has become an increasingly hot topic among romance readers and writers, especially following the proliferation of smaller independent romance and erotica publishers enabled in part by the lower costs of publishing ebooks. Authors seek to explicitly depict consent negotiation in their sex scenes, but also to examine unequal power dynamics in relationships and the impact those may have on consent. For a generation of authors who may have grown up reading bodice rippers, this is in part a reaction to that, but also a way to respond to an ongoing conversation in their community, meet reader demands, and move the genre forward.[19] In this way, romance novels and the conversations they spark may actually help rewrite some of our dominant sexual scripts, rather than simply reproducing the tired tropes of rape culture. Of course, not all romance novels do this well, or at all, but there is certainly a section of the community—both readers and writers—that cares deeply about consent and that seeks to redress some of the issues the genre has historically been plagued by.

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Sex Advice

Sex advice has been an integral part of our culture and media landscape for decades now. Sex and relationships advice books such as the classic *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* are only the tip of the iceberg. Women's magazines, both of the prestige and glossy variety like *Cosmo* and of the gossip variety like *Heat*, have countless pages dedicated to sex advice, and many newspapers' advice columns remain remarkably popular and full of questions about sex. These more traditional sex advice media have been joined by a whole host of online contributions to the genre, offered by media organizations, charities, and individuals on blogs and social networks. So what does sex advice literature have to say on the subject of consent?

The authors of *Mediated Intimacy: Sex Advice in Media Culture*[20] investigated precisely this question by looking at a range of books, newspaper problem pages, and websites, and the results are dispiriting to say the least. Consent as a topic or even index entry is almost completely absent from sex advice books. Not only that, but sex advice literature reproduces many of the problematic and harmful discourses about sex that we discussed in chapter 4, and that make consent such a thorny issue. Like *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, many subscribe to the idea that men and women are fundamentally different when it comes to sex, and that men experience a much stronger sex

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drive. Yet when it comes to talking about how to manage disparities in sexual desire, sex advice literature, particularly for men, frequently encourages coercive and non-consensual behaviors. These can range from mainstream magazines such as *Men's Health* encouraging men to put women under time pressure and question their reasons for refusing sex to niche websites run by "pick-up artists," which read like outright rape manuals.

Mainstream sex advice literature generally subscribes to the "no means no" model of consent: the view that if someone clearly refuses you should not pressure them into sex. By extension, however, this model constructs the absence of a "no" as a "yes." As a result, some experts who dispense sex advice will suggest things like trying out new sexual activities without discussing them first, effectively hoping that you will get away with it. This is problematic in a number of ways and does not encourage an approach to sex and consent that respects others' bodily autonomy. At the same time this literature will also encourage women (especially) to engage in sex even if they do not want it or are not enjoying it—for instance, as a relationship maintenance activity. The juxtaposition of this kind of advice with statements that you should not be coerced into sex may be particularly harmful: it obscures the non-consensual nature of the practices advocated, and makes it more difficult for individuals reading sex advice books and columns to recognize the inherent consent issues involved.

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The one context in which mainstream sex advice literature does acknowledge that there may be pressures involved that can affect individuals' ability to freely consent is in the context of sex advice for young people. In particular, online resources aimed at teenagers cover consent in quite a lot of depth and nuance, discussing factors such as drugs and alcohol, social pressures, the relationship-maintenance approach as a kind of pressure, and young people's concerns about appearing immature or juvenile if they do not engage in sex.

The discrepancy between sex advice for young people, which emphasizes social factors and pressures when it comes to consent, and that for adults, which actively reproduces those exact social pressures, is striking. Yet maybe there is a silver lining here, in that today's young people are tomorrow's adults. They will have grown up with much better sex advice when it comes to consent, and therefore hopefully demand a better quality of sex advice for themselves as adults. And we may even be seeing some changes in mainstream sex advice aimed at adults resulting from the #MeToo campaign. One recent *Men's Health* article, for instance, in discussing the idea of "blue balls," specifically addressed the issue of consent.[21] It stated clearly that if your partner withdraws consent, blue balls are not an excuse to keep going, and suggested that masturbation would resolve the issue without violating your partner's bodily autonomy. For a publication that less than five

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years earlier advocated pressuring women into sex, this is a remarkable turnaround.

