Sounding Subjectivity: Music, Gender, and Intimacy

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

Lindsay Marie Bernhagen

Graduate Program in Comparative Studies

The Ohio State University

2013

Dissertation Committee:

Professor Barry Shank, Advisor
Professor Mary E. Thomas
Professor Maurice E. Stevens
Copyright by
Lindsay Marie Bernhagen
2013
Abstract

This dissertation centers on the role of musical experience in the production and maintenance of intimate, interpersonal relationships. Music acquires meaning in its ability to enable and amplify personal relationships among participants who share musical experience—not only through the semiotic decoding of lyrics and musical sounds that characterizes much music scholarship. Because there is scant language available for describing musical experience without reference to non-sonic elements such as lyrics, communal identity, or performers’ personae, this research relies on textual and ethnographic methods to examine how human experiences of musical sound are understood via racialized and gendered discourses of embodiment, intimacy, pleasure, and danger.

Specifically, this project consists of textual analyses of music censorship discourse and ethnographic analyses of female musicians and listeners who seek out shared musical experiences in explicitly gendered contexts including a feminist punk movement, a girls’ rock music camp, and a long-standing women’s music festival. The introductory chapter offers an overview of the scholarship and theory that has influenced this project and sets up the theoretical framework I have developed through my own research. To establish the stakes of this project, the second chapter focuses on discourses of musical danger to reveal
a persistent and anxious fascination with music’s relationship to the body and intimacy in the American imagination. Subsequent chapters explore how music is deployed precisely for its ability to engage the body, incite pleasure, and enable intimacy. The first of these case studies takes as its subject riot grrrl, a 1990s feminist punk movement, in order to explore how musical intimacy was enabled within the movement through its “Girls to the Front” policy, and how efforts to forge relationships through shared, embodied musical experience served as antidotes to young women’s gendered experiences of isolation and violation. The next chapter, which emerges from ethnographic research performed at the Girlz Rhythm ‘n’ Rock Camp, a week-long overnight summer camp in central Ohio reconsiders the tendency to frame these types of programs as spaces for girls’ agency and empowerment. Drawing from interviews with the campers, I suggest that the girls see their shared musical experiences at camp (and beyond) as moments of reprieve from the compulsion toward individualism that undergirds empowerment discourse. In the final of these case studies, I argue that the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival is imagined as a “safe-space” where gendered communualism is enabled through shared musical engagement, and that experiences had at the festival are more profoundly distinguished by this than by the oft-cited feminist coalition-building and consciousness-raising.

Women and girls are centered for multiple reasons. First, within censorship discourse, girls are constructed as particularly vulnerable to music’s effects on the body. Second, gendered contexts for women’s and girls’ shared musical activity are increasingly prevalent in the United States. Third, these contexts provide sites for pleasurable and interpersonal bodily engagement via music that serve as responses and antidotes to
experiences of scrutiny, restriction, and violation of the feminine body. Finally, because of music’s semiotic ambiguity and its properties of resonance, it strikes against the purported firmness of subjective boundaries, against the assumed fixity of linguistic order, and thus against the rationality of gender hierarchy.

By seeking to better understand the specificity of human social experience in the presence of musical sound, this dissertation contributes to several areas of inquiry including ethnomusicology, gender studies, and cultural studies while facilitating an expanded consideration of music as a pervasive and powerful human activity.
For all those with whom I have made, though about, and loved music—especially Justin, who bravely let me into his music library when he hardly knew me.
Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to express my deep gratitude and admiration for my advisor, Barry Shank. Thank you for making me feel like there was a place for my ideas and, once I found it, like I deserved to be there. I still cannot believe my good fortune in getting to think about (and even make!) music with you. I would also like to thank my other committee members, Mary E. Thomas and Maurice E. Stevens for their intellectual and personal support and encouragement over my graduate school career.

The research for my project was generously supported by the Coca Cola Critical Difference for Women Grant, and by the Department of Comparative Studies at The Ohio State University. Intellectually, I have benefitted from countless peers including those with whom I shared Dr. Judy Wu’s women’s history writing seminar, and all of the brilliant popular music scholars that have provided me with ideas, resources, and provocative questions at the last few years’ worth of IASPM-US meetings. This project is much improved for their insights. Though they may be unlikely to suspect it, my thinking has benefitted immensely from all of the students I have taught over the last several years. I am especially grateful to the undergraduates currently in my Cultural Studies of American Musics class who have graciously endured and inspired me during the last stages of this project.
I am full of gratitude for my colleagues at the Ohio State University Center for the Advancement of Teaching who have been immensely supportive and understanding during the last two years—especially Stephanie Rohdieck, who fluidly switched from hat to hat on an as-needed basis. To my parents and brother: thank you for all of your support over the years—especially for not ever moving off the lake so that I could come back to the water whenever I needed to. My heartfelt appreciation goes to the interdisciplinary cadre of brilliant, adventurous, and clever friends who help keep my wit sharp and my priorities straight—especially Stacia Kock, Jess Spears, Michael Carter, Adriane Brown, Ally Day, Hannah Ewing, Rebecca Favorito, and Sharon Ross. And finally, I am most grateful for Riley and Jack who, because they are silly and loving dogs, refuse to let me take myself too seriously, and for Justin Acome, who keeps me smart and laughing—and who lets me use his record player (unsupervised) whenever I want.
Vita

