WE FEED OFF EACH OTHER': EMBODIMENT, PHENOMENOLOGY AND LISTENER RECEPTIVITY OF NIRVANA’S IN UTERO

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A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2006

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ABSTRACT

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Despite the fact that listening to recorded music is a predominant form of human interaction with music in general, music scholarship often continues to classify listening as a passive form of reception in comparison to the “activity” of actual music performance. This thesis presents the idea that music listening is actually an embodied and agentive form of reception that varies according to different listeners, their listening strategies, and other surrounding contexts. In order to provide detailed analysis of this assertion, Nirvana’s 1993 album *In Utero* is the primary recording that this thesis examines, arguing that the album contains specific embodied properties that ultimately allow for embodied forms of listening and responses within the musical experience. Phenomenological reasoning and scholarship from popular music studies, history, cultural studies, and other humanities fields contribute to the central argument.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe an oversized thank you to the following friends and family for their support: Pat and Priscilla Martin, Veronica Martin, Linda Coleson, and my colleagues in the Popular Culture department. Aaron Weinacht and Patrick Blythe earn special thanks for their continuing willingness to participate in arguments and theories that, as always, range from prescient to ridiculous. Kandace Virgin also deserves my thanks and love for patiently tolerating my stubbornness and need to constantly work ahead, as well as my other idiosyncrasies.

Several academic mentors made this thesis possible over the course of many years. It is impossible to imagine even being in this program without the time and effort that Carolyn Malone and Rene Marion were willing to invest in my thesis in Ball State University’s graduate history program. I hope that the state of my work today will make them proud. Jeremy Wallach has been an excellent advisor who constantly challenges and critiques my research, yet encourages my propensity for interdisciplinary scholarship and trusts my general intellectual intuition. With his guidance, I have gone from knowing nothing about music scholarship to possibly having a future in the discipline, all in less than eighteen months. Becca Cragin and Angela Nelson have offered very helpful feedback on this project, and I am thankful that they were willing just to serve on my committee. Daniel Cavicchi at Brown University and Harris Berger at Texas A&M University warmly accepted my unsolicited questions about this project despite never having met me. Additionally, the latter read multiple sections of this thesis and provided feedback that was vital to its methodology. I hope to thank them in person someday.
Finally, my love for music ultimately underpins my academic fascination with the issues that this thesis addresses. The following artists and bands provided me with memorable embodied listening experiences during my period of research and writing: Arab Strap; Bob Mould; DragonForce (“Through the fire and the flames/WE CARRY ON!”); Mogwai; New Order; Q and Not U; Stars; The Twilight Singers; Xiu Xiu; and many others. As for Nirvana, my epiphany while listening to them—which I detail in the pages ahead—is only one of countless powerful moments I have experienced with their music in the last fourteen-plus years.
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INTRODUCTION

For many of us, our primary interaction with music on a daily basis is simply through the activity of listening to music and our corresponding responses. Nevertheless, most music scholars continue to believe in, as music scholar Daniel Cavicchi astutely notes, a “juxtaposition between active playing and passive listening,” thereby dismissing listeners in a culturally determinist manner similar to that of Theodor Adorno and the Frankfurt School. Yet Cavicchi argues that such a characterization “is quite contrary to the musical experience of many people…and automatically prevents a deeper understanding of what their musical experience entails.” Thus, the question that remains is not whether the study of listening is an important contribution to music scholarship; rather, it is how we begin to approach such a topic.

The analytical concept of embodiment is one potentially fruitful way of approaching the subject of listener reception. In his essay “Embodiment and Cultural Phenomenology,” anthropologist Thomas Csordas poses the following premise concerning embodiment:

If embodiment is an existential condition in which the body is the subjective source or intersubjective ground of experience, then studies under the rubric of embodiment are not “about” the body per se. Instead, they are about culture and experience insofar as these can be understood from the standpoint of bodily being-in-the-world. They require what I would call a cultural

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2 While Adorno believed in the constructive nature of listening to “serious” classical music, he felt that those who listened to popular music eventually lost their ability to discern complex musical elements, focusing instead upon songs because they are a hit or contain a catchy melody. See Adorno, “On Popular Music,” in Essays on Music, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 437-468.
3 Cavicchi, 10. Also, see Cavicchi, Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning among Springsteen Fans (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 108-133 for a detailed discussion of how Bruce Springsteen fans approach listening and musical meaning.
As Csordas argues, looking at embodiment from the perspective of phenomenology essentially allows us to consider questions of both “perceptual experience” and “mode of presence and engagement in the world” from an individual, subjective perspective. Likewise, in her recent study *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, film scholar Vivian Sobchack finds that phenomenology “focuses on the phenomena of experience and their meaning as spatially and temporally embodied, lived, and valued by an objective subject,” thereby allowing for the examination of embodied experience within its surrounding social and historical contexts. She provides a vivid example of this analytical process by recounting how watching *The Piano* affected her bodily senses. As she writes, her reaction to the film “was a heightened instance of our common sensuous experience at the movies…to experience weight, suffocation, and the need for air; to take flight in kinetic exhilaration even as we are relatively bound to our theater seats; to be knocked backward by a sound…” Sobchack views the cinematic film experience as one where our carnal senses (hearing, sight, touch, taste, and smell) largely determine our affective comprehension and reaction to what is on the screen.

Yet although Sobchack is privileging the *oculocentric* (visual-based) form of cinema in her phenomenological description, we can just as easily apply her words to the

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5 Ibid., 143-145.
7 Ibid., 61-65.
8 Ibid., 76.
**audiocentric** (aural-based) experience of listening to music. After all, music listeners often experience emotional weight and impact, “take flight” or “lose themselves” within the sonic textures of a particularly good song, and are “moved” (in both a literal and figurative sense) or even “knocked backward” by the polyphonic structure of the music. These reactions are a byproduct of what philosopher Alfred Schutz calls the “mutual tuning-in relationship,” or the immediate and present experience between music performers and listeners that allows meaning and responses to emerge.\(^9\) Moreover, although Schutz bases his theory on live music performances, recorded music is also capable of creating these shared musical experiences that lead to embodied forms of reception in the listener. Yet while scholars are slowly beginning to develop research on the presence of embodiment within live music performances,\(^11\) such studies favor the perspectives of performers over those of listeners. Embodiment is even more noticeably absent in regards to research on recorded music, even though ethnomusicologist Jeremy Wallach states that the format naturally contains not just a “material” presence, but also an “audiotactile” quality that “literally moves the listener.”\(^12\)

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\(^9\) In *I See a Voice: Deafness, Language, and the Senses—A Philosophical History* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1999), Jonathan Reé writes, “The idea that auditory perception is passive compared with seeing and looking seems to forget...that hearing and listening may also, in their way, be means of active inquiry, and methods of orienting oneself in the world” (53). Because of the historical privileging of sight and looking as the primarily “active” and essential form of human sensory experience, hearing and listening appear more passive in comparison—thus arguably influencing how Adorno and other music scholars have approached the subject. For an excellent discussion of this topic, see Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: The Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 10-19.


Consequently, this thesis presents the idea that listening to recorded music is an embodied activity that results in the listener’s corporeal, agentive response. The two primary questions that I examine are 1) how embodiment actually arises from the relationship between recorded music and the listener; and 2) the dynamic nature of potential embodied responses that the listener subsequently experiences from their reception of that music, and how surrounding social and cultural contexts impact those responses. In order to answer these questions, I frequently rely upon phenomenological analysis and reasoning to establish the ways in which embodiment relates to both music recordings and listening to these recordings. I also employ an interdisciplinary methodology that will include both empirical and theoretical scholarship from the primary fields of music scholarship (musicology, ethnomusicology, and popular music studies), as well as history, anthropology, and cultural studies. Additionally, I draw upon various non-scholarly sources concerning popular music, such as magazine and Internet articles and interviews, as a means of providing both necessary context and relevant examples. Finally, there are several sections in my study where I use self-reflexive personal descriptions in order to concretely establish and elaborate upon my arguments. I utilize this last approach as a means of broadening my examination of the general possibilities of embodied experience and response, as opposed to creating a one-sided, \textit{a priori} investigation.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{13} Cultural anthropologist Charlotte Aull Davies offers a discussion of autobiography’s importance for ethnographic projects in her study \textit{Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others} (London: Routledge, 1999), 178-189. As she notes, “The perspective of this book is to argue that an informed reflexivity is compatible with, indeed is essential for, both a realist ontology and a commitment to social scientific knowledge in the sense of knowledge that is based in, and can inform us about, a real social world and that is public and open to critical analysis” (178). Also, Sobchack utilizes self-reflexive descriptions throughout \textit{Carnal Thoughts} as a means of engendering expanded analysis about embodied experience (she explains her methodological reasoning on pages 6-7), as does cultural anthropologist
In order to limit what is already a broad investigation, Nirvana’s 1993 album *In Utero* is the specific recording that serves as the focal point of my study. I primarily choose this particular band and album for two reasons. First, besides becoming widely regarded as one of the strongest and most creative popular music bands of the 1990s, Nirvana served as the flagship band for the nationwide “alternative” rock movement of the early 1990s, became a primary signifier for the media-driven cultural construction of Generation X during that period, and helped legitimize the re-entrance of punk rock into the musical mainstream. Therefore, it is relatively unsurprising that in addition to a plethora of popular literature on Nirvana that consists mostly of personal and historical details concerning lead singer/guitarist/songwriter Kurt Cobain and the band, there exists a respectable amount of academic work on the band as well. Nevertheless, the current scholarship remains somewhat limited in its scope, with the predominant subjects concerning the band’s struggles with authenticity, their efforts to define their own musical and visual aesthetics, and textual analyses of Cobain’s lyrics. Moreover, as musicologist Mark Mazullo comments in his excellent essay “The Man Whom the World


Sold: Kurt Cobain, Rock’s Progressive Aesthetic, and the Challenges of Authenticity,” very few scholars have actually bothered to discuss Nirvana’s music beyond a superficial level, choosing instead to highlight Kurt and his lyrics.\(^{17}\) Therefore, a study that considers the sum of Nirvana’s musical components—lyrics, vocals, and actual music—from the standpoint of phenomenology and embodiment not only advances our knowledge of the latter subjects, but also provide a fresh academic perspective on the band as well.

Secondly, while all music is visceral in the sense that it contains the ability to engage the listener in a corporeal manner, Nirvana was a particularly and uniquely visceral band in nearly all aspects of their creative output. The contents of their two major-label studio albums, 1991’s *Nevermind*\(^ {18}\) and *In Utero*—including cover art, liner notes, lyrics and music—all contain a high degree of corporeal themes and imagery, which the band often applies in abstract and metaphorical manners. Moreover, Nirvana’s mixture of punk, heavy metal, and traditional rock and pop elements resulted in songs that were catchy, yet corporeally heavy and aggressive from a sonic standpoint. This is especially true for *In Utero*, an album that explicitly and pervasively represents bodily pain and suffering, specifically that of Cobain. Against a searing musical backdrop of discordant guitars, thick bass, and massive drum beats, Cobain sings, screams, and howls his way through lyrics that continually revisit themes of death, bodily decay, and human agony. As I establish in my analysis, the result is an album that is powerfully affective, and is likely to stimulate a range of different responses in the listener.

\(^{17}\) Mazullo, 744.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I examine how in order to fully understand listening as an embodied experience, it is also necessary to understand how music recordings themselves both signify and possess embodiment. I specifically identify and analyze three types of embodiment that are present within recorded music. First, lyrics are often a form of embodied representation because of the subjective and experiential nature of their creation. Secondly, what Roland Barthes terms as “the ‘grain’ of the voice” signifies, or “indexes,” the body from which it emerges during performance, and is potentially capable of affecting others. Finally, because recorded music occupies space and volume, it contains a materiality, or palpable sonic presence, that correlates with both embodied lyrics and vocals. In order to explain these different types of embodiment, I use several examples from Nevermind throughout the chapter, with the additional intention of contextualizing Nirvana’s relationship to embodiment in the period preceding In Utero. These examples demonstrate how we can begin to understand the affective nature of recorded music from the standpoint of its own embodiment, while recognizing that we cannot gain a more complete picture without considering the role of the listener.

The second chapter continues this examination by relying upon a phenomenological approach to focus upon the relationship between In Utero and the subjective listener. I first provide a brief overview of phenomenology and argue that theories such as Schutz’s “mutual tuning-in relationship” and ethnomusicologist Harris

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Berger’s interpretation of “partial sharing,” help us to understand how recorded music communicates in a manner that is fundamentally beyond spoken language. As Schutz argues, we can use speech to describe certain aspects of music, but it is only by participating in the “experience of the ‘We’” —where the “stream of consciousness” of both the musical performer and the listener are “lived through in simultaneity”—that one can truly feel and grasp what music means. Therefore, phenomenology can help explain the creation of a relationship where the listener ascertains the meaningful, embodied expressions of music performers within the recording, which establishes a basis for how the listener will respond to what he/she hears.

In the second section of this chapter, I turn to a detailed, phenomenological-based analysis of In Utero and its forms of embodiment. Through an examination of the album’s cover art, lyrical metaphors, vocal performances, and instrumentation, I find that the shared embodiment that emerges between the album and the listener specifically involves ideas of visceral, personal pain. Although we can consider some of these themes of pain to be abstract or unclear in their referential meaning, Cobain’s lyrics and songwriting became darker and more violent in nature as his personal problems began to worsen after the success of Nevermind. As a result, my analysis details several direct and discernable links between Kurt’s corporeal suffering and embodied representations in his lyrics (notably his use of feminine tropes), the evident pain in his vocals, and the noisy, edgy instrumentation of his guitar, Krist Novoselic’s bass, and Dave Grohl’s drums.

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21 Harris Berger, Metal, Rock, and Jazz: Perception and the Phenomenology of Musical Experience (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), 21-22.
22 Wallach, 36.
23 Schutz, 115-116.
My third chapter completes this investigation by considering listening as an agentive, embodied experience that varies according to the listener and the surrounding contexts of the experience. I first present a brief outline of why listening is embodied, thus arguing against traditional, determinist-oriented models of listening. I then consider four factors that are common within listening experiences, but also assure that those experiences are never static or predictable: the cultural identity of the listener; the listener’s ability to use music as a means of recalling and creating memories and “places”; the dialectical relation between listening and the surrounding aural environment; and the use of personal stereos and headphones in listening. It is in this section that my own self-reflexive experiences of listening to In Utero—specifically, an experience of listening at my grandmother’s house when I was fourteen—that creates the framework for these findings, though I will rely upon several different areas of research to expand my personal reflections and consider the general possibilities that can arise from listening to the album.

In their 1988 essay “Start Making Sense! Musicology Wrestles with Rock,” musicologists Susan McClary and Robert Walser argue that the field’s failure to adequately and meaningfully describe how music impacts us, or “kicks butt,” is “the single greatest failure” in the field. Since that article, both scholars have used musicological methods to explain music’s affective ability to listeners by approaching the body as a textual site of musical discourse and studying the structure of semiotic codes

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and meaning in music. While these approaches are certainly important in furthering our understanding about music’s ability to move us, we also need music analysis that places our corporeal selves—not just a secondary discussion of our bodies—at the forefront as well. By providing an inquiry about the role of phenomenological embodiment in music, it is my hope that this thesis contributes to our knowledge about how music impacts us and how we respond.

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CHAPTER 1: NEVERMIND AND THE EMBODIED PROPERTIES OF RECORDED MUSIC

Driving with Nirvana

It was during a weekend in September 2004 that my girlfriend and I went to Muncie, Indiana (where we both previously lived) to pick up a truck that she was purchasing from her grandmother. Since we were driving separate vehicles back, I asked to borrow her copy of Nirvana’s 2002 greatest-hits collection, simply titled Nirvana,\(^1\) since I had none of my own music to play on the two-and-a-half hour drive back home. As I was driving, the band’s trademark guitar roar filled the truck’s small interior, and I began to keep time with the music by pounding my hand against the steering wheel. For me, this was not out of the ordinary—since I’m old enough to remember and appreciate Nirvana’s truncated period of stardom in the early 1990s, listening to them is like affectionately revisiting old, forgotten love letters. You will never have the same amount of emotions and passion that you once did, but such texts remind you of those feelings in a compelling manner.

Yet this time around, there was something different. It was when “In Bloom” came on—a dynamic mid-tempo rocker from Nevermind—that I began to consider Nirvana’s relationship to the body. Within the song, Cobain specifically employs corporeal metaphors to create quasi-abstract lyrical meanings. The line “Spring is here again/Reproductive glands,” for example, evokes the shared modes of reproduction between nature and humans. One can find similar lyrical allusion to the body throughout both Nevermind and In Utero—it is not a stretch to suggest that Cobain uses the body as a motif within nearly every song on those albums. In addition to this factor, Nirvana’s

\(^1\) Nirvana, Nirvana, David Geffen Company 0694935072, 2002, compact disc.
music is incredibly visceral, even when it possesses a polished production and mixing (as it does on *Nevermind*). On many of their songs, drummer Dave Grohl’s huge fills lead into distorted, massive-sounding choruses where Cobain’s guitar and Krist Novoselic’s bass combine to assault the listener. Even during the band’s quieter and more subdued moments, there exists an underlying primal tension that threatens to burst to the surface at any point—the sonic equivalent of a particularly good suspense movie. Then there is the nature of Cobain’s voice. Especially during the band’s later stages, his voice sounded as if Scotch tape held it together—without caution, it would shatter and undo its precarious binding. As his personal life became increasingly worse after *Nevermind*, his vocals belied the downfall—hoarseness and sharp splinters permeate even his crooning on *In Utero*. Quite simply, his voice became the sound of human pain. When you consider all of these combined elements, it is not surprising that playing Nirvana’s music in the confined quarters of a moving vehicle represented a powerful, *embodied* experience for me. Just as the band implicates the body in multiple manners throughout their songs, I responded through my own bodily responses by pounding the tempo with my hand and bobbing my head, driving increasingly faster all the while.