Consent in Wider Popular Culture

Representation and discussion of sex and consent is not limited to particular genres or types of culture. Many products of popular culture have something to say on the subject, even if they are not explicitly pornographic, focused on romance, or seeking to give sex advice. Yet explicit consent negotiation is rarely shown in popular culture. Most of the time all we see is an implied progression through the default sexual script. In film and TV especially, some time after the kissing starts (how long exactly will generally depend on the rating of the product), there is a cut to the next morning with some improbably arranged bed sheets covering everything the censors say needs to be covered (and only that). Where sex is visually implied, it is more often than not penile-vaginal intercourse with little negotiation or consideration of alternatives. In these ways popular culture reproduces and reinforces the dominant sexual script and the primacy of penile-vaginal intercourse as *the* sexual act that "counts." Like other instances and reproductions of this script, this makes it more difficult to imagine and negotiate alternatives that may work better for us as individuals,

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taking us instead down one particular path regardless of our consent.

Fortunately, we are beginning to see some exceptions to this monotony of representation, and to the lack of depictions of consent negotiation, though we rarely get both of these in the same product. It is worth considering some specific examples of both developments here, and what they might mean for the possibility of long-term cultural change around consent.

Developments in depicting sexual acts that don't follow the default sexual script tend to be led by TV shows that market themselves as gritty or prestige and are rated for an older audience. They also tend to feature more queer characters and same-gender relationships, both being major vehicles for covering issues of sex beyond the default script. HBO's vampire show *True Blood*, for instance, has both queer representation and some heterosexual scenes that are well outside the bounds of the default sexual script, including representation of BDSM activities. And Netflix's *House of Cards* has at least one memorable scene depicting a man performing cunnilingus.

These developments in how sex is represented in popular culture may allow viewers to begin to think outside the dominant sexual script or validate desires and experiences they have already had in their own lives. Yet the consent negotiation element is absent from them, potentially

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Recent developments in how sex is represented in popular culture may allow viewers of some of these shows to begin to think outside the dominant sexual script.

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leaving those wishing to go off-script without a clear idea of how to do so.

Where we do tend to see more explicit consent negotiation is in content aimed at young audiences or depicting young adults. At the end of Disney's *Frozen*, for instance, Kristoff shyly asks Anna if he can kiss her. The CW network's recent DC Comics adaptation *Black Lightning* has several extended scenes in which teenage characters Khalil and Jennifer discuss and plan the logistics of having sex for the first time, including a discussion of condom use. Some aspects of this are better executed than others. The way the discussion is framed strongly implies that what they mean by sex is penile-vaginal intercourse, following the dominant sexual script. On the other hand, the conversation takes place outside a sexual situation and the characters are given the opportunity to open up and be vulnerable with each other in admitting their sexual inexperience. A final notable example of consent negotiation depicted on screen is the 2010 film adaptation of the graphic novel *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World*, which contains a scene showing explicit consent withdrawal. Scott and his love interest Ramona are making out after a date when Ramona decides she is not in the mood for this or anything else. Scott respects her choice and the two spend the rest of the night cuddling. Significantly, all these examples provide possible scripts for negotiating consent, including

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asking for and giving consent, but also withholding or withdrawing consent.

There have also been a few more recent examples of content aimed at an older audience that both challenges the default sexual script and shows explicit consent negotiation. Two of the main characters in ABC's *How to Get Away with Murder*, for instance, are a mixed HIV status gay couple. Once they find out that one of them is HIV-positive, they have to navigate issues of desire, consent, and safer sex practices, including pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP). The conversations they have are frank and tend to happen outside of sexual situations, while also acknowledging the role of desire and spontaneity in sex.

Action comedies *Deadpool* and *Deadpool 2* contain two scenes of pegging (anal sex where, in this case, a cisgender woman wearing a strap-on is the insertive partner and a man is the receptive partner), and both contain an element of consent negotiation. In the first, Wade withdraws consent, while in the second he initiates the encounter. Both scenes are in keeping with the extremely tongue-in-cheek tone of the film, showing that consent negotiation does not have to be a serious or legalistic process and can be a fun and integral part of everyday sexual practice. These examples show that a more consent-focused representation of sex and sexuality in popular culture is possible, and can be both entertaining and successful.

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We may be seeing some improvements in the representation of sex and consent in popular culture, but there are other ways in which it remains problematic. Particularly when it comes to the representation of marginalized groups and body types, popular culture frequently continues to rely on harmful tropes and construct marginalized subjects as either desexualized or hypersexual in ways that dehumanize them and reproduce some of the more subtle effects of rape culture.