2001 ................................................. Stevens Point Area Senior High

2005 .................................................... B.A. Music, Luther College

2008 ..................................................... M.A. Women’s Studies, The Ohio State University

2008 ..................................................... M.A. Music, The Ohio State University

Fields of Study

Major Field: Comparative Studies
# Table of Contents

Abstract ......................................................................................................................................... ii

Acknowledgments .......................................................................................................................... vi

Vita ................................................................................................................................................ viii

Fields of Study ................................................................................................................................ viii

Chapter 1: Semiotics, the Sensuous Body, and “The Music Itself” ........................................... 1

  Musicologies, Language, and Limits ................................................................................................. 2

  Toward the Sensuous and Emergent Musical Self ........................................................................ 9

  Permeability and Intersubjectivity .................................................................................................. 15

    A Brief Example: Disco and Oceanic Oneness ........................................................................... 17

  Musical Intimacy ............................................................................................................................ 19

  Methodological Overview .............................................................................................................. 24

Chapter Outline ............................................................................................................................... 30

  On Scope ......................................................................................................................................... 35

Chapter 2: Musical Danger and Aural Sex .................................................................................... 37
Music and the Sensuous, Sinful Body .................................................................38

Porn Rock and the Parents’ Music Resource Center .......................................51

More than Words .................................................................................................54

“Aural Sex” ............................................................................................................58

Conclusion............................................................................................................61

Chapter 3: “The Point Was Simply to Make Some Noise”: Riot Grrrl and Embodied Musical Experience .................................................................64

Message over Music? .........................................................................................67

Grrrls and Girl Love............................................................................................76

Screaming Bodies ...............................................................................................79

Girls to the Front...............................................................................................84

Contradiction, Ambiguity, and the Star System ............................................97

Conclusion........................................................................................................103

Chapter 4: “We Sang Together, So Now We’re Cool”: Musical Intersubjectivity at a Girls’ Rock Camp .................................................................106

Interrogating Empowerment .........................................................................108

The Counselors’ Take ......................................................................................117

At Camp .............................................................................................................124

Musical Intimacy, Empowerment, and Vulnerability at “Weirdo Camp” .......132
Chapter 1: Semiotics, the Sensuous Body, and “The Music Itself”

“The most intimate thing I will ever do is to play music with people and in front of people, other than making love to somebody.”

--Melissa Auf Der Mar, bassist

“there came a moment in the middle of the song when she suddenly felt every heartbeat in the room & after that she never forgot she was part of something much bigger.”

--Brian Andreas, StoryPeople “Connection”

Despite widespread agreement both scholarly and popular that music is an important and powerful element of cultural activity, there persists a lack of focused and sustained discussion exploring why the sensuous aspect of musical sound (as it is distinct from other media) might be such a moving element of human experience. Discussions of how music “works” are typically text-based analyses of musical scores or performances, whether they are semiotic, based in music theory, or some combination of the two. While this sort of work provides insight into the ways in which musical structure works to make meaning and the ways in which participants in musical events recognize and develop semiotic systems for generating musical significance, the embodied element of musical experience—“the music itself,” as Susan McClary calls it—is at best relegated to implication, and at worst, ignored entirely. At its most fundamental level, this project is an attempt to recenter the specifically musical of musical experience, to theorize musical

---


2 "‘Same as It Ever Was’: Youth Culture and Music," in *Microphone Fiends: Music and Youth Culture,* eds. Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose (New York: Routledge, 1994). 32
subjectivity without relying on formalist and linguistic models of analysis, and to recognize “music as a particular and irreducible form of human expression and knowledge.”