While my initial revelations during that trip were not quite as expansive as what I just discussed, it is that particular incident that provided the initial impetus for this entire project. What initially made the experience so meaningful for me was that I had discovered, in a rudimentary manner, the connection between Nirvana’s music and myself as a subjective listener, contributing to my corporeal reactions. It demonstrated to me that music listening is profoundly *active* in that it involves our conscious bodily engagement with what we hear, even if the music is a recording that we have heard
several times over. Yet in developing his theory that music listening is a passive act, Theodor Adorno relies upon the idea that the repeatable experience of listening to music recordings—in particular, popular music recordings—is inadequate for the development of critical listening skills; indeed, it is this type of musical experience that, in his view, primarily leads to regressive listening practices.² Besides reifying a problematic dichotomy between classical or “serious” music and popular music (which was Adorno’s explicit intent), this idea assumes that, as he specifically states, “[s]tructural standardization aims at standard reactions”—in other words, the mechanical processes of the culture industry attempt to modify listener habits for its financial and ideological benefit.³ Consequently, Adorno assumes that the listener eventually develops standardized listening habits that are difficult, if not impossible, to escape.

Subsequent generations of music scholars, sharing Adorno’s sympathy for “serious” music, have commonly perpetuated his negativity towards the everyday practice of listening to music recordings, even while perhaps remaining more open to concepts of listener agency. Edward Said provides a somewhat surprising example of this trend in his writings on music. As he states:

Some years ago Adorno wrote a famous and, I think, correct account of ‘the regression of hearing,’ in which he emphasized the lack of continuity, concentration, and knowledge in the listeners that has made real musical attention more or less impossible…Whether we focus on the repeatable mechanically produced performance available on disc, tape, or video-record, or on the alienating social ritual of the concert itself, with the scarcity of tickets and the staggeringly brilliant technique of the performer achieving roughly the same distancing effect, the listener is in a relatively weak and not entirely admirable position.⁴

⁴ Edward Said, “Performance as an Extreme Occasion,” in Musical Elaborations (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 3. Although Said departs from Adorno on the function of concerts (as Adorno views concerts in a more positive manner), his statement on recordings does not. It must be said that Said’s consideration of Adorno as an intellectual hero almost certainly influences his position on this topic.
While we perhaps best recognize Said for his efforts as a public intellectual to promote progressive forms of political resistance and self-determination, the above statement indicates what is an essentially conservative opinion on music and its impact upon listeners. Nevertheless, the development of popular music genres over the past few decades (especially rock and roll) demonstrate that music recordings, existing within particular social and historical contexts, are not only capable of capturing the aural qualities that we associate with live musical performances, but also allow for an infinite variety of listener responses that, in turn, profoundly impact musical development. In short, just as sociologist Tia DeNora argues that music itself is “active,” music recordings offer active and dynamic musical experiences.

Given the above ideas, this chapter elaborates upon how embodied properties might contribute to the active nature of listening to recorded music, thereby establishing the initial aspect of my theory that the experience of listening to music recordings—from the production of recorded music itself to our reactions—is a thoroughly embodied process. I specifically analyze three types of embodiment within recorded music and their interrelation with one another: embodied representation within music lyrics; Roland Barthes’ idea of the “the ‘grain’ of the voice” and its ability to both signify embodiment through indexical properties and deeply impact the listener; and Jeremy Wallach’s notion of “sonic materiality” and its emotionally salient potential. As a result, I focus more upon the embodied musical “object” itself and its potential impact, while later chapters in

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7 Barthes, 293-300.
8 Wallach, 34-64.
this thesis involve detailed considerations of the role of the listener. In order to provide specific explanations of these recorded embodied properties, I explore how Nirvana’s Nevermind relates to each property and the significance that results. Since this thesis primarily focuses on In Utero, my explorations in this chapter are intended to provide contextualization for the period before In Utero, specifically some of the factors that would eventually influence the forms of embodiment that appear within that album.

Lyrics as Embodied Representation

Within the increasingly interdisciplinary climate of humanities scholarship, the concept of representation remains valuable as a theoretical means of examining issues of cultural and social identity. Yet as philosopher Daniel A. Putnam argues, it remains difficult to apply representational theories to the study of music because they commonly rely upon a “linguistic model” that generally privileges visual representation. Cultural historian Jonathan Sterne documents how Western society has historically interpreted (and continues to interpret) vision as a sense that “bathes us in the clear light of reason,” thus denigrating the epistemological value of our other senses by implication, including hearing. Consequently, visual representation can often contain these a priori assumptions about sight and hearing, making them incompatible with the audiocentric study of music. More specifically, Putnam notes that the “linguistic/visual model” emphasizes “[w]holly rational engagements [that], whatever else they may be, are not at the heart of the aesthetic experience in music.” While music is certainly not purely

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10 Sterne, 14-19.
11 Putnam, 59.
“irrational,” using rational forms of representation to explain music risks overlooking the distinct nature of musical power and affect.

In addition to these issues, applying linguistic-based representational models to music (regardless of visual considerations) raises the common problem of conflating musical and linguistic systems, thus obscuring the clear difference between the two with regards to signification and affectivity. As ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino astutely notes, because most spoken and written words within linguistic systems are “symbols” that are arbitrary “or can be removed from direct connections with their objects,” they “can not [sic] reproduce the feelings and experiences of those objects” that they signify.12 Conversely, he finds that musical forms of signification are inherently direct and non-arbitrary in the feelings and experiences they create. In this manner, Turino’s example reaffirms Putnam’s argument that using linguistic representation to explain music is fundamentally inadequate. In her essay “Untying the Music/Language Knot,” ethnomusicologist Elizabeth Tolbert goes a step further, contending that comparing music and language inevitably results in the “feminization” (or seeming inferiority) of music (as opposed to the stronger, more “masculine” qualities of language), thereby reifying the “binary structures that affirm the dominance of language over music.”13 Her proposed solution is the complete separation of “intertwining discourses on ‘music,’ ‘language,’ and ‘human nature.’ ”14 This argument is specifically crucial with regard to representation,15 for it advocates not only the examination of music according to its own

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14 Ibid., 89-90.
15 In making this statement, I slightly disagree with Tolbert’s overall argument, feeling that language theories can help produce beneficial music analyses. For example, see Barthes, “The Grain of the
specific and unique properties, but also, specifically, a consideration of “representational systems” without the ideological baggage of linguistic models, making them easier to incorporate within musical analysis.\textsuperscript{16}

Yet despite the plausibility of Turino’s and Tolbert’s claims, they do not address the question of how to properly approach popular music lyrics (or music lyrics in other genres, for that matter) and their forms of representation. Before discussing vocals and instrumentation, I feel that it is necessary to address and elaborate upon this question first in order to establish the legitimacy of lyrical meaning within the musical experience. On the one hand, it is apparent—and oftentimes crucial—that the consideration of lyrics, unlike vocals and instrumentation, require linguistic analysis. Nevertheless, it is equally as crucial to remember that lyrics exist in relation to and gain significance from the musical and sonorous elements that surround them. What this means is that while it is, at times, necessary to examine lyrics from a linguistic angle, we should not resort to facile, logocentric interpretations that supersede the musical nature of lyrics within particular song forms. (Daniel Cavicchi outlines how his research on Bruce Springsteen fandom initially fell into this trap, as he first concentrated upon lyrical meanings at the expense of other elements in the songs.\textsuperscript{17}) In short, lyrics are not self-sustaining in meaning, but instead derive a primary portion of their “identity” (so to speak) from music. While accepting this idea necessitates walking an analytical tightrope—lyrics, after all, often provide seemingly transparent meanings—it allows us to sidestep the problem of overly privileging linguistic modes of thought.

\textsuperscript{16} Tolbert, 89.
\textsuperscript{17} Cavicchi, \textit{Tramps Like Us}, 110-113.
Besides emphasizing the inherent musicality of lyrics, it is also important to note that in addition to their ability to indicate meaningful social, cultural and historical contexts (much like music),\(^\text{18}\) lyrics can be highly personalized and/or subjective in their form and content. Humanities scholars Richard Leppert and George Lipsitz provide an apt example in their 1990 essay on Hank Williams. In surveying the common lyrical themes of Williams’ songs in the context of 1950s American normative culture, they note that their analysis “focuses on the ways in which he gave an individual voice to collective fears and hopes about the body, romance, gender roles and the family. We wish to locate these issues variously in the site/sight of his physical body, his voice, his lyrics and his music.”\(^\text{19}\) What this ultimately means is that when Williams sings about a subject such as the potential troubles of romantic relationships (especially from a first-person or second-person perspective, such as “Your Cheating Heart”), his lyrics exist not only in dialectical relation to the American social fabric’s upholding of the nuclear family during that period, but also as a subjective testament to his own struggles in positioning himself within that social fabric. As Leppert and Lipsitz write, Williams’ ability to reveal the “structural weaknesses within the idealised nuclear family and its promises of happiness” stems from his own uneasiness with that particular ideal and its corresponding dominant forms of masculinity.\(^\text{20}\)

At first, Williams’ lyrics may not seem very extraordinary aside from its contribution to his status as a groundbreaking country musician. Yet if we accept Thomas Csordas’ definition of embodiment as “an indeterminate methodological field

\(^{18}\) Ibid.: “Several scholars…have emphasized the role of historical and social context in shaping musical meaning…” (113).

\(^{19}\) Richard Leppert and George Lipsitz, “‘Everybody’s Lonesome for Somebody’: Age, the Body and Experience in the Music of Hank Williams,” *Popular Music* 9:3 (October 1990), 260 (emphasis added).

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 268.
defined by perceptual experience and by mode of presence and engagement in the world,\textsuperscript{21} then I would argue that they exhibit how lyrics are capable of being not just “merely” representative, but specifically embodied forms of representation as well.\textsuperscript{22} Williams provides a subjective and incarnate spirit to his lyrics, thus commonly belying his “mode of presence and engagement in the world.” With respect to my argument, Kurt Cobain similarly provides specifically embodied lyrics throughout \textit{Nevermind}, which form a partial contextual grounding for Nirvana’s use of embodiment on \textit{In Utero}. Yet if William “gives a body” (so to speak) to his lyrics by interjecting personal subjectivity into his subject matter, Cobain’s embodied lyrics are slightly different in that he often literally implies the body both directly and indirectly. In his biography on Cobain, \textit{Heavier Than Heaven}, Charles M. Cross finds that even before Nirvana formed, Cobain possessed a peculiar interest in the human body and its functions, which often appeared in the paintings, sculptures, and other artistic works that he created on a regular basis.\textsuperscript{23} As the band developed in the late 1980s, he increasingly began to use corporeality as a form of representation within his lyrics, leading to its pervasive presence on \textit{Nevermind}.

Given Cobain’s use of embodiment within his lyrics on the album, the question remains whether the lyrics are self-referential in their meaning. Upon examination, some are arguably a reflection of his personal struggles—as he had already long struggled with anger, self-loathing, and drug and alcohol abuse, as well as a chronic case of debilitating stomach pain—while others appear to be more personally removed in their meaning. As Cross notes about Cobain’s lyric-writing process during the album’s recording sessions,

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{21} Csordas, 145.
\item\textsuperscript{22} It should be noted that Leppart and Lipsitz limit themselves to a textual discussion of “the body,” similar to Walser and McClary.
\item\textsuperscript{23} Cross, 94.
\end{itemize}
“Many lines [that would appear on the album] left the listener unclear as to whether he was singing about external or internal circumstances, defying explanation though communicating an emotional tone.”24 The song “In Bloom” exhibits how many of Nevermind’s songs contain both abstract and concrete forms of embodied representation. During the chorus, Cobain employs embodied images as he nearly screams, “He’s the one/Who likes all the pretty songs/And he likes to sing along/And he likes to shoot his gun/But he knows not what it means.” This leads Nirvana biographer Michael Azerrad to plausibly conclude that the song is an indictment of “the jocks and shallow mainstream types who had begun to blunder into Nirvana shows after Bleach [Nirvana’s first studio album].”25 In this case, Cobain’s use of the word “gun” serves as a corporeal metaphor for hypermasculinity—a socially constructed pattern of behavior that he consciously sought to avoid in his personal life and creative output. Yet in the song’s verses, Cobain employs embodied images concerning reproduction and death, matching lines such as “Spring is here again/Reproductive glands” with “We can ask for more/Nature is a whore.” These particular lyrics do not appear to have any connection to those in the chorus, and are therefore more resistant to detailed interpretation.

“Smells Like Teen Spirit”—the first single from the album that contributed heavily to Nevermind’s commercial and critical success—offers another example of embodied representation that result in meanings that are somewhat difficult to discern. While Cobain addresses much of the lyrics in the first person, lines such as “A mulatto/An albino/a mosquito/my libido” do not seem to have an immediate meaning in relation to the surrounding lyrics. Early interpretations (like Azerrad’s) hold that the

24 Ibid., 182.
25 Azerrad, 215; Nirvana, Bleach, Sub Pop SP34b, 1989, compact disc.
song is an indictment of the contemporary generation, or that it addresses the musical underground’s ability to inflict major change within corporate music. He describes the lyrics as reflecting “confusion and anger” over ideas that contradict each other, like “I’m worse at what I do best/And for this gift I feel blessed” during the second verse.

Conversely, Cross argues that the lyrics actually relate more to the source of the song title: one of Cobain’s friends had once spray-painted “Kurt smells like teen spirit” on the bedroom wall of Cobain’s house, referring to his sexual relationship with musician Tobi Vail. When Vail broke off the relationship, his writing expressed bitterness over what he perceived to be her rejection of him—thus, as Cross documents, some of the lyrics embody these bitter feelings (“She’s over bored and self-assured”). Nevertheless, other lines (such as “I feel stupid and contagious”) preface the alienation that Cobain often felt in regards to the music mainstream. Therefore, the lyrics of “Smells Like Teen Spirit” create contradictory ideas out of embodiment and other themes, though perhaps this type of representation mirrors Kurt’s own internal conflict.

What Cobain’s lyrics on Nevermind offer us, then, is a way to understand the influence of embodiment within his lyrics. Moreover, the above discussion demonstrates that we should not view embodied lyrical representation through a linguistic model, but instead as musical elements that are important on their own, yet gain their true significance in relation to other musical elements. As I further elaborate in this chapter and the following chapter, Cobain’s lyrics become more coherent in their subjective

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26 Azerrad, 213.
27 Ibid. Additionally, Creswell notes that “pairs of oppositions” appear frequently in Nirvana’s songs (81).
28 Cross, 167-169. The words “teen spirit” refers to the women’s deodorant of the same name, which Vail used.
29 Ibid., 169.
meaning through analysis of how embodiment also relates to vocal and instrumental performance.

The Embodied Vocal “Grain” and Indexicality

As I argue in the above section, lyrics operate in relation to other musical properties, particularly vocals and instrumentation. Sociologist Simon Frith asserts that the former is especially important to consider alongside lyrical analysis since the literal human voice complicates the “voice” or “voices” that appear within lyrics.\(^\text{30}\) This is especially true when we consider embodiment’s involvement in this process. As Frith elaborates:

> The voice is a sound produced physically, by the movement of muscles and breath in the chest and throat and mouth; to listen to a voice is to listen to a physical event, to the sound of a body...we don’t expect voices to need anything outside the body in order to be heard. And this is clearly one reason why the voice seems particularly expressive of the body; it gives the listener access to it without mediation.\(^\text{31}\)

Under this description, the voice is the primary aural conduit that exists between the body and the outer world. Revisiting Sobchack’s argument that embodiment involves a conflation of the subjective and objective,\(^\text{32}\) we can then say that the voice is an embodied act that arises from our innards, or flesh, as a subjective form of expression and emerges from our objective body outward, constituting ourselves within the larger world. In this manner, as humanities scholar Steven Connor identifies, vocal acts are embodied performances: “My voice, as the passage of articulate sound from me to the world...is something happening, with purpose, duration, and direction.”\(^\text{33}\) As long as we have vocal

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 191.
\(^{32}\) Sobchack, 4.
abilities, we have the ability to create an infinite variety of embodied performances that, even after having departed from the body, are able to signify their point of origin.

Turning back to the musical voice, we can assume that all vocal performances within music are inherently embodied on a basic level. The question then becomes what those performances tell us about embodiment, and the types and qualities of signification that are involved in the process. Roland Barthes’ “The Grain of the Voice”—as commonly cited as it remains—is particularly useful for exploring this specific subject. In analyzing the nature of vocal performances, Barthes distinguishes between what he calls the “pheno-song,” involving “all the features which belong to the structure of language being sung,” and the “geno-song,” which includes volume and other factors that comprise the “diction” that lies underneath the pheno-song. The “grain” occurs in the space between the geno-song and pheno-song, and is “the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue”—or, as he notes later in the essay, “the body in the voice as it sings.” As art historian Douglas Kahn explains, “For Barthes, every rake of the wind across the larynx superseded the pneuma [vital spirit] of the breath and soul with a jouissance [roughly translated, intense pleasure or bliss] of the body.” Indeed, as sociologist Paul Filmer notes, the “grain” ultimately “articulates” the qualities of the geno-song (such as volume and timbre); this articulation leads to the corporeal jouissance that is supposed to be a primary indication of the “grain.”