Think, for instance, of Disney's *Moana*. The film features a Disney princess of color who has no love interest or romantic storyline. It is the continuation and extension of a trend seen in films like *Brave* and *Frozen*, where the main characters' goals do not include living "happily ever after" with a man. In *Moana*, there is not even a hint of a romantic relationship for the lead character. The film has received a lot of praise from white feminist critics for this lack of romantic subplot. It shows, they argue, that girls and women can be strong and independent and have adventures of their own, without needing to focus on the prospect of romance, love, or marriage. Critics of color have also praised *Moana* for its representation of Polynesian women, including darker skin, coarse dark hair, and body types that diverge significantly from the slender Disney princess default.

Yet critics of color also express reservations about *Moana*'s lack of a love interest. Some feel that the positive

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representation of women of color is incomplete or undermined by not showing them leading full lives including sexual and romantic relationships. The underlying message here becomes "yes, you can be dark-skinned, have curly dark hair, and have a body type that does not conform to the slender norm; you might even have great adventures, but ultimately, you will be unlovable."[22]

The core of the disagreement here between white critics and women of color comes down to how race informs dominant ideas of appropriate and acceptable femininity. White femininity is traditionally constructed as delicate, fragile, and dependent on male providers who are to be repaid in romance, love, or sex. For white women, then, strength, independence, and an absence of a love interest in media is perceived as breaking traditional gender roles and therefore liberating and empowering.

But the picture is very different when it comes to dominant ideas of black womanhood. The African American feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins has identified several dominant "controlling images" of black women present in American culture. The mammy is a desexualized caregiver devoted to her white charges, an image dating back to black women house slaves, whereas the Jezebel is hypersexualized, promiscuous, and aggressive. The two dominant ideas of black motherhood, the matriarch who emasculates and drives away her male partner and the welfare mother who is a single parent, are also notable for

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denying black women the emotional support of a romantic partnership.[23] Thus for black women, storylines that do not give black women characters a romantic interest, rather than being liberating and empowering, simply reproduce elements of the controlling images and tropes used to exert power over their lives.

We saw in chapter 4 that this becomes an issue in relation to sexual consent because both desexualization and hypersexualization are wielded as instruments of power, used to control and dehumanize some groups of people. And desexualized individuals commonly find it difficult to refuse sexual or romantic advances, or even tend to seek out sex that is otherwise not wanted in order to reaffirm their sexuality. So by offering desexualized representations of women of color, popular culture products like *Moana* reinforce some of the controlling images that limit the ability of women of color to fully exercise agency in their sexual and romantic lives.

The desexualization of black women, in popular culture and elsewhere, also puts asexual and aromantic black people in a double bind: on the one hand, desexualization itself is harmful to allosexual black people, but on the other hand, the resistance to that desexualization frequently takes the form of insisting that sexual and romantic relationships are necessary for a character to be truly fleshed out and leading a full life. This in turn reproduces compulsory sexuality, creating the kind of climate where

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We all bring different experiences to our readings of media, resulting in different interpretations. What one person finds empowering may be oppressive to another.

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asexual and aromantic people struggle to articulate their experiences and desires and feel pressured to engage in sexual and romantic relationships they may not want.

A lack or representation of healthy romantic relationships also affects groups other than black women. Fat women, disabled people, and older people, among others, are not only desexualized in popular culture but are frequently entirely absent, providing them with even fewer opportunities to see themselves reflected in culture and to draw from it sexual and romantic scripts that help them exercise agency and meaningfully negotiate consent.

Media and popular culture of all kinds does shape the way we think about sex, about our own sexuality, about the kinds of sex we should and should not be having—regardless of our age or sexual experience. But it does this in complex ways that are not reducible to simple cause-and-effect statements. We all bring different experiences to our readings of media, resulting in different interpretations. What one person finds empowering may be oppressive to another. That media effects are complex and highly individualized, however, does not mean that we should not look at media overall critically and seek to understand where it broadly speaking reproduces or challenges harmful dominant discourses and sexual scripts. As a key social institution and source of sexual scripts for most of us, media and popular culture have an important role to play in any future shift from a rape culture to a culture of consent.

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Sexual Consent

By: Milena Popova

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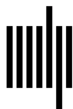

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