Musicologies, Language, and Limits

In 1986’s Contemplating Music, musicologist Joseph Kerman called for a paradigm shift away from positivist methods in musicological research toward a more humanist approach that could apply critical theory and methods. Despite considerable and persistent resistance from many of his scholarly peers, Kerman’s critique ushered in a new trend, termed “new musicology,” in music scholarship. Scholarship within this new paradigm draws from a number of fields, including cultural studies, feminist theory, queer theory, and critical race theory to consider the role of discourse and subjectivity in musical experience. In a prominent early example of “new musicological” work, Susan McClary contends in Feminine Endings that classical sonata-allegro form can be read as an extended sonic metaphor of patriarchal sexual domination, and that, because musical meaning is generated within the discursive constraints of a patriarchal culture, the way we experience music is a reflection and reification of that discourse. She explains that sonata-allegro form (which usually involves the tonic key and its accompanying theme triumphing over the secondary key and theme) has been traditionally been understood in gendered and sexualized terms of the “masculine” triumphing over the “feminine,” and

---

5 Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1991). McClary is often considered one of the most important figures to emerge in the academic realm of “new musicology.” Others include Lawrence Kramer, Philip Brett, and, of course, Joseph Kerman.
even goes so far as to refer to harmonic closures in classical music as “ejaculatory moments.” McClary makes a compelling case for a close reading of the sexuality sonically embedded in and connoted by classical musical form, though the implication of this portion of her work is that the most important mode through which music becomes a significant and meaningful part of human experience is through culturally constructed, connotative signification. Despite the important efforts of work like *Feminine Endings* to bring cultural context and subjective engagement into conversations about music, the scope of this and similar projects does not extend to the experiences of actual bodies that hear and feel musical sounds in different contexts. In short, this sort of work focuses on musical texts, rather than the experience of them.

Similarly, much ethnomusicological research using ethnographic methods to examine the purpose and consequences of different groups’ musical behavior takes for granted that music has the capacity to affect subjects, without necessarily interrogating the process of that effect. Rarely does this work extend beyond interpreting the connotative or denotative meanings of certain musics or musical gestures. Ethnographic work which focuses on people who come together to share musical experiences generally takes music as a way to articulate identity or communal belonging though the specificity

---

6 Ibid., 68.
7 Examples of this sort of work are numerous, but for further demonstration of textual analysis of the connection between music and sexuality, see Lori Burns and Melisse LaFrance, *Disruptive Divas: Feminism, Identity, and Popular Music* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Sheila Whiteley, *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity, and Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 2000).
8 Again, because this is one of the twin poles that comprises the majority of cultural (ethno)musicology, examples are numerous. For further demonstration of this sort of work, see Stephen Feld, “Aesthetics as Iconicity of Style (Uptown Title); or (Downtown Title) ‘Lift-Up-Over Sounding’: Getting into the Kaluli Groove,” *Music Grooves* (Fenestra Books, 2005): 109-150; Louise Mientjes, *The Sound of Africa: Making Music Zulu in a South African Studio* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003).
of this articulation happening in the presence of sound is lost. For example, Andy Bennett uses ethnographic data from twelve months of fieldwork consisting of focus groups, interviews, and participant observation in northern England and central Germany to show the ways in which young audiences use music and style as ways to articulate and understand local distinctions and constructions of place. Bennett focuses primarily on the appropriation of certain musics and styles as counterhegemonic signifying practices employed to negotiate tensions between the local and the global, though he does not attend to the ways in which the fundamentally embodied aspect of musical experience might make it particularly apt (or not) for the sort of negotiations he identifies. Similarly, Lauraine Leblanc, author of Pretty in Punk—an ethnography of girls’ participation in a musical subculture that I had hoped would be illuminating during my research for this project—neglects to consider that the embodied, sonic dimension of musical experience is perhaps an integral reason why girls might be attracted to punk. Leblanc finds that girls turn to the subculture for a number of reasons that primarily circulate around rebellion and support/community. The centrality of musical experiences in punk is entirely absent from her work.

In musicological work where the sharing of musical experience has received attention, it is often in terms of music’s role in the production of a larger, amorphously delineated “community,” or music’s role in religious experience—both of which suggest, as does Christopher Small, that we use music primarily as a modality for the affirmation

---

9 Theodeore Gracyk roundly critiques the reduction of music to merely a badge of identity, important only for its social relevance (Listening to Popular Music: Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Led Zeppelin, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2007).
and celebration of our identities and our memberships in specific communities. The function of “musicking” together, states Small, “is to explore and celebrate our sense of who we are, to make us feel more fully ourselves.”\textsuperscript{12} This idea is prevalent in musicological scholarship. Sharing music has been cited as a way to generate cohesiveness within a diaspora, as a way to articulate a political identity and lay claim to membership in a certain community, and as a way to signify faith in a deity.\textsuperscript{13} The capacity to articulate or generate feelings of identity and community is certainly an important cultural function of music. However, rather than using a hierarchical model wherein musical experience provides a participating subject a set of semiotic signs by which to signify their membership in or allegiance to a discursively constituted “something bigger” (a category, a community, a god) I offer instead a lateral model which approaches music in terms of intimacy: as a way of experiencing intersubjective relationships of sharedness without a necessary identity-reifying recourse to a discursively constituted community. In other words, before there is a “we” that can serve the sentiment “This is who we are,” the possibility of “we-ness” must be opened—and music participates in this process of opening.