34 Wallach, 42.
36 Barthes, 295, 299 (emphasis in original).
38 Filmer, 98.
With this definition, Barthes contrasts the vocal performances of two different Russian cantors—Fischer-Dieskau and Panzera—as examples. He describes Fischer-Dieskau as a singer that is extremely proficient from a technical standpoint—skills that fall under the category of pheno-song—yet remains unable to convey a sense of jouissance through geno-song. Conversely, Panzera also demonstrates a mastery over pheno-song, but is also able to convey his lyrics in (what Barthes assumes to be) a more material and therefore more meaningful manner that leads to jouissance. This comparison raises two critical factors in determining the presence of a vocal “grain.” First, Barthes indicates that the “grain” is a unique ability that, unlike the embodied nature that already exists in the voice, is not inherent—“there is such a thing as an ‘ungrained’ voice, a voice that conceals its own means of physical production,” as Frith notes. This bifurcation exists independently of genre, commercial success, and even (as the above example demonstrates) technical ability—rather, it is the singer’s ability to convey a fundamentally embodied spirit within his/her singing that determines the “grain.” Secondly, the key for Barthes is that a singer whose performances indicate a vocal “grain” is able to move beyond “what in music can be said” by creating signified meanings that emerge from within the body. For example, in comparing the Russian cantors, Barthes argues that Fischer-Dieskau relies too much on his lungs (“a stupid organ,” as he comments) to sing, thus hindering his ability to control his breath in a manner that will help conjure jouissance. Panzer, on the other hand, uses the throat and its nearby elements (“the tongue, the glottis, the teeth, the mucous membranes, the nose”) as a means of clearly signifying the incarnate nature of his vocals that leads to the “grain”

39 Barthes, 296.
40 Frith, 191.
41 Barthes, 297 (emphasis in original).
and jouissance—hence Kahn’s statement that correctly identifies Barthes’ emphasis upon the larynx.\textsuperscript{42} I do not believe that what amounts to Barthes’ personal preference between singing styles in this case is of particular importance. Rather, it is his idea that a singer’s ability to signify the body through performance—and the resulting jouissance—ultimately determines the presence/absence of a vocal “grain” that deserves further exploration.

Barthes’ conceptualization of signification derives from his own interpretation of semiology, the scientific model of signs that he commonly uses as a mode of analysis throughout his writing on popular culture. Within this model of semiology, signs consist of a symbol (a signifier) and its referent object (a signified), creating an arbitrarily constructed relationship that occurs within specific social and historical contexts.\textsuperscript{43} In contrast, I would like to argue that Turino’s work concerning semiotics (a signification system that American scientist/philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce developed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century) and, in particular, the Peircean concept of indexicality, is highly applicable to the embodied signification of the vocal “grain.” In considering the potential of Peircean semiotics to explain musical experience, Turino argues that it defines “the concept of sign in the widest, most flexible way as something that stands for something else to someone in some way.”\textsuperscript{44} In other words, not only does the concept of sign represent an object, but that relationship also creates an effect (or

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Ibid., 296.}
\footnote{For a basic overview of this subject, see Dominic Strinati, \textit{An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture} (New York: Routledge, 2002), 108-119, 123-128.}
\footnote{Turino, 222 (original emphasis removed).}
\end{footnotes}
“interpretant,” in Peircean terminology) in a particular perceiver/observer.\textsuperscript{45} The following diagram\textsuperscript{46} illustrates this pattern:

![](image)

Additionally, as I allude to earlier in this chapter, Turino contends that Peircean forms of signification are direct, as opposed to the arbitrary nature of Barthes’ semiology.\textsuperscript{47} Therefore, he uses Peirce’s theories to not only extrapolate how different forms of signification directly relate to various musical experiences, but also the feelings and meanings (or interpretants) that may result from those experiences.

With this goal in mind, Turino states that the defining factor of musical indexicality is copresence; indexical signs and their objects operate together in real-time, sharing a direct, connected resemblance.\textsuperscript{48} Moreover, this element of copresence exists within the context of everyday experience, making indexical signs highly experiential and contextual in their meaning.\textsuperscript{49} (One example he mentions is the American tradition of signing “The Star-Spangled Banner” before baseball games.) Consequently, indexical signs are able to evoke potentially powerful emotions in the observer—with the example of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” a range of different feelings (patriotism, past memories, boredom) can result from hearing and singing it at a baseball game. How then might

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 222-223.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 223.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 227-228. Turino does note in this section that Peirce recognizes arbitrary semiotic relationships, which he calls “symbols.”
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 227. Also, see Sterne, 130, for a brief explanation of indexicality.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 235.
indexicality relate to the “grain” of the voice? By returning to the triangular diagram of Peircean signification, we find the following:\(^{50}\):

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{Vocal “Grain (Sign)} \\
\text{Jouissance (Interpretant)} \\
\text{Body (Object)}
\end{array}
\]

Because any notion of a vocal “grain” is inseparable from the body of the singer from where it originates, it is possible to imagine the “grain” as a musical sign that is embodied because it directly signifies, or indexes, its corporeal point of origin. Moreover, since Barthes argues that the experience of \textit{jouissance} enables the listener to identify the vocal “grain” in a singer, \textit{jouissance} becomes an embodied interpretant, or tangible effect, that emerges from the copresent relationship between the “grain” and the singer’s body. Accordingly, the concept of indexicality allows us to emphasize the presence of embodiment within both the vocal “grain” itself and the listener’s responsive \textit{jouissance} to that “grain.”

When we consider the “grain” of the voice as an indexical sign within rock music, it becomes apparent that many of the celebrated singers during its history have often lacked superior tone and pitch, yet possess stirring voices that, in comparison to the voices of others, distinctively convey their embodied nature—Bob Dylan and Janis Joplin are two obvious examples. In the same way, Cobain’s vocal performances on \textit{Nevermind} belie a tremendous vocal “grain” that strongly indexes his body in its projection and (for many listeners over the years) is deeply affective, even though his singing is sometimes hoarse and melodically limited. This is not to dismiss the technical aspects of his vocals.

\(^{50}\) Personal correspondence with Jeremy Wallach, December 2005.
altogether—despite the rough elements of his vocals on the final recording, his voice is also often surprisingly smooth. On the album’s softer songs such as “Polly,” he maintains a tuneful croon, with his trademark hoarseness only slightly present. Even on “Smells Like Teen Spirit” and other aggressive songs, Cobain is usually able to smoothly transition between singing and screaming. Yet his “grain” originates more from his ability to create a felt, embodied presence on the album, utilizing all of his vocal techniques, than from these strengths alone. Cobain biographer Azerrad even directly mentions Barthes’ theory of the vocal “grain” in making his contention that Kurt has the “ability to say something about the human condition that goes far beyond merely singing the right lyrics and hitting the right notes.”

During Kurt’s vocal performance on Nevermind, his screaming and attempts to remain in control of his screaming remains among the strongest indices of his body. As Azerrad notes, “Asked to pinpoint the source of his [Kurt’s] pain, he indicates a spot just below his breastbone—it also happens to be exactly where he says his scream originates.” Kurt’s chronic stomach trouble is the “pain” to which Azerrad refers, a mysterious ailment that was never fully diagnosed despite his visits to several different specialists. This physical pain, combined with the depression and emotional pain that supposedly began after his parents divorced, propelled a wholly original, gut-level scream that sounds remarkably powerful on record. The fragile nature of Kurt’s voice only contributes to the “grain” of his scream; it would commonly give out on a daily basis while he was laying vocal tracks for Nevermind. Kurt even resorted to drinking

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51 Azerrad, 231.  
52 Ibid., 305.  
53 Cross, 182; Azerrad, 176.
codeine cough syrup in an attempt to protect his vocal cords.\textsuperscript{54} As a result, while his vocals remain deceptively strong and dynamic throughout the album, Kurt’s scream belies his vocal fragility, making them that much more compelling. This is especially true during the album’s few fleeting moments where Kurt relinquishes control of his voice, such as the final section of the caustic punk exercise “Territorial Pissings.” As the band hurtles into the final chorus, he repeatedly yells the line “Gotta find a way/A better way/A better way…” before unleashing a piercing primal scream that he finishes with a staccato emphasis. Similarly, during the end of another fast song, “Stay Away,” Kurt stretches out a scream that breaks off hoarsely only when he runs out of breath. Such moments signify how his vocal efforts are “supremely rooted in the body,” as Mazullo identifies.\textsuperscript{55}

Further evidence of Cobain’s vocal “grain” comes from how Nirvana’s audience responded (and continues to respond) to his vocal expressivity. During the overwhelming critical and commercial success of \textit{Nevermind} (with sales of 10 million in the United States alone), many people came to see Cobain as the “voice” of Generation X—an artist who captured the culture zeitgeist of apathy and alienation in a way that others could not. Although Cobain flatly rejected any responsibility as the “voice of a generation,”\textsuperscript{56} his ascendance to this particular status partially stems from the belief that \textit{Nevermind}’s content reflected the major concerns and fears of his peers, such as

\textsuperscript{54} Azerrad, 176.

\textsuperscript{55} Mazullo makes this comment in his analysis of Nirvana’s \textit{MTV Unplugged} performance in November 1993, when the band played a cover of David Bowie’s “The Man Who Sold the World.” He compares the “disembodiment of the voice” in the original to Kurt’s “almost heartbreakingly strained” vocals on Nirvana’s version, noting that punk and grunge bands—notably Nirvana—are “supremely rooted in the body” (716).

\textsuperscript{56} Mazullo discusses the struggles that resulted from Cobain’s role as “reluctant spokesperson for a generation” at length (730-737). Additionally, Coyle and Dolan document Cobain’s insistence that his art speaks for himself (21). The actual term “voice of a generation” is generic, and appears in several academic and non-academic writings about Nirvana and Cobain specifically.
distancing themselves from the culture of their baby-boomer parents and coming to terms with contemporary crises, including the burgeoning of AIDS. While Cobain’s lyrics (and the band’s music, as I will begin discussing shortly) certainly contribute to his pronounced stature, we should not underestimate the affective impact of his vocal “grain.” An appropriate (and commercialized) example of Cobain’s vocal influence occurred a few years ago, when the “nu-metal” band Puddle of Mudd released their hit debut album *Come Clean* (2001). Lead singer Wesley Scantlin, who possesses a hoarse voice with a limited melodic range, instantly drew comparisons to Kurt because of his vocal style (as well as the generally gloomy nature of his lyrics). Scantlin apparently even decided against undergoing surgery to remove nodules in his throat for fear that his singing voice—and its similarity to Cobain’s voice—would change. It is therefore unsurprising that in his review of the album for the British music weekly *New Musical Express*, Noel Gardner calls Scantlin “a very good Kurt Cobain impersonator” before criticizing the band for excessively aping Nirvana’s musical style. Despite the fact that Gardner and other critics at the time generally dismissed this form of vocal mimicry, Puddle of Mudd achieved temporary commercial success in large part because of Scantlin’s ability to sound like Cobain when he sang, indicating the value of Cobain’s embodied voice and its ability to “speak” to others.

57 Mazullo, 730-737. Creswell also states that *Nevermind* contains a “depressive tone” that is similar to the cultural feelings attributed to Generation X members (81).
Sonic Materiality and Embodied Effect

While Barthes’ theory of the “‘grain’ of the voice” and its effects begins to address the relation of embodiment to vocal performance and how it may affect the listener, it nevertheless leaves important questions about the embodied sonic influence of the voice and sung lyrics. I argue that an initial answer lies in what Wallach defines as the “sonic materiality” of recorded music.61 As he finds, “Sound, after all, not only emanates from vibrating bodies, but also has the power (regardless of its source) to vibrate other bodies with which it comes into contact.” In this manner, a concept such as the indexical “grain” of the voice “can be viewed as a sonic feature that contains the possibility of engaging the body of a listener as well.”62 Additionally, this process is reversible, as certain sonic elements of a record are also capable of signifying embodiment. Wallach notes that when death metal guitarists remove the midrange sound frequencies from their amplifiers and equalizers (leaving an amplified level of treble and bass), their goal is to emphasize “aural extremes” that are “iconic of social opposition and affective extremity,” thus contributing to their musical identity.63 Therefore, signified forms of embodiment become palpable through the sonic materiality of recorded music. This does not mean that we should privilege the material nature of recorded music over lyrical representation and vocal indexicality. Rather, these components contribute to the affective presence of the recording together; it is just necessary to recognize the (traditionally ignored) embodied aspect of recorded music itself, as Wallach does.

As consumers, we are quick to recognize purchasable music recordings as material because they are tangible objects like any other form of matter. (This is true

61 Wallach, 35 (original emphasis removed).
62 Ibid., 42 (emphasis in original).
63 Ibid., 47 (original emphasis removed).
even in the case of computer music file formats such as mp3s, since they “visibly” occupy space in regards to Internet bandwidth and personal computer hard-drives.) It is perhaps because of this everyday experience with tangible music recordings that one of the biggest obstacles towards accepting sonic materiality is our long-standing belief that sound—musical or otherwise, recorded or live—lacks the tactile nature of objects that we can smell, taste, and touch.\(^{64}\) Yet sound waves are material in that they physically occupy atmospheric space and volume. When my alarm clock emits a high-pitch beep-beep every morning, I awake because the sound waves of the beep-beep now surround my somnambulant body, occupying a significant amount of space where silence previously existed.\(^{65}\) There is a direct correlation between the volume of the sound and the amount of space it occupies—if my alarm clock were any louder, its noise would fill the room (and the space around my body) even more and would subsequently affect the way I awake. We can even say that despite the (often valid) criticisms that scholars have raised concerning economic scholar Jacques Attali’s theory of music history, he is absolutely correct in asserting that “noise is violence”—it kills silence and takes its place.\(^{66}\) Moreover, sound is particularly resistant in its material occupation. As literary scholar Mark Slouka writes, “If my neighbor decides to wash his car in front of my study window, as he does often, I can black out the uninspiring sight of his pimpled posterior by drawing the shades; to block out his stereo, I must kill noise with noise.”\(^{67}\) Slouka’s example indicates that as an aggregate composition of sound waves, recorded music is no

\(^{64}\) Reé, 34.
\(^{65}\) Kahn, 27.
different than other noises in its ability to kill silence and fill space. Nevertheless, it is important to realize that inaudible music and other sounds are also voluminous—there may be, as Kahn states, “a gradient of all sound extending from small sounds to loud sounds,” but that does not compromise their inherently material nature.

Additionally, we are capable of feeling the vibratory nature of sound waves in a manner that is closely similar to our “normal” sense of touch. Philosopher Jonathan Reé characterizes our ability to feel sound as a common phenomenon: “You can pick up the thunder of an avalanche in the mountains, or the hooves of galloping horses, the beat of a rock band or the slamming of a door, by feeling them through your feet [much] as [by] hearing them with your ears.” His point is that even those who are deaf can still “hear” by sensing sound vibrations in other ways. In regards to music, we often acknowledge the felt presence of musical sound waves by equating them to actual waves of water, such as Daniel Cavicchi’s description of “letting the music wash over me” while listening to CDs in his car. Recorded music is even more tactile in that it not only contains reproducible sound waves, but also has traditionally existed within a physical format—from vinyl records to mp3 files—that we can tangibly sense.

Turning to Nirvana, the question, then, is obviously not whether Nevermind has a sonic materiality, but how it presents that materiality in relation to the album’s embodied lyrical representation and vocal indexicality, as well as what means are involved in the process. Because Nirvana formed and grew within the Pacific Northwest music scene of the 1980s to early 1990s, many saw them as a flagship band for the “grunge”

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68 Kahn, 160.
69 Reé, 36-39.
70 Cavicchi, 1.
71 Wallach, 50.
sound/movement that largely characterized the scene. The Melvins, among a handful of other bands, innovated this style of music by mixing the musically visceral nature of punk rock with the pronounced distortion and slower tempos of classic heavy metal, resulting in a sound that was intimidating yet largely accessible to audiences. In later years, area bands would add their own musical definitions and innovations to this particular sound. Mudhoney leaned (and continues to lean) more towards garage and punk influences while emphasizing fuzzy distortion; other groups, such as Soundgarden, were closer to metal than punk. Yet as Mark Mazullo argues, Nirvana stands out from its contemporaries by reflecting an array of both classic (the Beatles) and contemporary (R.E.M.) pop influences. Kurt shared an affinity for punk and heavy metal like many of his peers, but as Nirvana continued to grow, his songwriting still relied upon relatively basic, catchy pop hooks and chord progressions.

The sonic materiality of *Nevermind* ultimately underscores Kurt’s dual interests in pop and more abrasive forms of music. Producer Butch Vig sought to thicken the band’s sound through special equipment, including an oversized snare drum and effects for Krist Novoselic’s bass. Yet after Nirvana recorded the album with producer Butch Vig, the band’s record label, David Geffen Company, remained unhappy with the album’s overall sound. Subsequently, they hired Andy Wallace, a well-established producer in both mainstream rock and pop, to remix the record. By adding extra equalization and effects to the drums and guitars (including a chorus pedal for Kurt’s guitar), Wallace helped create

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72 Mazullo points out that in addition to punk and metal, grunge reflected early garage bands of the late 1950s and early 1960s, including the Kingsmen (718). Influential Melvins albums include *Ozma/Gluey Porch Treatments*, Boner Records 16-2, 1989, compact disc.

73 See Mudhoney, *Superfuzz Bignuff*, Sub Pop 0021, 1988, compact disc (which the band named after the guitar effects box that helps produce their distinctive sound); and Soundgarden, *Screaming Life*, Sub Pop 0012, 1987, compact disc.

74 Mazullo, 719-721.

75 Cross, 188.
a shiny and strident sound that permeates the album.\(^7^6\) One of the primary characteristics of this sound is Wallace’s placement of extra space between the guitars and drums. As a result, the instruments throughout the entire album all possess their own “body;” that is, the guitar, bass, and drums each occupy a distinct space and presence within the mix that the listener can clearly discern. While Nirvana initially accepted this sound, they later criticized it as sounding too calculated and commercial; Kurt even compared the album’s production as something more appropriate for the stadium-metal band Motley Crüe.\(^7^7\)

Wallace’s efforts are perhaps best evident and the album opener “Smells Like Teen Spirit.” After four bars of Kurt’s clean-sounding power chord riff, the song explodes—the same guitar riff becomes massive and distorted, and the bass and drums form a vicious backbone—before settling down again into a softer rhythmic groove for the verse. One of the many reasons for the song’s success is arguably due to this jarring loud/soft dynamic, a result of the band’s songwriting vision and Wallace’s conscious mixing efforts. Each verse slowly gains momentum as Kurt adds a droning two-note melodic line, before Dave’s drum roll leads back into the violence of the chorus. After a simple yet searing guitar solo against the harmonic progression found in the chorus, the band plays one more verse before the final chorus and a titanic ending where the drums go into sonic overdrive.

Yet importantly, “Smells Like Teen Spirit” never buries each instrument’s “body”—if anything, it is the song on *Nevermind* where their separation-yet-cohesion shines through the most. Additionally, the song’s loud/soft opposition helps re-emphasize the presence of each instrument during the chorus, individually pushing them

\(^7^6\) Ibid., 189; Azerrad, 179-180; Mazullo, 720.  
\(^7^7\) Azerrad, 180.
towards the viewer from a standpoint of volume. Kurt’s voice also plays a similar role—as he sings during the verses and screams during the chorus, he mimics the dynamics of the instruments, thus providing an analogous human counterpart to their separate “bodies.” Conversely, the instrumental dynamics add extra weight to the embodied “grain” of Kurt’s vocals (as well as his somatic lyrics), therefore enhancing the noticeable and affective presence of both. The following song on *Nevermind*, “In Bloom” also relies upon this loud/soft/loud dynamic, with analogous results. After a crashing, full-instrument introduction, the song settles around Kurt’s chunky, scraping riff before entering the first verse, where Krist’s bass provides the lead melody. The song slowly builds into a roaring chorus, matching the increased intensity of Cobain’s singing and emphasizing the embodied imagery of his aforementioned lyrics (He’s the one/Who likes all the pretty songs…”)

As I have argued in this chapter, considering the role of embodiment within the musical experience requires an acceptance that, contra the dismissal of Adorno and other scholars, music recordings themselves contain embodied elements that allow music to be active and non-static, thus partially debunking the traditional notion of listener passivity. These elements includes, but are not limited to, embodied lyrics, the vocal “grain” that indexes embodiment and relies upon embodied reactions, and the palpable materiality of sound that exists in relation to both lyrics and the vocal “grain.” When examined within the context of Nirvana’s *Nevermind*, these properties collectively provide a specific understanding of Nirvana’s relationship to embodiment in the period preceding *In Utero*. Additionally, they also allow an initial understanding of how musical embodiment in general might impact listener receptivity. Yet it is impossible to determine the entire
nature of embodied musical meanings without exploring in much further detail how the listener might possibly receive embodied properties within the musical experience. In the next chapter, I examine how the theory of phenomenology may further explain the visceral impact of musical embodiment upon the listener, and provide a detailed phenomenological-style analysis of and specifically analyze how we can discern the embodied aspects found within *In Utero* in order to analyze its embodied aspects. I then turn to the subject of listener receptivity in my third chapter, where I consider potential reactions to *In Utero* and their importance in constituting musical experience.
CHAPTER 2: UNRAVELING IN UTERO’S EMBODIMENT THROUGH PHENOMENOLOGY

Why Phenomenology?

I would first like to briefly return to the anecdote that I shared in the introduction of the previous chapter about listening to Nirvana. As I have mentioned, the experience stood out—despite its commonplace nature—because of my recognition of how Nirvana’s music is able to convey such a strong sense of corporeality, and the initially unconscious nature of my corresponding response (driving faster and keeping time with my hands). As I would later learn while reflecting upon this experience from an academic perspective, the analytical concept of phenomenology offers a more sophisticated and substantive conduit for grasping how I was able to recognize and determine the embodied meanings that Nirvana expresses within their music, as well as why I reacted in a bodily manner to what I was hearing. As Thomas Csordas stresses, phenomenology ultimately “offers an understanding of embodiment at the microanalytic level of individual experience.”1 Accordingly, this chapter relies upon a phenomenological approach to explore the role that embodiment plays in the experience of listening to In Utero. First, I provide a description of phenomenology and how we might conceptualize its relation to music. I theorize that three phenomenological concepts in particular—the “mutual tuning-in relationship,”2 “partial sharing,”3 and carnal sense-making4—help explain how elements such as lyrics, the vocal “grain,”5 and

1 Csordas, 157.
2 Schutz, 115.
3 Berger, 21-22.
4 The term “carnal sense-making” is my own, but credit the inspiration behind it to Sobchack’s Carnal Thoughts (1-9).
5 Barthes, 293-300.
sonic materiality\(^6\) contribute to the power of musical experience. I then offer a detailed, phenomenologically-informed analysis of *In Utero* through separate discussions of the album’s cover art and lyrics, vocals, and music. In this analysis, I argue that the specific embodied properties of *In Utero* predominantly present the concept of visceral, personal pain (as I hint at in the anecdote at the beginning of the first chapter), and thus may encourage particular sensory experiences on the part of the listener. While I make this argument from the perspective of both a researcher and a fan of Nirvana, I contextualize my analysis in several ways (including considerations of gender, history, and observations from rock critics and journalists), and therefore additionally provide the foundation for my discussion of corporeal listener reactions in the next chapter.

**Phenomenology and Musical Inquiry**

As a branch of philosophical thought that burgeoned during the twentieth century, phenomenology is centrally concerned with the nature of *experience*, or conscious *perception of phenomena*, in everyday life. Philosophers David Stewart and Algis Mikunas note that phenomenology is distinct from positivistic science and other branches of philosophy in two principal manners: “(1) consciousness itself is not an object among other objects in nature, and (2) there are conscious phenomena which cannot be dealt with adequately by means of the quantitative methods of experimental science.”\(^7\) Consequently, phenomenologists support the notion that “[p]erceptual phenomena emerge as the outcome of the subject’s active and meaningful engagement with the world, and [that] both the object of experience (or *noema*) and the engagement (or *noesis*)

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\(^6\) Wallach, 37.

that constitutes it are present in experience,” as Harris Berger contends.8 This belief essentially denies the separation or dichotomy that empirical science and logical philosophy often create between the objective phenomena of the natural world and our subjective experience of those phenomena—indeed, phenomenological scholarship consistently argues that both aspects are necessary to our understanding of experience. It also stresses the importance of both the mind and body in experience, thus eschewing the traditional Western concept of the “objective” mind, “subjective” body, and the distinction between the two.9

Yet the question of how phenomenology should redress the failure to adequately document experience and perceptual consciousness has led to differing approaches in the development of the discipline. The work of Edmund Husserl, the pioneer of phenomenological reasoning in the twentieth century, seeks to capture the transcendental nature of experience through what Berger describes as a “rigorous description of that which is concretely given to consciousness.”10 By suspending our preconceived notions about what experience entails (Husserl refers to this as epanche, a Greek term referring to the suspension of judgment), we can undergo a rational, “pure” analysis of both

8 Berger, 21.
9 Stewart and Mikunas, 21; F. Joseph Smith, The Experiencing of Musical Sound: Prelude to a Phenomenology of Music (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1979), 16-17. This is a crucial implication for musical study, particularly our reception of music in general. Sterne notes that the objective mind/subjective body distinction commonly factors into the historically constructed differences between vision, which “tends toward objectivity,” and hearing, which “tends toward subjectivity” (15). Jackson comes to similar conclusions about vision: “The visualist bias has the effect of distancing the subject from the object, of seeing them as discontinuous entities...It runs counter to Terence’s great maxim Homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto (I am human, and nothing human is alien to me)” (6). Finally, McClary addresses this mode of thinking in regards to music: “The mind/body split that has plagued Western culture for centuries shows up most paradoxically in attitudes toward music: the most cerebral, nonmaterial of media is at the same time most capable of engaging the body” (Feminine Endings, 151).
10 Berger, 20.
experience and the world in which experience takes place. Nevertheless, later phenomenologists would argue that the Husserlian method of *epoche* focuses more on the *objects* of experience rather than experience itself, or “being.” As a result, Martin Heidegger (a student under Husserl), Jean-Paul Sartre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty all consider phenomenology as an existential concept, though their approaches and findings noticeably contrast from each other.

Of the approaches found within the transcendental “branch” of Husserl and the existential “branch” that includes Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, it is Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis upon the human body’s role as both a subject and determinant of experience (with which both Csordas and Sobchack align their work on embodiment) that is perhaps the most significant to our present examination of musical phenomenology and embodiment. As he writes in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, human bodies are *lived*, making them inseparable from ideas of human consciousness and experience: “I am my body, at least wholly to the extent that I possess experience…” Indeed, Vivian Sobchack relies upon Merleau-Ponty’s theory of lived, contextualized experience to define embodiment as “a radically material condition of human being that necessarily entails both the body and consciousness, objectivity and subjectivity, in an *irreducible ensemble.*” Given this definition, Merleau-Ponty’s concern with the body’s active and material role in experience seems quite appropriate for considering questions of embodiment. Yet to focus solely on Merleau-Ponty would be to slight other insightful

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11 Stewart and Mikunas, 26. Husserl also interchanges the term “bracketing” with *epoche*, as in to suspend our judgments in “brackets.”
12 Ibid., 69-75; Smith, 27. For an overview of all four philosophers, see Christopher Macann, *Four Phenomenological Philosophers: Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty* (London: Routledge, 1993).
14 Sobchack, 2, 4.
phenomenological approaches toward analyzing musical experience, especially those that exist within music scholarship. Although phenomenology has yet to gain a consistent foothold within musicology, ethnomusicology, and popular music studies, the few musical scholars who extensively incorporate it into their scholarship—notably Alfred Schutz, Thomas Clifton, F. Joseph Smith, and Harris Berger—have made significant strides in exploring the nature of musical experience, albeit from relatively contrasting angles. As a result—and keeping in mind Smith’s insightful declaration that music scholars should be more concerned about becoming “phenomenological thinkers” rather than “Husserlians, or Heideggerians, or Sartrians”—I embrace the concept of a phenomenological methodology that incorporates several different approaches as a means of grasping how we experience music.

Schutz’s 1951 essay “Making Music Together” is perhaps the best place to begin a phenomenological consideration of musical experience, for it presents a conceptual model of music as a form of communication that is intersubjective—in other words, but both composers/musicians and their audiences actively establish musical experience. Schutz finds that the basis of musical communication is the “mutual tuning-in relationship” that exists between the “composer” of a musical piece and the “beholder,” which can be the performer or conductor (particularly in the case of classical music,}

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16 I would be remiss if I failed to note that other scholars are beginning to incorporate phenomenology in a less extensive, yet still significant, manner for their particular studies. For example, see Michael Bull, *Sounding Out the City: Personal Stereos and the Management of Everyday Life* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 10-12; Thomas Porcello, “‘Tails Out’: Social Phenomenology and the Ethnographic Representation of Technology in Music-Making,” *Ethnomusicology* 42:3 (Autumn 1998), 485-510; and Sterne, 10-19.
17 Smith, 27. Additionally, Clifton lays claim to a similar approach in the preface of *Music as Heard* (x).
18 In viewing musical experience as an intersubjective act, Schutz is following the transcendental branch of phenomenology that Husserl pioneered. For further explanation, see Clark E. Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1994), 25-42 (especially 37-38).
which is Schutz’s focus), or, for the purposes of our investigation, the listener.\textsuperscript{19} When writing a musical piece, the composer relies upon his/her socially constituted musical and nonmusical knowledge to adequately convey specific feelings and meanings within the music—an example would be using crescendos and upward harmonic progressions to build tension and excitement. In a similar manner, the listener must also draw upon his/her knowledge and background to appreciate these elements. Yet Schutz contends that while the listener hears these musical elements in real (or “outer”) time, he/she must listen to and grasp the meaning of those elements in “inner time”—our stream of consciousness that cannot be distinctly separated into temporal intervals.\textsuperscript{20} The assumption is that if music is a mode of communication that is fundamentally beyond language,\textsuperscript{21} we can only truly understand it within inner time. Schutz concludes by asserting that “the latter [ beholder, or listener] participates in the former [composer]’s stream of consciousness by performing with him step by step the ongoing articulation of his musical thought.”\textsuperscript{22} This “sharing of the other’s flux of experience in inner time” constitutes the mutual tuning-in relationship, or “experience of the ‘We.’ ”\textsuperscript{23}

By theorizing that musical meaning emerges within an experience shared between the composer and the listener, Schutz establishes a strong, plausible phenomenological foundation for understanding musical experience. Nevertheless, this foundation lacks two critical components. The first is that while Schutz acknowledges the listener’s active role in determining musical meanings, he does not properly consider how social and

\textsuperscript{20} Schutz, 113-114.
\textsuperscript{21} Wallach, 36.
\textsuperscript{22} Schutz, 114.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 115.
cultural contexts might impact reception. If we consider the listener as a subject of worldly experience, then, as Berger contends, “the diverse acts by which the subject constitutes experience are radically social: informed by situated events and broader social contexts, actively employed to achieve social ends, and potentially consequential for others and society as a whole.” Just as the composer (or “songwriter,” in popular music parlance) relies upon familiar social and historical factors to manufacture musical meanings, the listener’s cultural background affects how he/she interprets those meanings, making listening a culturally constructed activity. The way to fully address the influence of context in musical experience is to incorporate Berger’s approach to “partial sharing” (a concept that, ironically, Schutz originally developed): “…perception is not capricious imagination…the fact that we live in a common world allows a measure of partial sharing.” Sobchack elaborates upon this point in her description of phenomenological interpretations:

The proof of an adequate phenomenological description, then, is not whether the reader has actually had—or is even in sympathy with—the meaning and value of an experience as described—but whether or not the description is resonant and the experience’s structure sufficiently comprehensible to a reader who might “possibly” inhabit it (even in a differently inflected or valued way).

Thus, as long as the listener is familiar with and can identify with the feelings and meanings within the music (even distantly), he/she is capable of producing a corresponding level of understanding based on personal social and historical contexts.

This leads us into the second critical factor, which I began to develop earlier: the fact that our objective bodies—our “flesh,” so to speak—play an indispensable role in

24 Berger, 22.
25 Ibid., 21.
26 Sterne: “Listening is a directed, learned activity: it is a definite cultural practice (19).
27 Ibid.
28 Sobchack, 5 (emphasis added).
29 Sobchack makes this argument in regards to phenomenological descriptions in general (5).
how we express and interpret musical meanings while listening to music. In other words, listening relies upon what I would call carnal sense-making—our senses help us make sense of the musical experience. My use of the word senses is deliberate, though it requires some explanation. To begin with, Csordas uses the term “being-in-the-world” (which originates from Heidegger) to explain how “the body is a thoroughly cultural phenomenon, and embodiment is of importance as the existential ground of culture.” If we accept this as true, then we must also accept Sobchack’s argument that “experience is not only always mediated by the lived bodies that we are, but our lived bodies (and our experience of them) is [sic] always also mediated and qualified by our engagements with other bodies and things.” Thus, the “lived body” plays an indispensable role in both the act of expression and interpretation/reception. With regards to the musical experience, we can theorize that the songwriter does not just draw upon social and historical contexts when writing a piece of music, but specifically his/her corporeal relation to those contexts, resulting in the role that embodiment plays in the final musical product. It is the same process when the songwriter or other musicians perform the piece of music, for “lived bodies” complete the phenomenological expression of those feelings, whether vocally, instrumentally, or both. Hence, we have the embodied properties—lyrics, the vocal “grain,” and sonic materiality—that I discuss in the previous chapter.

But where does the listener fit into this overall process? It is obvious that the sounds of music engage our carnal sense of hearing. Yet as Douglas Kahn contends (and as I have discussed), sound is capable of producing an “all-around corporeality” by surrounding the listener and engaging the body as a whole—it does not just contact our

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30 Csordas, 156. The concept of “being-in-the-world” originates from Heidegger’s study Being and Time (New York: Harper, 1962), but Csordas specifically cites Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation in his work.
31 Ibid., 4.
ears. Put simply, music impacts us through not just our hearing, but also our entire bodies. In order to adequately conceptualize the embodied meanings within a musical piece, he/she relies upon carnal senses (as well as the cultural contexts that exist in relation to those senses) as a means of perceiving music. Thus, his/her resulting interpretations and reactions not only have a basis in hearing, but also seeing, feeling, and so forth (whether in a literal or metaphorical sense). In short, we find that we listen with our bodies, as all of our senses (in conjunction with our mind) are capable of contributing to how we constitute musical experience. The resulting implication is equally remarkable. Reflecting back upon the previous chapter, we can now see how the embodied properties of recorded music—embodied lyrics, the indexicality of the vocal “grain,” and sonic materiality—are all expressed and cognitively received within the mutual tuning-in relationship that is a fundamental component of the musical experience.