Looking at trends in “new musicology” and ethnomusicology—both areas of inquiry which aim to acknowledge and explore the role of subjectivity in musical

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening} (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 142.

experience—demonstrates that the relationship between subjectivity and the felt, embodied experience of musical sound is rarely at the center of inquiry. However, many scholars have acknowledged the centrality of embodiment in musical experience and have called for additional theorizing of music’s relationship to subjectivity with this in mind. Shepherd and Wicke remark that “musicology has been remarkably unsuccessful in putting forward concepts and theories capable of explaining the attraction of music for people in their everyday lives, and the power and influence it appears to have over them.” Likewise, Theodore Gracyk has argued against the reduction of musical experience to its “social relevance,” pointing out that much musical pleasure is experienced by people who are entirely unable to articulate what the social relevance of a song might be. He argues for consideration of the “aesthetic value” of music—that which cannot be reduced to its semiotic significance, but that is undeniably an important and present element of human musical experience. “Consumers move with and are moved by [music], appreciating the experience it offers without,” he offers, “knowing what larger purpose or consequences it may have.”

---

14 As a rare counterexample, Alice Echols (Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture. New York: W.W. Norton, 2010) argues that the experience of being in disco clubs was actually able to facilitate a shift in gay male sexual practices. She suggests that the pleasurable feeling of the body being penetrated by the pounding beat of disco helped to depathologize being the anally penetrated “bottom” in gay sexual encounters. Echols’ work suggests that embodied musical experience can have a significant impact on the ways in which sexual intimacy is experienced because musical experience can be one of embodied intimacy.


16 42.
At this point, it is prudent to acknowledge that much of the difficulty that arises in attempts to understand the complex ways in which music works results from the profound influence of linguistic philosophy on music scholarship and the limitations of language available for describing non-connotative experiences. Music and language are not the same, obviously, and yet linguistic models of analysis—particularly semiotics—are often relied upon when scholars attempt to analyze human musical activity. What results is only ever a partial account, leaving in its wake myriad questions about the specificity of musical experience. Italian musicologist Enrico Fubini observes,

> Since ancient times, philosophers, intellectuals and musicians have written about music and have clearly believed it to have a particular status among the arts, being endowed with special powers…. It expresses something, and yet, despite the complexity of its ‘language,’ it says nothing definite about anything. While everybody, even the strictest of formalist thinkers, seems to concur in ascribing to music a certain power of expression, nobody has yet succeeded in defining clearly what it is that music expresses or how it does so.\(^\text{17}\)

One of Leonard Meyer’s astute arguments in his influential book *Emotion and Meaning in Music* is that a primary problem with talking about experiences of music is the failure to distinguish between “affect” and “mood”; when we speak of affect and music, we are usually speaking of the *mood* we are socialized to assume music signifies, rather than our actual, affective experience of musical sound.

---

Distinguishing between what music references and the mechanisms through which it generates effects is imperative if we are to more fully comprehend why music matters in specifically musical (rather than in essentially linguistic) ways. Robert Walser writes,

Both music and language are meaningful to us, but they seem to be fundamentally different sorts of discourse. We can use language to describe musical processes or effects, but we usually find that propositional statements about music are clumsy compared to the efficiency of the music itself, and the feeling persists that much remains unaccounted for, no matter how lengthy the explanation.¹⁸