In this manner, I would argue that embodiment is present not only within recorded music itself, but is also an innate aspect of our musical receptivity, both in the sense of determining what the music is “about” as well as shaping our own embodied reactions. Just as our everyday experience is embodied due to our contact with “other bodies and things,” the act of listening to music is a shared, often intimate experience with another lived body or bodies. Although this powerful process is certainly mysterious, a phenomenological approach provides much-needed knowledge by placing the questions of what we experience musically and how we experience it at the forefront of our inquiry, while allowing us to maintain the centrality of embodiment within this experience.

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32 Kahn, 27.
33 Personal correspondence with Jeremy Wallach, January 2006.
Before continuing, I want to provide a brief example that succinctly incorporates the phenomenological theories of the mutual tuning-in relationship, partial sharing, and carnal sense-making. Recently, the “webzine” *Three Monkeys Online* interviewed Greg Dulli, singer-songwriter for the independent rock group The Twilight Singers. Towards the end, the interviewer, Andrew Lawless, asks about Dulli’s production work with Afterhours (an Italian rock band), and specifically inquires how Dulli can truly appreciate listening to a band that doesn’t speak his language:

Lawless: But what of the language problem? Can you get the full effect of the music without understanding the lyrics?
Dulli: I think so! The record I’m listening to right now, more than anything is *Lágrimas Negras*, and it’s by Bebo and Cigalla. Bebo is an 85 year old Cuban piano player. Cigalla is a 35 year old Spanish singer. I’ve no idea what exactly they’re singing. I can look at the titles of the songs and get an idea. The title of the album [when translated] is Black Tears. It’s so unnecessary for me to understand the lyrics, *because I can understand by the timbre of his voice what he’s feeling, and what I’m supposed to feel.*

Dulli’s comments demonstrate his participation in a mutual tuning-in relationship with Bebo and Cigalla when listening to *Lágrimas Negras*. Moreover, the last sentence in particular reveals his use of both partial sharing and carnal sense-making to determine the feelings within the music, regardless of the language barrier. This is not to dismiss the role that lyrics can play in song meanings—quite the opposite, as I demonstrated in the first chapter and will demonstrate shortly. Yet as Dulli’s reflections indicate, the corporeal connection that is a part of his experience listening to Bebo and Cigaalla is the most telling and meaningful factor of all.

In presenting these ideas, it is crucial to stress that, as sociologist Tia DeNora argues, music “provides resources that can be harnessed in and for imagination,

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awareness, consciousness, action, [and] for all manner of social formation.” The thoughts, feelings and meanings that music presents are certainly important, but never fixed or complete by themselves because the listener applies and subsequently constitutes the music within specific social and cultural contexts. This seems like a basic idea, but one that is vital if we are to establish embodiment as an interactive component of musical experience. Keeping this in mind, my analysis of Nirvana’s *In Utero* in the remainder of this chapter concerns embodiment within the album itself, while I explore the concepts of listener contexts and corporeal reaction in relation to the album in the following chapter.

**Embodiment and *In Utero*’s Cover Art and Lyrics**

During the period (1991-1993) in between the releases of *Nevermind* and *In Utero*, the public pressures of fame that accompanied the commercial and critical success of the former only seemed to amplify the negative factors in Cobain’s life. Mark Mazullo even suggests that Cobain “suffered from a profound ‘identity crisis’ that resulted from the combination of his fame, his heavy drug use, and his likely depression.” As a result, the way that Cobain expressed his own bodily pain and suffering began to intensify as well. Charles Cross documents one example from 1992, the year before Nirvana made *In Utero*, where Cobain starkly implicates his stomach pain in his personal journal: “‘I’ve violently vomited to the point of my stomach literally turning itself inside out to show you the fine hair-like nerves I’ve kept and raised as my children…’” In a similar manner, the bodily images found in the cover art and lyrics of *In Utero* provide much more graphic examples of pain and its related elements (such as sickness, decay, death,

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36 Mazullo, 738.
37 Cross, 277.
and escaping from pain through medicine, drugs, and other ways) than *Nevermind*, perhaps suggesting Cobain’s personal suffering. In his analysis of *In Utero*, Michael Azerrad writes, “Virtually every song contains some image of sickness and disease[,] and over the course of the album, Cobain alludes to: sunburn, acne, cancer, bad posture, open sores, growing pains, hangovers, anemia, insomnia, constipation, [and] indigestion.”

One of the ways that Cobain expresses these forms of pain in the cover art and lyrics of *In Utero* is by using metaphors and perspectives that relate to the human body through gendered performance and reproduction. Because gender is a socially and historically constructed process that emerges from perceived sexual differences, cultural scholar Judith Butler argues that gender identity emerges from a “stylized repetition of acts” that individual subjects perform within social contexts. This means that normative ideas about gender may appear to be naturally grounded in “masculine” and “feminine” binary categorizations, but are in fact unstable, as subjects have the possibility to perform their gender identity in a flexible manner. Cobain exhibits the latter on *In Utero* by singing from and identifying with various perspectives that are clearly feminine. I would suggest that he attempts to emphasize and identify with ideas of “feminine” vulnerability and hurt as a means of highlighting his own vulnerability and

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38 Azerrad, 321.
39 As Joan Scott contends in her study *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), “gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power” (42). Additionally, see Thomas Laqueur, “Orgasm, Generation, and the Politics of the Reproductive Body,” *Representations* 14 (Spring 1986), 1-41 for an overview of how gender construction emerged from scientific and medical information and discourses about the human body.
41 Ibid., 179-180.
42 See Mimi Schippers, *Rockin’ Out of the Box: Gender Maneuvering in Alternative Hard Rock* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002). While Cobain was fascinated with femininity and the feminine form in general, Schippers argues that alternative hard rock as a whole (which would include Nirvana) adopted feminist modes of “criticism” and understanding “to create a world that was different” than the traditionally gendered structures of rock music (54).
hurt. Similarly, he uses images of reproduction to express personal pain by (again) identifying with women from this particular standpoint. Neither of these practices are particularly new for him, but within the context of his exacerbated “identity crisis,” they appear to be more personal in their meaning. A beginning signal of this shift is present within the liner notes of the band’s 1992 B-sides collection *Incesticide*. In a long and rambling letter-style note that finds Cobain railing against stardom, the music industry, and culturally intolerant fans, he finishes with these lines: “Last year, a girl was raped by two wastes of sperm and eggs while they sang the lyrics to our song ‘Polly.’ I have a hard time carrying on knowing there are plankton like that in our audience. Sorry to be so anally P.C. but that's the way I feel.” The reproductive-based term “wastes of sperm and eggs” captures Cobain’s anguish over what happened by expressing hatred toward the rapists, yet is not only an attempt to deny even the worth of their existence, but is also an expression of his own perceived guilt *as a man* who was unable to control such events.

Two of *In Utero*’s songs are particularly salient examples of how Cobain relies upon themes of gender and reproduction and relates those themes to his personal pain and vulnerability. On “Pennyroyal Tea,” he addresses his chronic stomach pain with the line “I’m on warm milk and laxatives/Cherry-flavored antacids,” but also uses pennyroyal

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43 On *Nevermind*, the song “Polly” describes the kidnapping and rape of a young girl that had occurred a few years earlier. Although Cobain sings from the standpoint of the attacker and, as Cross finds, captures his “humanness,” he does so in a manner that sympathetically captures the girl’s plight (141). I note some of *Nevermind*’s reproductive images/metaphors in the first chapter.


45 Mazullo: “As one might expect, Cobain often commented on the troubles he had in dealing with the sycophantic behavior of his fans” (739). Although the rapists are an extreme example, they nonetheless highlight the frequent contrast between what Cobain sought to promote in and through his music, and the “cultural politics” (as Mazullo calls it) of his fans.
tea—an herbal drink that pregnant women supposedly once used as an abortifacient$^{46}$—as a metaphor for cleansing his inner tumult: “Sit and drink pennyroyal tea/ Distill the life that’s inside of me.” (This line—as well as the song in general—is particularly poignant after his suicide by a gunshot to the head.) “Rape Me” is more direct, as Cobain (who admitted that the song was self-referential$^{47}$) compares himself to a female rape victim: “Rape me/Rape me, my friend/Rape me/Rape me again/I’m not the only one.” In this context, his lyrics embody his vulnerability, and lash out against his perceived public “violation” during the chorus: “My favorite inside source/I’ll kiss your open sores/Appreciate your concern/You’re gonna stink and burn.”$^{48}$

In addition to these examples, In Utero’s cover art offers what appear to be embodied gender and reproduction themes of a reflexive nature. A winged feminine figure rests in the center of the front cover, arms slightly outstretched, against a light-yellow background. Her transparent skin allows the viewer to see certain bones (such as her ribcage) and her intestines, or her viscera. The back features what Azerrad describes as “an assortment of plastic fetus models and other body parts, lilies, and orchids on a rug at his house,” along with several “feminine symbols” bordering the edges that relate to fertility and motherhood.$^{49}$ If we accept the idea that, as an integral aspect of music recordings, cover art commonly correlates with the elements and aesthetics of the actual

$^{46}$ Cross, 280. Also, I discovered through personal correspondence with Becca Cragin (March 2006) that many women continue to use pennyroyal tea as an abortifacient, especially if they are younger—often in their teens—and have limited means to obtain a legal abortion.

$^{47}$ Azerrad, 323.

$^{48}$ Azerrad notes that this lyric directly refers to “the manager of a Seattle band” who commented in a September 1992 Vanity Fair feature article how Cobain and his wife, musician Courtney Love, abused heroin throughout Courtney’s pregnancy with their daughter Frances Bean (266, 323).

$^{49}$ Ibid., 330.
music itself, then both images embody Cobain’s vulnerability, as the feminine figure’s innards are, quite literally, on display for everybody to see.

Besides gender and reproduction tropes, Cobain employs other types of embodied expressions throughout *In Utero* that are (again) self-referential in nature. Indeed, the album’s first song, “Serve the Servants,” arguably contains some of the album’s most autobiographical lyrics. The first line is “Teenage angst has paid off well/Now I’m bored and old,” which is a reference to his profits from the cultural zeitgeist of Generation X, and the personal degenerative aftermath that resulted. Later in the song, he uses physical pain as a conjoined metaphor for the adolescent turmoil that resulted from his parents’ divorce: “As my bones grew they hurt/They hurt really bad/I tried hard to have a father/But instead I had a dad.” Although Cross notes that Cobain tries to downplay his own sentiments with lines such as “That legendary divorce is such a bore,” it remained “the most single significant event in his life”—one that possibly even instigated his stomach pain.

Nevertheless, not all of Cobain’s descriptions of bodily pain were inherently negative—in several lyrics on the album, he uses pain as a metaphor to describe the dysfunctional connection between his wife Courtney Love and himself. One example appears on “Dumb,” and concerns the well-documented cycles of drug usage (specifically heroin) that he and Courtney shared: “My heart is broke but I have some glue/Help me inhale and mend it with you/We’ll float around and hang out on clouds/Then we’ll come down and have a hangover.” Azerrad contends that those lines make “for a good

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50 Wallach, 50; Walser, 2. The latter makes the following argument concerning heavy metal: “The visual language of metal album covers and the spectacular stage shows offer larger-than-life images tied to fantasies of social power, just as in the more prestigious musical spectacles of opera.”

51 Cross, 22-23, 271. Cobain spent time in a hospital for “malnutrition” at the age of ten, but in reality this was probably the onset of his gastric problems. This occurred a year after his parents divorced.
synopsis of his and Courtney’s months in the drug wilderness…he sought refuge in heroin with Courtney, then paid the consequences afterward.”

Other, marginally more positive themes of co-dependency emerge elsewhere. “Heart-Shaped Box,” the album’s first single, contains the line “I wish I could eat your cancer when you turn black”—what Cross calls “the most convoluted route any songwriter undertook in pop history to say ‘I love you.’ ”

Nevertheless, “Heart-Shaped Box” also exhibits that despite the increased presence of pain in Cobain’s bodily references and metaphors on *In Utero*, many of these references remain obtuse and abstract in their meaning, just as on *Nevermind*. The “I wish I could eat your cancer” line may seem somewhat clear, but the surrounding context of the song defies any easy, concrete interpretations. “Radio Friendly Unit-Shifter” offers another appropriate example. Although the song features images of burns (“Second-rate third-degree burns”), starvation (“Starve without your skeleton key”) and depression (“What is wrong with me?”), there appears to be no significant meaning attached to those expressions—Cobain even characterized the song as a tossed-off effort. Even album closer “All Apologies” falls into this category. The song matches images such as “Sunburn with freezer burn/Choking on the ashes of our enemy” with “I’m married/Buried,” thereby suggesting allusions to Cobain and Courtney’s relationship. Nevertheless, two prominent Nirvana fan sites disagree on whether the song has anything to do with Cobain.

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52 Azerrad, 328.
53 Cross, 280.
54 Ibid., 281.
55 Azerrad, 329.
The conflation between directness and opaqueness in how Cobain contextualizes pain on *In Utero* raises another problem as well. As theater scholar Philip Auslander argues in his recent essay on performance in popular music, there is a difference between the singer as a “real person,” his/her “persona,” or public image, and his/her “character,” or personality that he/she adopts for particular songs. Hence, a singer that is *performing* ideas and feelings that may or may not relate to his/her own existence is distinct from when he/she is *expressing* aspects of a personal nature. Based on a purely textual examination of how Cobain uses pain on the album, both character performance and personal expression are arguably present. Thus, there are lyrical examples where he not only may use pain merely as a signifier for other concepts, but also within the context of a character that does not relate to his own struggles.

It is because of the above factors that we cannot truly establish a pain-centered aesthetics of embodiment based solely upon Cobain’s lyrics. Yet in her seminal study *The Body in Pain*, philosopher Elaine Scarry points to the beginnings of a solution. In describing how Ronald Melzack developed the McGill Pain Questionnaire—a series of questions that hospitals use to establish the type and extent of a patient’s pain—she writes that “necessary to the invention of this diagnostic tool was Melzack’s assumption that the human voice, far from being trustworthy, is capable of accurately exposing even the most resistant aspects of material reality.” Just as Melzack’s questionnaire uses the human voice to assess subjective pain, considering the indexical nature of Cobain’s vocals

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allows us to develop an understanding of the pain he may be attempting to convey. This is not to say that the lyrics and cover art we have just analyzed are irrelevant. Rather, the relevancy of how they incorporate bodily pain becomes more directly manifest within Cobain’s vocals and (as we will examine later) the sonic materiality of Nirvana’s instrumentation.

**Indexicality and *In Utero’s Vocal “Grain”***

In her essay “Tori Amos’s Inner Voices,” musicologist Bonnie Gordon argues that the Tori Amos song “Me and a Gun,” a first-hand account of how a fan raped her in 1984, “performs a quest for voice and a desire to make accessible very interior sensations and feelings…By singing about her experience during the rape, Amos projects outwards an essentially interior experience.”

Citing Scarry’s *The Body in Pain*, she finds that pain is “fundamentally unshareable and resistant to language, for to understand someone else’s pain is to understand what happened inside her body. In order to express pain, the person must externalize it by making it into something others can grasp.”

Amos’s vocal performance on “Me and a Gun” is an example of this process; as an a cappella track, its particular qualities (breathiness, ranging volume, and what Gordon terms as “outward cries and groans”) provide a stark, embodied presence to her lyrical descriptions of the event, allowing the listener to definitively recognize and comprehend the pain that she suffered and arguably still suffers.

Gordon’s argument is a primary example of how feminist scholars, extending Roland Barthes’ conception of the “‘grain’ of the voice,” have begun to argue that the

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60 Ibid., 198.
61 Ibid., 199.
vocal “grain” specifically articulates underlying meanings and emotions contained within the sung female voice. In a similar manner, I contend that Cobain’s vocals and unique “grain” on *In Utero* provide palpability—or a corporeal exteriority—to the internalized corporeal pain that often appears in his lyrics, and are a clear indication of the embodiment that links the listener to the recorded performance. Yet if we consider that his vocals possessed this dynamic quality on *Nevermind*, then how do they differ on *In Utero*? Music journalist Howard Hampton provides an answer in his review of the album for the music magazine *Spin*: “Fame has aged Cobain’s plaintive rasp, as if celebrity were some kind of public dungeon that turned his shout into a prisoner’s, looking for an echo in solitary confinement.” Just as the negative aspects in his life (increasing heroin use, depression, and the pressures of fame) seem to have impacted his use of pain as a lyrical trope, they also arguably affected his vocal abilities as well. As I describe in the introduction to this chapter, Cobain’s voice on the album sounds incredibly precarious—it is much more hoarse than before, and contains rougher edges and splinters, regardless of whether he is singing or screaming. This contrast from *Nevermind* is almost immediately discernable during the verses of “Serve the Servants.” As Cobain sings, he sounds markedly raspy, and his voice involuntarily cracks when reaching for notes that are well within his range. Although he manages to smoothly sing during the song’s chorus, this occurrence is more rare on *In Utero*. *Rolling Stone* reviewer David Fricke describes Cobain’s singing during the quiet opening section of “Rape Me” as a “battered

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croon,” and with good reason—his voice sounds worn and remarkably aged over just a two-year period.64

Yet it is his yells and screams that remain the most telling elements of his performance. It is more than ever on *In Utero* that Cobain’s scream approximates extreme physical and emotional pain. The best example of this occurs during the chorus of the album’s second song, “Scentless Apprentice.” During the verse, his gravelly, half-sung/half-yelled vocal lines ascend in both melody and intensity, before he abruptly snaps off each of them. As Dave Grohl’s drum roll leads into the chorus, Cobain unleashes a sustained primal scream of “Go awwwayyyyy! Get awwwwayyyyy!” that mutates into a piercing, upper-register howl. He repeats this procedure throughout the song’s three choruses, achieving the same effect over and over again without studio effects or manipulation.65 Perhaps the best way to describe this performance is to compare it to the *Nevermind* track “Stay Away,” as Azerrad does. On that particular song, Cobain yells “Heeeeeeey, stay awwwwayyyyy!,” and does so in a manner that is quite fervent within the context of the album. Yet it cannot match the sheer vocal-shredding, visceral nature that Cobain displays on “Scentless Apprentice”—Azerrad even argues that “Stay Away” sounds “mighty tame in comparison.”66 This scream on “Scentless Apprentice” provides emotional meaning and resonance to the simple statement “Go away, get away,” turning it into a desperate, haunting noise. Just as Gordon contends that the “sound of her [Amos’] voice [on “Me and a Gun”] becomes the

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64 David Fricke, “Sleepless in Seattle [Review of Nirvana’s *In Utero]*,” *Rolling Stone* 665 (16 September 1993), 64.
65 Azerrad, 317. *In Utero* producer Steve Albini recorded Cobain’s vocals with no additional effects or processing.
66 Ibid., 324.
enunciation of her painful experience," Cobain’s scream and its indexical relationship to his suffering body transforms the song’s interior, implied theme of human isolation and alienation into an exterior expression of pain that is difficult to mistake.

Likewise, there are other examples on *In Utero* where Cobain’s vocals have this transformative effect. On “Pennyroyal Tea,” he sings subdued lines during the verses in a “plaintive groan,” as Fricke describes it. While the listener may already know that the aforementioned line “I’m on warm milk and laxatives/Cherry-flavored antacids” reads as a true account of Cobain’s stomach, Cobain’s pauses in the middle of the lines, combined with his groan, turns the words into an intimate confessional, as if he’s almost pushing them out from his gut: “I’m on…warm milk…and lax-atives…Cher-ry…fla-vored…ant-a-cids.” It is during the chorus—which, in following Nirvana’s standard songwriting formula, is quite loud—that he shifts into a cathartic yell, stretching the “me” in “Distill the life that’s inside of me” over two measures and making it seem as if he must distill and force out what’s inside of him, as the metaphor of pennyroyal tea might suggest. His vocals follow a similar pattern in “Heart-Shaped Box.” The lyric “I wish I could eat your cancer when you black” is quiet until Cobain’s voice crescendos on “black,” leading into the chorus: “HEY! WAIT! I’ve got a new com-plaint!/For-ever in debt to your price-less ad-vice…” The best description of his voice in this section is a wounded sneer—his trademark sarcasm is present, yet the raspy edge in his voice implies an expression of genuine hurt, whether the lines apply to Courtney, the public, or whoever else. Even in the songs that may not necessarily apply to Cobain, his voice adds a personal, painful layer to the lyrics, and makes certain statements especially stand out. In the otherwise

67 Gordon, 198.
68 Fricke, 63.
“hodgepodge” poetry of “Radio Friendly Unit Shifter,” for example, the chorus line “What is wrong with me?” becomes a rhetorical roar of self-assessment, with “What is what I need?” only justifying his own personal doubt.

Consequently, conceptualizing Cobain’s voice as an indexical conduit between his internal (embodied) self and the external world, resulting in corporeal exteriority, enhances the meaning of his lyrics and uncovers the frequently personal nature associated with his references to pain. Yet in order to develop a fuller and more accurate understanding of Cobain’s embodied pain and In Utero, it is necessary to consider the sonic materiality of the album’s instrumentation and its particular (and pronounced) conveyance of pain.

**Sonic Materiality and In Utero’s Musical Instrumentation**

One of the central aspects of English and music scholar Bruce Holsinger’s sweeping study *Music, Body and Desire in Medieval Culture: Hildegard of Bingen to Chaucer* involves how medieval musicality (musical-related thoughts and discourse in addition to music itself) often incorporated elements of pain and violence as a means of religious expression. As he observes, “The neoplatonic vocabularies that provided numerous premodern writers with a way of relating their disordered individuated selves to the harmonies of the universe could also serve to express the often searing agonies of life in a human body—especially a body poised at the threshold separating the human from the divine.”69 Two common examples of this process were compositions that were to be performed in conjunction with acts of “extreme asceticism” (such as self-flagellation), and writings that celebrated the sonorous qualities of Christ’s death on the

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cross, including his “dying moans.” Although these types of musicality often included descriptions and expressions of sweet melodies and harmonies, they remained fundamentally violent in their content and expression.

While Nirvana may not have possessed the ascetic fervor of Holsinger’s medieval subjects, the music of *In Utero* expresses similar “searing agonies of life” through dynamic, noisy compositions that were the band’s penchant, while progressing towards more raw and violent sonic properties. It defines what *Spin* journalist Eric Weisbard describes as “an honest attempt to portray life with Kurt Cobain’s famous stomach—the measure of beauty available to someone rolling around on a hotel bed, wavering between pain, spew, and fog.” Ultimately, the violent sonic materiality of *In Utero*’s music is arguably the central factor in our examination of pain and embodiment. The combination of searing visceral musical accompaniment with Cobain’s lyrics and vocals not only expresses qualities of pain, but also conceivably explicates the pain that Cobain is partially sharing with the listener.

The band’s calculated musical shift on *In Utero* is best understood in comparison to *Nevermind*, especially in terms of the album’s respective values. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Andy Wallace was largely responsible for creating *Nevermind*’s clean and accessible sound, which Nirvana would later criticize. In order to create a different sound for *In Utero*, the band picked Steve Albini, a veteran independent music performer and producer known for championing traditional and natural-sounding recording methods, to oversee the album’s production. As *Spin* journalist Charles Aaron writes, what results is “the difference between watching somebody get punched in the gut and

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70 Ibid., 197-240.
71 Eric Weisbard, “#18: Nirvana, In Utero,” *Spin* 15:9 (September 1999), 126. Weisbard’s piece was part of “The 90 Greatest Albums of the ‘90s,” which was the feature article for that particular issue.
being punched in the gut.” Albini recorded most of the guitar, bass and drum parts “live” (meaning that he recorded the instruments together instead of overdubbing each instrument individually), and did not add any equalization or artificial reverberation to anything (just as with Cobain’s voice), instead preferring to simply use several microphones placed around the recording room. The result is that each instrument is loud and clearly discernable in the mix, sounding incredibly—and in a sense, violently—present and alive to the listener. Additionally, the loud presence of the instrumentation, as Weisbard notes, shatters the equally conspicuous “dead air” that is present in the recording, marking its function as what Jaques Attali would call the “channelization of violence,” where the noise of music represents a violent interruption of silence.

Nirvana emphasizes these production effects with songs that Hampton describes as “fractured, spasmodic, [and] bent out of shape.” The band employs dissonance, distortion and powerful rhythms (among other sonic elements) to produce sounds resembling violent pain that both contribute to and support the presence of pain within Cobain’s lyrics and vocals. For example, it is not an accident that both Hampton and New Musical Express reviewer John Mulvey use the terms “bludgeoning” and “bludgeoned,” respectively, to describe the music of “Serve the Servants.” Cobain’s discordant guitar (including a squall of a solo) slices through the mix, while Krist’s bass and Dave’s drumming provide a contrasting rhythmic rumble. Combined with the effects

73 Azerrad, 317.
74 Wallach, 37.
75 Attali, 26-28.
76 Hampton, 99.
77 See Walser for a discussion concerning the signification of guitar distortion in heavy metal (41-46). Also, see Wallach, 47-48.
of Albini’s production, the song is essentially sonic pain, which emphasizes Cobain’s emotions concerning fame and his father. Similarly, “Scentless Apprentice” employs a gigantic riff that crunches with distortion, dissonant guitar leads that snake upward in their melody, and a booming mid-tempo beat to create perhaps the most oppressive-sounding song on the album. When Cobain unleashes his primal scream in the chorus, the guitar leads play in the background, matching the harsh timbre of his vocals. Elsewhere on the album, prominent guitars and intimidating beats abound, creating a darkly emotive atmosphere that is the perfect accompaniment for Cobain’s raspy ruminations on suffering.

However, *In Utero* is not entirely oppressive from a musical standpoint, for it includes several elements of pop harmonies and melodies, much like the mixture of sweetness and foreboding in the medieval musical examples cited earlier. These pop elements create a sonic dichotomy that highlights the album’s more painful sounds even further. Yet this effect also makes pain catchy by creating an easier and slightly more tuneful musical experience for the listener. “Heart-Shaped Box” is a detuned, lurching composition, but Cobain’s melodic arpeggio guitar lead exudes what Fricke calls a “frayed elegance.” Moreover, the song is mixed for radio play (one of the few commercial concessions made for the album), and follows the standard songwriting formula that Nirvana rode to success on *Nevermind*: soft, melodic verses that build up right before loud, intense choruses, with Cobain’s vocals matching the dynamic properties of the instruments. “Pennyroyal Tea,” which reviewers compared to the pop

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79 This is essentially an inversion of Attali’s argument that music often includes dissonance into harmonious structures to create resolvable “panic” and “anxiety.” (28).
80 Fricke, 64.
81 Cross notes that David Geffen Company hired noted producer Scott Litt to remix “Heart-Shaped Box” and “All Apologies”—the two eventual singles from the album—for commercial reasons (283).
styles of the Beatles and alternative-rock luminaries R.E.M., follows a similar pattern.\textsuperscript{82} Cobain’s quiet, bare-bones guitar backs his lyrics that intimately explore his physical ailments, before the song emerges in a chorus where both the vocals and instruments are roaring and overdriven, yet remain quite accessible. The result of songs like these is that the album’s instrumentation is musically brutal, but not unlistenable; filled with pain, but also containing ear-grabbing pop hooks and structures. It is notable that in contrast to his eventual displeasure with \textit{Nevermind}, Cobain was completely satisfied with how \textit{In Utero}’s musical combination of sonic hostility and harmony sounded.\textsuperscript{83} As Azerrad suggests, he had found a way to express his pain through combining his “pop instinct” and heavy, angry music “into one harmonious whole.”\textsuperscript{84}

Even after establishing the theory that recorded music contains meaningful embodied elements that impact the listener, we are left with the questions of 1) how to discern the affective potential of those properties in musical experience; and 2) how to conceptualize the potential reactions of the listener. This chapter attempted to provide an answer by arguing that previous studies of phenomenology, particularly in music scholarship, help uncover the active process of listening. I find that the phenomenological theories of the “mutual tuning-in relationship,” partial sharing, and carnal sense-making are all critical in discovering how the act of listening to recorded music represents a form of embodiment shared between the “lived bodies” performing on record and ourselves. With this in mind, my analysis of Nirvana’s \textit{In Utero} is an attempt to demonstrate the affective meanings that might emerge from that album’s embodied

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.; Hampton, 99.  
\textsuperscript{83} Azerrad, 317-318.  
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 320-321.
properties within musical experience—in particular, meanings that refer to Cobain’s personal pain that provided a heavily influential context for the album. This leads us to the second question of how the immediate impact that results from shared embodiment might correspond to the potential embodied responses of the listener. In the next chapter, I share some of my listening experiences of In Utero—as well as the reactions that accompanied those experiences—in an effort to both theorize the multitude of factors that affect our embodied responses to recorded music, and to explore how those factors and our corporeal responses constitute meaning within musical experience.
CHAPTER 3: IN UTERO AND LISTENING AS EMBODIED EXPERIENCE

My Active Listening to In Utero

To begin this chapter, I want to share a particular listening experience with In Utero that I had when I was fourteen. The purpose for this anecdote is to reflexively position my adolescent self as a research subject in order to undertake a phenomenological consideration of listening to recorded music. As I demonstrate, my reflections in this anecdote—and throughout this chapter—are an attempt to understand the specifics of my listening experience\(^1\) as a means of framing the act of music listening in general as an embodied and dynamic process.

A few months after I first purchased In Utero in the fall of 1994, I stayed overnight at my grandmother’s house in Terre Haute, Indiana, about twenty minutes from where I lived. As I always did whenever I went practically anywhere outside of home, I had brought my personal cassette player and a handful of cassettes with me, including In Utero. Given my particular music interests at the time, the other albums were probably from bands associated with the grunge genre or “Seattle sound;” Alice in Chains and Soundgarden were two bands in particular that I heavily favored. Yet I find it somewhat telling that In Utero is the only album I still remember having brought to my grandmother’s house for that visit. Although I had only really become serious about Nirvana around the time of Kurt Cobain’s suicide in April 1994, their music—dynamic, bracing, and just plain good—had completely captivated me, as I’m sure it did for millions of other fans. This was especially true of In Utero. As an awkward and nerdy

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\(^1\) I use the term “listening experience” in this chapter in place of “musical experience” for purposes of subject matter. Nevertheless, my use of the two terms is interchangeable—“listening experience” denotes the “musical experience” that I describe in the previous chapter.
fourteen year-old with oversized glasses and self-esteem issues, I felt that the album captured the anger I felt about myself, the environment of my high school, and the surrounding rural Indiana culture of my county. It was the kind of album that led me to near-irrationality because of how it delighted me—I distinctly remember making statements to my friends along the lines of, “Wouldn’t it be great if there were an all-Nirvana radio channel?” As such, *In Utero* maintained a constant presence in my boom box and personal cassette player, inspiring me to listen at hearing damage-inducing levels while I silently mouthed (or sang, depending upon the location) with Cobain. My visit to my grandmother’s house was no different in this regard.

As I turned out the light in the guest bedroom and got into bed, the small night-light near the head of the bed cast a dim glow across the wall and part of the ceiling. My surroundings were very quiet, despite the fact that we were in a midsize city and it wasn’t extremely late at night—every small sound stood out against the background of silence. As I lay down, I wrapped the headphones over my head and pressed the play button, hearing the familiar magnetic hiss that signified the beginning of the cassette. The jarring opening chord of “Serve the Servants” kicked in, and I concentrated intently upon Cobain’s vocals and the cacophonous intensity of the band. To my chagrin, I felt my eyelids beginning to grow heavy. I couldn’t fall asleep yet—I had to listen to the entire album! Determined to stay awake, the drum beat of “Scentless Apprentice” filled my ears as I stared upward at the ceiling, the glow of the night-light continuing to interrupt the otherwise thick darkness of the room. Nevertheless, I was losing my temporary war against sleep, and it was somewhere around “Heart-Shaped Box” that I drifted off for the
night. When I woke up in the morning, the headphones were still pressed against my ears, and I discovered that I had “listened” to the rest of the album without awakening.

Given the countless hours I have spent listening to music since childhood, listening at my grandmother’s house was no more special or noteworthy than others I have had with In Utero, or any other recorded music for that matter. Nevertheless, it is even in the most mundane and routine listening experiences that we find a wealth of actions and reactions, contexts, and influences that shape each experience into something wholly original and often quite memorable, as I would define this particular experience. Indeed, when we begin to conceptualize listening as a conscious experience that involves our entire body and exists in relation to our larger environment, then it is becomes much less tenable to argue that our listening habits are passive. I therefore suggest in this chapter that just as embodiment is central to the “mutual tuning-in relationship” that occurs between performer and listener, examining listener receptivity and responses through the lens of embodiment helps account for the power of musical experience, and establishes the personal and active roles our lived bodies play in the process as well. This also means that while our relation to others and our surroundings consistently mediates and influences our modes of listening, any consideration of those modes as passive, predictable, and static is (at best) based upon misguided and a priori thought concerning the nature of human experience, or (at worst) intentionally misleading. As Simon Frith contends, we “listen on the basis of who we are and what we musically know and expect, and we respond according to how and where and why we’re listening.”

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In order to establish the above ideas, I first use phenomenological and embodiment-based reasoning to briefly outline my argument of why listening to music is an embodied process. Consequently, my additional aim is to effectively counter any theory of passive listening such as Adorno’s. I then use my preceding anecdote of listening to *In Utero* as a framework for exploring my responses and some of the various dynamics that contributed to those responses, including my cultural background, the impact of personal memories and “places” that are associated with listening, the aural surroundings, or “soundscapes,” of the room and location in which I was sleeping, and my use of a personal cassette player with headphones. Continuing my argument from the first and second chapters, I find that examining my listening experience in relation to the recorded embodied properties of *In Utero*—including Cobain’s lyrics, his voice, and the sonic materiality of Nirvana’s music—provides further insight into my listening experience. It is my intention that analyzing this particular experience highlights my personal agency in being able to fall asleep to *In Utero*’s disquieting compositions, regardless of how Nirvana may have intended for listeners to receive the album. In a more general (but equally important) manner, studying an example of my personal listening habits demonstrates the unique and meaningful character of listening to recorded music in the context of our everyday lives.

**Listening as Embodied**

As I have discussed throughout this thesis, music scholarship has often failed to adequately address listening as an active and subjective process. Indeed, while most scholarly theories on listening stem from what is essentially a truism—music is powerful
enough to influence our bodies—they often proceed to simultaneously overestimate the control music has over us and underestimate our agentive capacity as listeners. Yet it is hardly fair to solely target music scholarship as responsible for this trend when we consider that, as Susan McClary finds, public outcry over “twin threats—subversion of authority and seduction by means of the body—constantly recurs throughout music history.” Indeed, the evolution of popular music in the twentieth century (and earlier, as McClary discusses) consistently involved public commentary about its supposed negative effects, politically motivated “moral panics,” and attempts to censor particular genres, including rock and rap. The historical (and ideological) import of passive listening theories within the public realm arguably ensures their continuance in some form or another. This trend, combined with the general academic dismissal of music listening, only increases the need and urgency to provide an alternative approach that not only accurately reflects the inherent value of listening, but also simply bears in mind that it is, for the overwhelming majority of us, a primary form of contact with music on a daily basis. As Daniel Cavicchi astutely asks, “What about me, the listener, the audience member, the music consumer? Am I not just as ‘musical?’”