Walser offers a brief overview of ethnomusicology’s relationship to “the linguistics craze” since the 1970s, the results of which, he rather comically states, “included disappointingly few useful insights, in spite of a great many breathtakingly intricate charts and thrilling, cryptic abbreviations.”¹⁹ Even prominent ethnomusicologist Steven Feld, a trained linguist himself, agrees that this method yielded only limited information that continuously evaded the central question of explaining why or how music works in specifically musical ways. Walser concludes, “When we talk about music, we must use propositional language, but our mode of description is not the same as what we describe,”²⁰ or as Shepherd and Wicke write, “sound in music functions in a manner distinct from sound in speech.”²¹
All of this is merely to acknowledge that there is relatively widespread recognition that linguistically-based methods of analysis can be illuminating with regards to certain aspects of musical behavior (its “social relevance,” to borrow Gracyk’s term), but they are ultimately insufficient for theorizing the specifically musical. Despite the acknowledgment of this challenge, most music scholars continue to rely on semiotic methodology when writing about musical phenomena for multiple reasons: 1) It typically does reveal something about musical experience; 2) It is well-suited to the written word—the medium in which scholarly analyses are most often presented; and 3) It bypasses some of the hairier questions about human subjectivity and identity initiated by the acknowledgment of embodied experiences. This project, though still constrained by the demands of language, seeks to take up the charge of the above-mentioned scholars—to complicate musical experience by disembedding it from connotative and denotative signifying systems in order to gain a better understanding of the multiple and complex ways in which we can have affective, embodied experiences of musical sound.

_Toward the Sensuous and Emergent Musical Self_

In considering the stakes of how we think through, talk about, and understand musical experience, it is useful to turn to later work by Susan McClary. Looking to

---

22 The authors who contributed to _Music and Manipulation_ offer a number of interesting takes on the use of music to engineer and control social behavior. Several of the essays in the book are predicated on a belief that music possesses a certain unique power to affect people. As just one example, in the foreword, Orjan Standberg and Bengt-Arne Wallin contend that “[music] has a special way of getting past the bouncers of the unconscious… it is mainly feelings and you cannot argue against them on rational grounds” (“Foreword: Manipulating Music—A Perspective of Practicing Composers,” in _Music and Manipulation: On the Social Uses and Social Control of Music_, eds. Steven Brown and Ulrik Volgsten [New York: Berghahn Books, 2006], x). Despite this, many of essays that comprise this collection contain consistent references to the use of music as a means of communication whose primary social function is merely to transmit encoded messages between parties—another version of a semiotic approach.
historical figures such as St. Augustine and Plato, McClary traces Western ideas about music, observing a pattern of uneasiness regarding its capacity for “subversion of authority and seduction by means of the body.”

Plato demonstrates anxiety about the sensuous body, particularly “as it can be aroused by the musics of women or ethnic groups noted for their ‘laxness.’”

Music, he claims, is particularly dangerous because “[l]eft to its own devices (or to the dreaded ‘sovereignty of the audience’), music’s ability to appeal to the body will wreak havoc on society.”

Similarly, St. Augustine expressed anxiety over the risks of using music in worship: “I ought not to allow my mind to be paralyzed by the gratification of my senses, which often lead it astray.” For Plato and St. Augustine, the body is the object of anxiety because it is believed to threaten the control provided by the rationality of the mind through the introduction of sensuousness and pleasure into experience.

Music scholarship continues to reflect these concerns by “marginaliz[ing] the music itself, the better to focus on lyrics, explicitly on political concerns, ethnographic research on reception, or issues involving the culture industry.” At the expense of considering the specifically musical, approaches such as these engender countless theories that are essentially semiotic and that “reinscribe the polemics against the body

---

23 “Same,” 30. Barry Shank likewise argues that music has “an ability to move us whether we want to be moved or not,” threatening a sense of agency, and compelling the submission of music to linguistic control through, for example, discourses of authenticity (Silence, Noise, Beauty: The Political Agency of Music, Durham: Duke University Press, Forthcoming).

24 “Same,” 29.
25 Ibid., 30.
26 cf. Ibid.
27 Ibid.
that have characterized attempts at policing music throughout Western history.”28 In contemporary terms, the perceived threat of music is its capacity to undermine the authority of the mind (and thus meaning, reason, identity, and autonomy) through appeal to the body. Unless we find nuanced ways to explore music’s relationship to the body and the politics therein, the sensuous experience of music—what makes music music, I would argue—is at best ignored, or, worse, is (as I demonstrate in the next chapter) appropriated as a justification for social control and the policing of certain bodies and pleasures.

Several authors have argued that musical sound (unlike language) has a unique capacity to bypass certain psychological processes—a common understanding of musical experience that regularly recurs among the various subjects and sites of analysis that comprise this project.29 For example, D. Robert DeChaine states, “One thinks language into meaning and feeling. Sound, by contrast, seems to find a path that traverses or short-circuits conscious reflection.”30 It would be obviously reductive to conclude that musical sound is never subjected to processes of “conscious reflection” (or that language always precedes “feeling”) when this process is precisely what motivates and makes possible the majority of musicology, music theory, and popular culture scholarship. However, it is imperative that we attend to this widely acknowledged, specific experience of listening that occurs before or alongside “conscious reflection,” that we acknowledge that, in the