In order to effectively counter the widespread assumption of passive listening, I would argue that returning to a phenomenological perspective provides the foundation for a solution to conceptualizing music listening. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty almost immediately establishes that any concept of experience in the world is not

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3 McClary, “Same As It Ever Was,” 36.
4 Ibid., 30.
“just” experience, but perceptual experience: “We must not, therefore, wonder whether we perceive a world, we must instead say: the world is what we perceive.”\(^7\) Just as important, he later asserts that “we shall need to reawaken our experience of the world as it appears to us in so far as we are in the world through our body, and in so far as we perceive the world with our body.”\(^8\) Similarly, Harris Berger argues in his study *Metal, Rock, and Jazz* that by “treating perception as social practice,” it is possible to demonstrate “how seemingly individual and microlevel acts are informed by and go to build up historical currents and the relatively stable forms of social life.”\(^9\) Thus, both Merleau-Ponty’s and Berger’s logical premise of experience resembles the following:

experience of the world = perceptual experience = embodied experience

This means that just like any other form of experience, the act of listening is an embodied activity where we constitute ourselves as what Vivian Sobchack calls both an “objective subject” and a “subjective object,” since our minds and bodies collectively contribute to this constitution.\(^10\) Cultural anthropologist Michael Jackson confirms this notion when he argues that humans “actively body forth the world; their bodies are not passively shaped by or made to fit the world’s purposes.”\(^11\) To deny this view when studying listening (or any other experience) is to risk *dismembering* that experience by reifying the traditional (and misguided) dichotomy between mind and body—a strategy that denies the basic essence of human experience.\(^12\)

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7 Merleau-Ponty, xviii.
8 Ibid., 239 (emphasis added).
9 Berger, 14.
10 Sobchack, 288 (emphasis removed).
11 Jackson, 136. The term “body forth” is originally found in Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*.
12 Ibid., 123.
Yet how do we account for the fact that social and cultural factors around us shape and impact our listening habits, while avoiding the temptation to draw deterministic conclusions? Jackson also addresses this problem through his use of the term “body-mind-habitus.”

Originating from the cultural theory of Pierre Bourdieu, *habitus* refers to what Bourdieu terms “systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*” which are responsible for conditioning our bodily habit and behavior through interactivity with the objects and people within it. As Jackson notes:

Forms of body use ("technique du corps") are conditioned by our relationship with others, such as the way bodily dispositions which we come to regard as “masculine” or “feminine” are encouraged and reinforced in us by our parents and peers...According to this view, collective representations such as those of gender and class are always correlated with patterns of body use generated within the *habitus*.

In other words, the *habitus* influences how we “body forth” by shaping our lived practices in accordance with particular social and cultural factors, which can range from constructed identity concepts concerning gender, class, and race to the sensory impact of human interaction around us. Consequently, we must acknowledge the potential presence and impact of those factors within our environment as we listen to recorded music. Nevertheless—and this is crucial—Jackson contends that “the habitual or ‘set’ relations between ideas, experiences, and body practices may be broken,” allowing us to express ourselves in a manner that circumvents social and cultural expectations. As his term “body-mind-habitus” signifies, this means that although the surrounding environment certainly affects and shapes listening habits, the listener retains the embodied, agentive ability to create and modify his/her experiences in a manner that

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13 Ibid., 131.
15 Jackson, 128 (emphasis in original).
16 Ibid., 129.
diverges from, interrupts, or otherwise resists conformity. I do not wish to suggest that we should avoid seeking the patterns and similarities that exist among listening habits—indeed, that is a primary goal of my analysis in this chapter. Rather, it is a mistake to generically categorize how and in what ways the listener contributes to those patterns when listening is a very specifically embodied activity that occurs in specific contexts, resulting in a potential myriad of differences between each listening experience.

This still leaves us with the question of how much power recorded music itself might have over our listening habits. It is here that I wish to recall my assertion in the second chapter that musical elements themselves—including the embodied properties I have examined throughout this thesis—only partially establish feeling and meaning within our musical experiences since the listener ultimately constitutes what the music is “about” to him or her. I would argue that considering the act of listening as an embodied and contextualized experience recognizes the power of recorded music without overvaluing what it does to us. Music certainly has the ability to affect us in a physically and emotionally salient manner because of its ability to make “full use of the properties of sound to move the body in ways in which speech cannot,” as Jeremy Wallach notes.17 Yet as Tia DeNora reminds us, “Music’s role as a resource for configuring emotional and embodied agency is not one that can be predetermined (because it is a resource that must be appropriated by music consumers).”18 Regardless of music’s affective potential, it does not make us do or feel anything because of the unpredictable nature of the listener’s

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17 Wallach, 36.
subjectivity within his or her particular contexts of experience, and the embodied perceptions and reactions that result.\textsuperscript{19}

Because of the fact that no two listening experiences are alike, my analysis in the remainder of this chapter is an effort to not just describe my specific constitution of a particular listening experience, but also (and more importantly) to outline some of the factors that affect our listening experiences in general. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate the value and necessity of at least attempting to understand how we utilize the social, musical, and corporeal influences within our lives to create complex and heterogeneous interactions with recorded music.

\textbf{Embodied Listening and \textit{In Utero}}

In deconstructing my anecdote of listening to \textit{In Utero} at my grandmother’s house, it is relatively easy to determine a basic interpretation to my reaction of falling asleep less than three songs into the album. For example, while Wallach argues that music naturally contains an “\textit{audiotactile}” quality that “literally moves the listener,” \textit{In Utero}’s musical combination of sonic hostility and harmony is arguably notable for what he would term its “transgressive” nature—a type of music that is “more likely to produce a strong response.”\textsuperscript{20} This is especially evident in Nirvana’s reliance upon particular sonic signifiers—including intense vocals, distortion, and detuned guitars\textsuperscript{21}—that are

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 74; Cavicchi, \textit{Tramps Like Us}, 113.
\textsuperscript{20} Wallach, 42 (emphasis in original).
\textsuperscript{21} During the height of the grunge genre in the early to mid-1990s, several bands helped popularize the “drop-D” guitar tuning, where the lowest E string is a full step lower than normal. The result is a limited range of extra chords that contain lower root notes than are possible with standard tuning, producing a slightly heavier guitar sound (depending upon the band using the tuning). For a few of Nirvana’s songs on \textit{In Utero} (“Scentless Apprentice,” “Heart-Shaped Box,” “All Apologies”) Cobain went a step further by detuning all six strings (creating an E-flat tuning) and then dropping the lowest string a full step (creating a “drop D-flat” tuning), creating a distinctly dark guitar tone on those three songs. The guitars on the rest of \textit{In Utero} are in “standard” E-flat tuning. The tablature book \textit{Nirvana: In Utero} (Hal Leonard Corporation,
prevalent within punk and heavy metal, two musical genres that have historically developed reputations for inspiring active, kinetic levels of participation on the part of the listener. Robert Walser, for example, finds that on a basic level, the rhythmic structure of heavy metal is able to “rouse physical energy and cue collective participation in heavy metal’s version of dancing, headbanging.”  

Additionally, Nirvana uses familiar rock and pop structures—such as melodic hooks, and calculated dynamics—that we commonly associate with forms of bodily movement, but are at times less strident and forceful in their sonic structure. Because of this amalgamation of musical elements, *In Utero* is theoretically capable of inspiring both strong physical responses (such as headbanging), and smaller ones, especially during its softer moments (keeping time with one’s hand/foot/head, humming along). Therefore, falling asleep to such music (despite its transgressive nature) was not extraordinary in this regard because of how many times I had heard the music before.

Nevertheless, this basic explanation—while containing some value—only scratches the surface of my listening experience at my grandmother’s house. In an academic consideration of any specific listening experience (not just my own), I would argue that four elements are particularly useful for understanding the context of the experience itself and the corporeal reactions of the listener, thus warranting further discussion in this chapter: 1) the relation of my cultural background and identity to *In Utero*; 2) my establishment of personal memories and a sense of “place” while listening; 3) the extramusical aural elements of my environment that were a part of my experience;

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1994) and numerous Nirvana- and tablature-related websites provide further information on Cobain’s tunings.

22 Walser, 49.
and 4) my use of specific playback technologies—in this case, a personal cassette player with headphones.

*Cultural Identity/Background*

A primary factor in shaping how I experienced Nirvana—and consequently, *In Utero*—was my ability to relate my cultural background to the generational and racial politics that Nirvana’s music ultimately encompassed. As I discuss in the first chapter, the commercial success and critical acclaim that both *Nevermind* and *In Utero* received led to the popular notion that Kurt Cobain was the “voice” of “Generation X” that not only represented a zeitgeist of apathy and alienation, but also addressed the cultural concerns of young people attempting to separate themselves from the baby-boomer generation of their parents. Looking backward from a critical perspective today, it is easy to see that this notion is extremely tenuous and problematic not only in terms of Cobain’s uneasy relationship with the fans from his generation\(^\text{23}\) (which I document in the second chapter), but also from a larger cultural perspective. As cultural scholar Bakari Kitwana writes in his recent study *The Hip-Hop Generation*, the term “Generation X” alone essentially homogenizes cultural differences across a broad swath of people: “Just as Black baby boomers were mostly defined by the civil rights and Black power movements, Black twenty-somethings were more than just Generation Xers in Black face…Hip-hop kids did not represent a nation any more than they were carbon copies of white Generation Xers.”\(^\text{24}\) Like many other forms of art and commerce associated with

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\(^\text{23}\) Ibid: “The central aspect of generation X’s cultural-political agenda, a general sense of alienation, can be discovered in Cobain’s lyrics, in Nirvana’s music, and in many dour anecdotes from Cobain’s life. However, a problem emerges when one leaps to the conclusion that Cobain’s musical (and poetic) endeavors were therefore part and parcel of a larger cultural movement that wished to disown the cultural-political agendas of the previous generation” (736).

the concept of Generation X, the corporations in charge of marketing Nirvana to the American audience—notably their record label, Geffen Records, and MTV—seemed to focus on young white youth more than any other demographic. This is especially true considering that the most popular grunge/"Seattle sound" bands of the period, including Nirvana, were almost completely composed of white men playing rock music, which itself has been a historical part of hegemonic practices intended to increase predominantly white target audiences.25

As an eleven-and thirteen-year-old white male when *Nevermind* and *In Utero* came out, respectively, I was “on the cusp” of the generation that Nirvana’s music supposedly represented. I vividly remember watching the video for “Smells Like Teen Spirit,” its anarchic overtones comprising a video unlike any other I had ever seen, and discussing it excitedly with my friends at school. Nirvana’s music was everywhere, it seemed, and it was incredibly exciting for me during a time when my musical tastes were in their very early period of gestation. Even after the release of the less commercial-friendly *In Utero*, DJ’s would play “Heart-Shaped Box” at school dances when I was in junior high (to mixed reactions—some kids liked it, while others clearly preferred the hit singles from *Nevermind*). Cobain’s suicide shook me, because I felt he belonged to us—“us” being my generation, though I failed to understand the cultural constructs and biases behind that idea at the time. Although I only owned *Nevermind* when he died, Nirvana already felt very familiar to me when I finally purchased *In Utero*. It is, in large part, because of my perceived role as a member of “Generation X” that Nirvana (along with

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social discourse about Nirvana, including that of my friends and classmates) maintained a near-constant presence during my adolescence. Our development of aesthetic judgments toward certain types of music always develops in relation to social and cultural interactions with other people and ideas.²⁶ Therefore, the band’s ubiquity contributed to my willingness to listen to their music, and arguably affected my increasing appreciation for them. This appreciation would probably have been different had my cultural identity—a young, middle-class white male from the Midwest, a critical geographical area for highly popular rock bands—been less compatible with the social and generational demographics of Nirvana’s target audience. Perhaps the best way to describe it is that liking Nirvana felt quite natural to me, and was not an acquired taste for me as a young music listener and fan.

In suggesting a correlation between my cultural identity and how I viewed Nirvana, I want to emphasize that while cultural factors were partially responsible for my initial interest in Nirvana, it was what I heard and felt during my embodied experiences with their music that ultimately solidified my appreciation for them. After I purchased In Utero, I became fascinated with all of its unique elements, such as the scraping guitars and thunderous rhythms on songs like “Scentless Apprentice,” the dark pop of “Pennyroyal Tea,” and Cobain’s frail voice throughout the album. All of the songs seemed to penetrate my body and mind, giving me chills and goose bumps while inspiring me to imitate Cobain’s vocals through mimesis. Therefore, it was only a short period of time before I became very comfortable with In Utero, listening to it at different times of the day with different corresponding reactions. Just as Cavicchi argues that music listening in the Western world is often a “fleeting” activity that occurs among the

²⁶ Frith, Performing Rites, 8-20; Cavicchi, Tramps Like Us, 113.
“mundane” elements of everyday life,27 the album became part of the fabric of my existence of that time, as I would play it in the periods before, during, and after school and the other activities and responsibilities I had at the time. Because of my comfort with listening to *In Utero* in a variety of situations, it was not unusual for me to listen while in bed at night. Even during the some of the album’s most aggressive moments, I was able to relax to what I heard, finding a peaceful solace in Cobain’s raspy voice and guitar distortion. This was certainly no different at my grandmother’s house, where I became gradually more relaxed while listening to the album’s first two songs until I could no longer stay awake.

*Establishing Personal Memories and “Place”*

One of the primary reasons why I eventually found *In Utero* so enjoyable to listen to during practically any point in my day was the fact that it inspired me to constantly imagine past events, future possibilities, and scenarios that were otherwise removed from the actual time-space continuum in which my listening experiences took place. This conjuring of personal memories and a music-oriented “place” is arguably a byproduct of what Alfred Schutz calls “inner time,” which, as I discussed in second chapter, is the place where the listener “connects” with the performer apart from “outer” (actual) time.28 Listening in inner time allows us to develop our own interpretations of musical meaning not only by understanding the perspective of the performer, but by applying what we hear to the context of our personal life and establishing intimate, self-oriented connections. For example, in his analysis of the various “interpretive moves”

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28 Schutz, 113-114.
that fans utilize while listening to Bruce Springsteen, Daniel Cavicchi contends that
“Springsteen is important to fans primarily because…his music ‘touched’ them in some
lasting way,” resulting in the development of “personal associations,” or memories, with
his music.29

Popular music scholar Sara Cohen takes this idea a step further by arguing that
music listening can result in a personal production of “place” from which memories can
emerge. In her ethnographic study of Jack Levy, an eighty-eight-year-old Jewish resident
of Liverpool, England, she notes the following:

“…music enables Jack to travel in an imaginary sense to different times and places. Illustrating
how music inspires his fantasy, transporting him from one place and immersing him somewhere
else, Jack described his Monday afternoons at a Liverpool ballroom during the 1920s. Monday,
he explained, was traditionally washing day. The women used to take off their aprons after a hard
morning’s work, do their hair, put on their finery, and take the bus to the city center, arriving at the
ballroom for the 2:30 P.M. start. Jack once danced there to a tune entitled “In a Garden in Italy,”
and he enthused about how the music made him picture that garden, and how wonderful that
experience was. Jack said of music: ‘It doesn’t matter if it’s dance music or what, it’s there in my
radio, and you’re in another world. It takes you to a new world.’ ”30

As Jack’s comments indicate, music is powerful enough to place us in “another world”
that is apart from our concrete everyday circumstances. Cohen finds that Jack is able to
do this precisely because music is “not just represented and interpreted: it is also heard,
felt and experienced.”31 The embodied nature of music allows Jack to listen and respond
in a manner that reminds him of past experiences, which consequently leads to his
creation of reflexive, imaginary “places” that often incorporate those past experiences.32

I believe that this is a crucial—and-common—element of the listening experience in
general. Similar to the concept of “actual” established, concrete places always existing in

29 Cavicchi, Tramps Like Us, 120.
30 Sara Cohen, “Sounding Out the City: Music and the Sensuous Production of Place,” in The Place of
269 (emphasis added).
31 Ibid., 267, 275.
32 Ibid., 267.
relation to our subjective thoughts, ideas, and memories about those places, our ability to create alternative “places” or “worlds” through music emerges from the listener’s embodied responses and the *evocative* quality of those responses. We commonly describe music as a form of escape or way to “lose ourselves” (so to speak) because that is precisely what our sensual and imaginative perception does within the inner time that is an inherent part of the musical experience.

When I began thinking of my listening experiences with *In Utero* that would be useful for analysis in this chapter, I initially found it slightly surprising that falling asleep to the album at my grandmother’s house continues to stand out in my mind. Upon reflection, I realize that my ability to become completely lost in different times and “places” while listening to the album is exactly why I remember that specific event. It was always easy to replay past scenarios in my mind while Nirvana’s music blared; for example, if I was being especially self-critical, Cobain’s roar of “What is wrong with me?” (from “Very Ape”) became a question I turned against myself as I thought of previous mistakes I had made, both real and imagined. Somewhat similarly, I would often build upon existing memories by imagining or fantasizing events that had never happened, such as playing the guitar parts to “Heart-Shaped Box” in my school’s band room. In those moments, it did not matter that I played alto saxophone, not guitar, and that I was not Kurt Cobain! At night, when I would listen to *In Utero* in bed, it was common for me to “float away” blissfully to my past, possible future, or a combination of the two, using previous perceptions, interactions, and experiences to guide my way. Just

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as listeners are capable of feeling a range of emotions from a single artist, I could gradually unwind my body and find solace in this embodied state instead of responding with more outward aggression and tension that often characterized my listening experiences during the day. I cannot remember exactly what I was imagining at my grandmother’s, but I am almost positive that I was in my own “place” while listening. It is a primary reason why seemingly mundane listening experiences in our everyday lives can become incredibly noteworthy and profound connections with recorded music.