29 Others have linked musical experience to pre-linguistic experience. For instance, film theorist Claudia Gorbman states, “The underlying pleasure of music can be traced to originary hallucinations of bodily fusion with the mother, of nonseparation prior to the Oedipal crisis of language and interdiction…..” (Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987], 4). See also Brandon LaBelle, Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life. New York: Continuum, 2010; Shepherd and Wicke; Gracyk.
30 90.
words of David Lidov, “Anterior to its status as sign, music is an action on and of the body,”\textsuperscript{31} and that we carefully heed Pierre Bourdieu’s advice and not “forget that the work of art always contains something ineffable, not by excess, as hagiography would have it, but by default, something which communicates, so to speak, from body to body, i.e. on the hither side of words or concepts, and which pleases (or displeases) without concepts.”\textsuperscript{32}

Musical experience is fundamentally—and fully—embodied. In order for hearing to occur, sound waves must come into contact with and \textit{move} parts of the ear. But it is not just the parts of the ear that move—sound engages, moves, and permeates the whole body, undulating in endless waves that morph and multiply as they resonate in and through bodies, making of the body an instrument. To conceive of sound as a singular, containable, bounded stimulus ignores the basic properties of resonance—the ways that sound moves within a space, envelops and moves (in/through) the body, transforming the listener into a sounding body. Writes philosopher Mladen Dolar,

\textit{[T]he sound is never one, it resists oneness by its very nature, it poses a problem of inherent multiplicity by its merely being a sound. And the enigma it presents is not only the enigma of its cause, location, and source, but through all this the attempt to render it one, to submit its multiplicity to oneness. Again, can one ever? And can one ever decompose it into discrete countable traits?}\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{32}Cf. Walser, 119. These types of observations are not limited to musicologists and social theorists. Many Christian, Jewish, and Muslim writings share a common belief that music induces pleasure, opening the door for debaucherous and morally degenerate behavior (See McClary [1994]; Amnon Shiloah, \textit{Jewish Musical Traditions}. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992.).
\textsuperscript{33}“The Burrow of Sound,” \textit{Differences} 22, nos. 2-3 (2011): 117.
Because the body has no distinct defense against it, because it comes from any- and everywhere, sound puzzles—at least momentarily—orientation: spatial, temporal, and semantic. Shepherd and Wicke write,

Sound brings the world into people from all directions, simultaneously and dynamically. While it is frequently possible to locate the source of a sound, it is a fundamental experiential characteristic of sound that it lifts off the surface of its material source to occupy and give life to the space not only between the source and the listener, but also around the listener…. It is experienced as a phenomenon that encompasses and touches the listener in a cocoon-like fashion.34

But this understanding misses a crucial point: sound does not just touch the listener, careening off an impermeable surface, leaving boundaries intact: it moves within and through the listener. Writes DeChaine, “Musical experience seeps, exposing the arbitrariness of binary divisions between… subject/object.”35 Sound simultaneously permeates and envelops the body, obscuring by its very nature the most fundamental of divisions upon which meaning rests: what is “I” versus what is “not I.” Philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy remarks, “to be listening is to be inclined toward the opening of meaning.”36

Prior to a sound being taken up, made sense of, subjugated to the demands of semiotic significance, there exists a moment of openness in which listeners are engaged by sound resonating in, around, and through them, circulating between themselves and others,

34 126. Likewise, Sarah Cohen remarks on music’s capacity to “envelop” as a distinguishing characteristic that sets music apart from visual experience, making it fundamentally more embodied (“Sounding out the City: Music and the Sensuous Production of Place,” Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers 20, no. 4 [1995]: 444).
35 81.
36 Listening (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 21...
creating an emergent, resonant “sounding one” of an ostensible many. Whither meaning without division?

Peter J. Martin cites both Shepherd’s and Tia DeNora’s work when arguing for a consideration of how music’s resonance with/in the body endows it with an immediacy that lends itself to a constitutive (rather than predominantly reflective) relationship to human subjectivity. While Martin emphasizes the use of music as a way to claim and secure an identity through the constitutive effects of listening, it is also important to consider the conditions of these effects. If music has an enhanced capacity to produce (rather than reflect) subjective effects, then it does this through enabling (or even demanding) subjective malleability and emergence. Therefore, rather than approaching music as a mechanism for strengthening or affirming one’s sense of identity, the constitutive effects of listening actually amplify the instability and incompleteness of identity by emphasizing the vacillation between the already-there and the yet-to-come of resonance and of the “reiterated ambivalence” of identity. Or, as Brandon Labelle puts it, “Sound and auditory experience form a primary sensual matter in contact with the body. The sonority of daily life is a deeply impressionable sensing, impinging on thought and feeling in ways that give accent to the shifting self” [emphasis mine]. It is this “shifting self” that undergoes magnification during the process of listening and enables the transgressing of individual boundaries that is the precondition for intersubjectivity.

39 133.
Permeability and Intersubjectivity

The notion that music obscures boundaries appears in the writing of music scholars from a range of disciplines, such as film studies and sound studies. Film theorist Claudia Gorbman, author of *Unheard Melodies*, a book taking up the role of movie music in terms of audience subjectivity, argues that music’s capacity to transgress boundaries is multifaceted and central to musical experience in both semiotic and non-semiotic ways. “Music in film mediates,” she writes. “Its nonverbal and denotative status allows it to cross all varieties of ‘borders’: between levels of narration (diegetic/non-diegetic), between narrating agencies (objective/subjective narrators), between viewing time and psychological time, between points in diegetic space and time (as narrative transition).”

Gorbman concludes that, because of music’s unique ability (function) as a boundary-crosser, it enables intersubjectivity and feelings of connectedness in ways that visual media alone cannot, hence the persistence of non-diegetic sound (which originated during the silent film era) in contemporary film. The continued inclusion of non-diegetic music enables a particular, powerful experience of intersubjectivity for the audience, “binding the audience together into a community of listener participants” as they share the experience of watching (and hearing) a film. Gorbman makes a point to note that this capacity of music is, of course, not limited to its use in film, and in fact, others have described musical experience similarly in vastly different contexts.

To take just a few examples, D. Travers Scott, writing about the disciplinary practices that surrounded early telephone usage states that listening is a “literal invasion
of borders, a transgressive penetration of an individual’s boundedness” that opens the possibility of intersubjectivity and intimacy with others. Susan Fast, in her musicological ethnography of Led Zeppelin cites much of the music scholarship that has inspired my own work in justifying her axiom that “all music is kinetic.” She elaborates, “Sound touches us, physically. It connects us with the body from which it is coming. It is an intimate form of human contact. This may well be one reason that music is so powerful: it engages us physically and with the bodies of the musicians who are making it (and, I would add, those who experience it with us). Fast concisely concludes of shared musical experience, “I am in your rhythm and therefore in your body—we are one.” Likewise, Barthes famously considers the invasive properties of music in his discussion of “the grain of the voice,” which he identifies as an embodied, euphoric engagement with an/other: “in throwing, so to speak, the anonymous body of the actor into my ear: [the grain of the voice] granulates, it crackles, it caresses, it grates, it cuts, it comes: that is bliss.” In an autoethnographic essay, DeChaine recounts a firsthand musical experience akin to what Gorbman and Fast describe, a sense “oneness” he experienced during a gamelan concert: “I kept sensing in that space an odd kind of solidarity, a oneness with the audience, as though together we had found a way to clear a space for ourselves in the music.” He continues,

---

44 131.
45 Ibid.
47 92.
During the gamelan concert, my scholarly detachment gave way to an overwhelming feeling of communal subjectivity, as though we were all, performers and spectators alike, participating in the creation of the musical space, participating in the creation of our selves within the play of that space…. For that time at least, I felt transformed in some less-than-tangible way, and, significantly, I felt as though I had collaborated with the other participants in effecting the transformation.48

Though I only include a handful of examples here, it is important to recognize the historical and disciplinary breadth that Gorbman, Scott, Fast, Barthes, and DeChaine represent, suggesting a long-standing and wide-ranging fascination with (if not an extended theorization of) the intersubjective effects of musical experience at the center of this project.

_A Brief Example: Disco and Oceanic Oneness_

Given the challenges of transposing the specifically musical into the linguistic, it is prudent to very carefully attend to the ways in which musical intersubjectivity is discussed, including other experiences to which it has been commonly linked and likened. Disco serves as a particularly rich example, as several scholars have argued that a central characteristic of disco that both attracted and unsettled portions of the American public was its emphasis on group feeling. The experience of disco, at its most idealized, is attributed with a fundamental ability to destabilize the bounded self and initiate