*Aural Surroundings/Soundscapes*

When I was younger, most of my listening experiences with *In Utero* constituted personal attempts to create a sonic “barrier” around me, essentially drowning out or cutting off any noise outside the music that I might have found distracting. On the school bus, I would keep turning up my personal cassette player until Nirvana’s instrumentation was noticeably clear over the loud chatter of the other kids and the roar of the bus engine; at home, I would adjust the volume levels of my boombox to avoid hearing my parents and the living room television. Whenever I listened in bed, such as at my grandmother’s, I found it pleasant that Nirvana didn’t have to compete with other noises. Every aspect of their music could stand out because of the silence that surrounded me, allowing for a more concentrated, intimate mode of listening on my part.

It was only recently when I realized that regardless of the location or level of volume interference, our aural surroundings *always* exist in dialectical relation to how we listen to music, even when I succeeded (and succeed) in cutting myself off from those surroundings. The work of communications scholar R. Murray Schafer is among the first to explore this relationship by using the term “soundscape” (which he coined in the
1970s) to refer to the “sonic environment” around us.\textsuperscript{34} In tracing the historical development of “the relationship between man and the sounds of his environment,” Schafer argues that modern civilization in general has increasingly produced technology and “noise” that masks, uproots, and dislocates the “natural” ecological sounds of our life in our environment, resulting in a soundscape that, as a form of “noise pollution,” negatively affects our listening abilities.\textsuperscript{35} More recently, historian Emily Thompson defines a soundscape as “an auditory or aural landscape…it is both a world and a culture constructed to make sense of that world.”\textsuperscript{36} With this definition, she shifts focus away from Schafer’s valuing of “nature” and concentrates instead upon both sounds and the “material objects” that create those sounds within the cultural and geographical contexts of “civilization,” as well as how the resulting soundscapes related to cultural changes in listening.\textsuperscript{37}

Thompson’s distinction is crucial, for it allows us to theorize that different physical environments produce distinct sounds that affect not only how we perceive those particular environments,\textsuperscript{38} but also—with regard to the topic at hand—the ways in which we listen to music within those environments. Douglas Kahn provides an example in his analysis of avant-garde composer John Cage’s “silent” composition “4’ 33.” Because the listener does not have to worry about the musicality of the composition itself, it is easy to note the environmental sounds that surround the listener, since musicality shifts to

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{34} R. Murray Shafer, \textit{The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World} (Rochester: Destiny, [1977] 1994), 274.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 3-4, 90-91, 206-208
\item \textsuperscript{36} Emily Thompson, \textit{The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900-1933} (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 1.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 1-2. While “civilization” is perhaps a culturally loaded term—especially in comparison with “nature”—Thompson uses it to signify urban manmade landscapes, as opposed to natural habitats.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Sterne, 96.
\end{itemize}
those sounds instead.\footnote{Kahn, 158-159.} Additionally, music theorist Ola Stockfelt offers another example: “The symphony that in the concert hall or on earphones can give an autonomous intramusical experience, tuning one’s mood to the highest tension and shutting out the rest of the world, may in the café give the same listeners a mildly pleasant, relaxed separation from the noise of the street.”\footnote{Ola Stockfelt, “Adequate Modes of Listening,” in \textit{Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music}, 89.} Importantly, Stockfelt is careful to note with these examples that the environmental sounds are not controlling the listening experience. Rather, the listener is capable of constituting their experience with music “in a variety of different ways in different situations,” adjusting to the varied sonic characteristics of each soundscape.\footnote{Ibid.} We could thus say that soundscapes mediate our listening experiences without overriding our embodied and agentive capacity.

How, then, does the soundscape of relative silence that surrounded me at my grandmother’s house figure into the listening experience? In addition to Kahn’s example mentioned above, Susan Sontag provides an answer in her essay “The Aesthetics of Silence”: ‘Silence’ never ceases to imply its opposite and to depend on its presence…Not only does silence exist in a world full of speech and other sounds, but any given silence has its identity as a stretch of time being perforated by sound.”\footnote{Susan Sontag, “The Aesthetics of Silence,” in \textit{Styles of Radical Will} (New York: Picador, [1969] 2002), 11.} Just as I assert in the first chapter that sound kills silence, we can invert and reword the assertion to say that silence emphasizes sound when the latter becomes audible. I enjoyed listening to \textit{In Utero}—as well as Nirvana in general—while in bed because everything in their music stood out so clearly without having to “compete” against other loud noises. The same sonic stillness at my grandmother’s that made other noises—the small creaks and groans

\begin{footnotes}
\item Kahn, 158-159.
\item Ola Stockfelt, “Adequate Modes of Listening,” in \textit{Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music}, 89.
\item Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
of her Victorian-era house, my adjustments in bed to become comfortable—seem louder than they actually were also made *In Utero* sound even more powerful than normal. Much like my ability to “float away” to different memories and “places,” I found this perceived sense of heightened musical power to be relaxing because it allowed me to identify with what I was hearing in a manner that felt closer and more personal that at other times—it was as if the band was playing for my ears only, and Cobain’s painful lyrics and vocals were addressed only to the circumstances in my life. Even though this relaxation (combined with my physiological need for rest) resulted in my drifting off to sleep while I was still listening, it was this type of listening experience that I felt was a perfect way to end my day—one that would have been different if not for the quiet, mediating presence of the soundscape that was around me.

*Personal Stereos*

In using terms such as solace, close, and personal to describe my feelings while listening to *In Utero* at my grandmother’s, I am certain that my use of a personal cassette player with headphones is just as important as the other factors I have mentioned that are a part of my embodied response. Indeed, I would argue that the basic characteristic of personal stereos—the ability to allow for what sociologist Jean-Paul Thibaud calls both “mobile” and “secret” modes of listening\(^\text{43}\)—seems particularly conducive for the type of listening experience that I have outlined in this chapter. Yet it is our understanding of how the listener actively uses personal stereos to create “mobile” and “secret” experiences that is ultimately useful for outlining embodied listening. More specifically, personal stereos allow the listener to manage or control the potential influence and

\(^{43}\) Jean-Paul Thibaud, “The Sonic Composition of the City,” in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, 330 (emphasis removed).
interference of the soundscape that surrounds him/her in order to constitute meaningful listening experiences, regardless of the location in which they take place.

Recent scholarship on personal stereos specifically focuses upon their usage in public urban environments and how the listener responds to the various soundscapes that he/she encounters. In this context, listening is “private” in the sense that the personal stereo user is conceivably the only one who can listen to the music, but also “public” because of the listener’s interaction within the urban environment.44 Despite this binary opposition, cultural scholars Michael Bull, Les Black and Ian Chambers all argue that the listener can actively integrate and/or exclude various elements of the public soundscape into their own private experience with music.45 This process of management can be as simple as turning down the personal stereo’s volume in order to hear sounds from another person or object, or turning it up to prevent such sounds from becoming intrusive (just as how I would turn up my cassette player while listening on the school bus in order to eliminate noise from the bus engine and other students). The listener is therefore able to decompose and reconfigure elements of the soundscape as part of his/her experience.46 Chambers compares this to that of a DJ who makes distinct musical collages out of different sounds: “Each listener/player selects and rearranges the surrounding soundscape, and, in constructing a dialogue with it, leaves a trace in the network.”47

Combined with the embodied factors and processes of listening I have already discussed in this chapter, the listener’s management of soundscapes through personal stereo usage consequently results in an embodied experience that is intensely and creatively personal.

44 Bull, 18.
46 Thibaud, 329.
47 Chambers, 99.
As Bull and Black write, “Walkmans are the iconic urban technology of privatization, permitting users to construct their own individualized sound world wherever they go.”

Much like the earlier question I pose concerning quieter soundscapes, this leaves us with the need to address personal stereo listening experiences in the private sphere, with its corresponding private—and often more quiet—soundscapes (which the above scholars do not adequately address). It is plausible to suggest that the same process of sonic appropriation and rearrangement can occur with private personal stereo usage, producing the same result of unique, individualized listening experiences. Although I did not have to worry about blocking out loud noises at my grandmother’s house, I still retained the agency to incorporate the various ambient sounds—my shifting in bed, the sounds of the house itself—as part of the experience. I felt like I had even more control listening to *In Utero* in bed because I could turn up the volume of my personal cassette player to emphasize the cacophony of Cobain’s guitar and the pounding of Dave Grohl’s drums, but could also keep the volume at a level that would allow outside sounds to filter into what Thibaud calls the “‘primary earshell’” of my headphones. Through this management, I was able to (as Bull asserts) establish a relationship with my experiential environment that emphasized the autonomous development of my embodied response to

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48 Bull and Black, 9.
49 Aside from Thibaud’s brief discussion of how personal stereos denote a completed transition from the home to public, (i.e., “Listening to headphones begins outside the home;” 333), the concept of personal stereo usage outside of public contexts seems to remain largely unexamined. The only exception (of which I am currently aware) is the following passage in Sara Thornton’s study *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1996): “Walls of sound are used to block out the clatter of family and flatmates, to seclude the private space of the bedroom with records and radio and even to isolate ‘head space’ with personal stereos like the Walkman” (19). Even in the case of Thibaud, his transitional theory, while quite reasonable within the framework of his argument, is essentially an assumption that the listener would not use a personal stereo inside the home (or even begin using the personal stereo before stepping outside the home), which is theoretically untenable.
50 Thibaud, 340.
the music. Because of the tranquil soundscape of the bedroom and the already private nature of my personal stereo use, this meant that I gradually embodied the stillness of my environment as part of my listening experience, allowing me to relate to *In Utero* and create my own cognitive “place” in a manner that was soothing for my entire body. It did not matter that Cobain’s voice sounded tortured and the music was discordant and jarring; just as I utilized louder public soundscapes during the day as a partial means of fostering aggressive forms of embodied listening, my listening experience at my grandmother’s involved softer soundscapes that allowed me to react in an entirely different manner to those same songs, gently ending my day with the headphones remaining wrapped around my head.

After establishing the embodied aspects of both particular properties of recorded music and the relationship that exists between recorded music and the listener, this chapter asserts that embodiment remains central to the listening process itself. Just as Merleau-Ponty argues that conscious experience always involves a corporeal “intentionality,” the act of listening, while always subject to the cultural *habitus* of the listener, represents an agentive “bodying forth” that is highly personalized. The establishment of listening as inherently embodied consequently counters the traditional belief—existing both within music scholarship and in the public sphere—that listening is a passive, externally determined, and predictable activity. Therefore, our goal should not be continuing the development of generic, presupposed models of listening, but instead discovering the myriad of contextual elements that the listener draws upon to constitute embodied experiences with music. Using my own experience of listening to *In Utero*

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51 Bull, 44.
52 Merleau-Ponty, 158-159.
while in bed one night at my grandmother’s house, I demonstrate that considering the issues of my cultural identity, my ability to create alternative “places,” the impact of my surrounding soundscape, and my ability to actively manage that soundscape through my use of a personal stereo with headphones are all useful in explaining how I established my particular listening experience and why I was able to relax and fall asleep to the abrasive songs at the beginning of the album. In providing analysis of these elements, I do not wish to suggest that these are the only factors that are significant to listening experiences, but that they offer an initial perspective for not only my specific experience, but also other listening experiences. It is my wish that other scholars and I will be able to expand our knowledge and understanding of the possible factors influencing embodied listening in future studies. For now, I hope that sharing one of my past listening experiences and its context demonstrates the power of listening and the naturally active role of our lived bodies in the process.
CONCLUSION

While I was researching various phenomenological studies for this thesis, I found it striking how the ideas of change and transition remained fundamental to phenomenology during the last century, regardless of the philosophical differences that existed within the literature. As musicologist F. Joseph Smith writes, “Why do we call phenomenology transitional? Because it was never meant to be the last word on anything. Its whole aim, we might say, was to overcome a static tradition in philosophy and science and their questionable ‘realism.’ ”¹ Because perceptual experience is always fluid, phenomenology, seeking to capture the basis and meaning of experience, has also remained fluid, eschewing concrete truths in favor of theories that attempt to understand what experience is like, and are thus subject to revision.

The willingness of phenomenology to both conceptualize experience as transitional and remain transitional itself is a primary impetus behind my effort to answer an increasingly insistent question: how can music scholarship continue to justify marginalizing the experience of listening to recorded music—an experience that allows listeners to constitute the meaning and impact of what they hear? As I argue in this thesis, it is impossible to believe that listening is passive without also denying our lived bodies as the very basis of any worldly experience. Consequently, it is, at the least, useful to study listening as an embodied activity that is subject to the numerous contexts of our worldly environment, yet is always active and agentive in the sense that we—our lived bodies—constitute our listening experiences from and in relation to those contexts. In order to properly establish this contention, I started with recorded music itself. Using

¹ Smith, 253.
Nirvana’s *In Utero* as the focal example of my study (as well as their album *Nevermind* for purposes of contextualization), I demonstrated that certain properties of Nirvana’s music—Kurt Cobain’s lyrics, the “grain” of his sung voice, and the sonic materiality of the band’s instrumentation—are specifically embodied properties that directly relate to the past and contemporary bodily experiences of the performers themselves. Although these properties cannot explain the dynamic nature of listening by themselves, they offer an initial perspective of how listening involves responding to embodied stimuli. I then moved to a phenomenological investigation of the relationship that exists between recorded music and the listener, finding that three theories in particular—the “mutual tuning-in relationship,” partial sharing, and carnal sense-making—help provide an understanding of that shared relationship as being embodied, therefore resulting in the understanding of listening as an embodied activity. Incorporating these theories into a phenomenology-informed analysis of *In Utero* highlights the possible embodied meanings of that album, notably the presence of Cobain’s own pain and suffering. Finally, I used phenomenological and embodiment theories to debunk traditional theories of listening as passive, thereby asserting the highly individual and contextualized nature of embodied listening. By doing so, it becomes possible to concentrate upon the potential factors that listeners may utilize in constituting their experiences, including cultural identity, the creation of “place,” soundscapes, and specific usage of playback technologies (in my case, a personal stereo with headphones) that are a part of a personal experience I share involving listening to *In Utero* at my grandmother’s house.

Given the centrality of Nirvana to my argument, I posit that this thesis highlights the potential academic value of studying the band and specifically their *musical output,*
particularly from the standpoint of listener receptivity. Because of Kurt’s Cobain’s 1994 suicide—which remains a singular moment in music history, given that no prominent rock musician had ever committed suicide in such a manner\(^2\)—and the personal struggles that preceded his death (as well as his ascendant status within rock history afterward), it is certainly worthwhile for scholars to examine his lyrics and the emotional, reflexive elements that they contain. Yet as I have alluded throughout this thesis, adopting a logocentric approach towards Nirvana—a tendency that musicologist Mark Mazullo correctly identifies as existing within current scholarship on the band\(^3\)—results in an inadequate explanation of not only Cobain’s unique subjectivity and its potential meanings, but also the musical value of Nirvana and the band’s ability to impact audiences in a powerful manner. Twelve years after Cobain’s suicide, it is perhaps easy to forget that the band’s music was (and remains) central to their sustained critical and mass popularity. Indeed, considering Nirvana’s use of pronounced sonic dynamics and marriage of seemingly disparate musical styles (punk, metal and pop)—and their ability to execute those elements with energy and strong songwriting—reminds us of how countless “alternative” rock bands sought to imitate their sound during the 1990s. This development, in turn, is perhaps a testament to how Nirvana might have affected their listeners, and therefore should be an impetus for scholars to analyze the visceral nature of the band and its affective possibilities upon listeners. Moreover (as I have noted), it is within Nirvana’s music (and Cobain’s vocals) that we find embodied aspects of Cobain’s subjectivity that, in coincidence with his lyrics, tell us more about his own outlook and perspective, such as the personal pain that appears on *In Utero*. My reliance upon

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\(^3\) Mazullo, 744.
phenomenology and embodiment to examine Nirvana from a receptive standpoint has been an effort to adequately address these issues, thereby representing my aim to offer a new, more satisfying direction for future scholarship on the band.

Additionally, in using phenomenology (as well as scholarship from several other disciplines) to contend that listening is an embodied and agentive activity, my goal is for this thesis to offer a model of listening that remains open to debate and modification, yet is absolutely explicit in demonstrating that scholars must consider listening as an experience that is invaluable to understanding music. It is simply not adequate to treat music listening as less important than musical performance, or as an unfortunate byproduct of dominant social forces, or even as something that requires advanced musical training and practice for one to do “properly.” This is not to dismiss the use of traditional methods to discover more about listening—indeed, approaches such as formal musicological analysis can be helpful in thinking more deeply about listening, such as Susan McClary’s semiotic considerations of music and the body that I mention in the introduction.4 Rather, these approaches must also acknowledge listening as perceptual and grounded in experience, remembering that our body always exists in relation to our subjectivity and the world in which we interact.5 Without attempting to overstate the value of this paradigm shift, a serious and widespread incorporation of the listening experience, and the musical meaning that it entails, has the potential to revolutionize our basic understanding of what music does to us and for us. It will not provide easy answers when we consider the sheer diversity of how we listen to music and

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4 This is especially true for her body-centered discussion of Madonna in *Feminine Endings* (148-166).
5 Merleau-Ponty, 504.
correspondingly react, but it will allow for a more intellectually open, honest, and ultimately fulfilling conceptualization of music and its dynamic nature.
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