48 93-94.
intimacy among co-participants. Gillian Frank argues that by the time disco emerged in the 1970s, rock had become the site of virtuoso performance, leading to increased emphasis on individual skills rather than what she identifies to as disco’s “queer participatory aesthetic”\textsuperscript{49} in which audiences are encouraged to dance and enjoy the musical experience at the expense of a focus on a singular person. According to Tim Lawrence, disco provided a space of “spiritual and joyful unity where egos disappear,”\textsuperscript{50} and, for Tavia Nyong’o, of Freudian “oceanic feeling-tone of love, ecstasy, and oneness”\textsuperscript{51} reminiscent of pre-Symbolic infantile plenitude. Likewise, in \textit{Love Saves the Day}, Lawrence recalls one scene as symbolically recreat[ing] the infantile scene of the womb, where the constant and memorable sound is that of the mother’s beating heart, which pulses along at, roughly speaking, the rate of a dance record. The secure and cocoon-like contours of the dance space created the perfect milieu for experimental regression—there was always lots of screaming and growling and whooping—and the sheer density of bodies accelerated the transformation from autonomous adult to childlike dancer. Unable to avoid body contact on all sides, individual dancers had little choice but to dissolve into the amorphous whole, and, as their distinctions

\textsuperscript{51} “I Feel Love: Disco and Its Discontents,” \textit{Criticism} 50, no. 1 (Winter 2008):106. Nyong’o notes that what made disco different was the simultaneity of the oceanic feeling-tone (the objectless love), and object-driven sexual desire. For him, Donna Summer’s “I Feel Love” is the quintessential musical example of this simultaneity. He writes, “[T]he track expressed an autotelic but not quite masturbatory pleasuring that constantly modulated between self and other, alternating and object driven and object-less love” (109). Offering a similar (though less positive) read on a Summer song, \textit{Time} magazine called Donna Summer’s “Love to Love You Baby” a “marathon of 22 orgasms,” and accused her of contributing to “radio’s electronic orgasmatron.” (“Show Business: Sex Rock.” \textit{Time} 106, no. 26. December 29, 1975).
between self and other collapsed, they relinquished their socialized desire for independence and separation.\textsuperscript{52}

Of course not everyone who encountered disco had this sort of destabilizing experience—a certain sort of willingness to engage and give oneself over to the music had to precede. Self-surveillance and policing—embarrassment—can disable participants’ from feeling the “kinetic oneness,” leaving them “tone-deaf” to the effects of the music.\textsuperscript{53}

\textit{Musical Intimacy}

Musical experiences become embodied through sonic engagement: sonic vibrations literally move through the subject, not stopping upon hitting the surface of the body, but permeating that boundary as it circulates between the sounding bodies of the participants in a given musical experience. When an embodied sonic experience—\textit{resonance}—is shared with another subject, then co-participants in a musical experience can share that embodiment in the same way that the eroticization of the body can be shared during sexual encounters. It is useful here to draw on David Halperin’s understanding of the function of sexual pleasure in \textit{Saint Foucault} in order to illuminate another way of thinking about intimacy and subjectivity. Halperin explains that “intense sexual pleasure performs the function of decentering the subject and fragmenting personal identity.”\textsuperscript{54} While this is perhaps overstated, shared sexual activity \textit{can} produce a felt intersubjectivity, an embodied intimacy with another person in a way that, at least

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{52} 105.  \\
\textsuperscript{53} Nyong’o.  \\
\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 94.
\end{footnotesize}
temporarily, troubles rigid boundaries of the self. Musical experience and sex have this in common, explaining (partially, at least) a great deal of metaphorical and conceptual overlap. Because sex is a primary vehicle through which we have come to understand embodied intimacy, sexual metaphors work well for articulating what this project identifies as experiences of musical intimacy; because music is a primary way in which we have embodied experiences of intersubjectivity, musical metaphors work well for describing intimate relationships.

In an article linking her experiences of lesbian sex and her musicality, Suzanne Cusick urges us to think of sexuality not in terms of reproduction or genital pleasure, but as “a way of expressing and/or enacting relationships of intimacy through physical pleasure, shared, accepted or given.” If sex is a “means of negotiating power and intimacy through the circulation of pleasure, what’s to prevent music from being sex, and thus an ancient, half-sanctioned form of escape from the phallic economy?” Cusick is

55 Music is frequently talked about using sexual metaphors (and vice versa), suggesting an experiential similarity between the two concepts: when a favorite indie band gets signed to a major label, they are often referred to as having “whored themselves out” to the highest bidder, with the accompanying notion that the “purity”—a quality rife with connotations of virginity—of their art will be lost as a result; and even Theodor Adorno accuses “light music” of having its “skirt seductively raised” as a prostitute might (“On the Social Situation of Music,” Essays on Music, ed. Richard Leppert, (UC Press: Berkeley, 2002), 395). Likewise, musical metaphors are often used to describe intimate human relationships: relationships are referred to as “harmonious” when partners are “in tune” with each other, relationship self-help books have titles like Sheet Music: Uncovering the Secrets of Sexual Intimacy in Marriage (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003), and there are a number of music-themed books of erotic tales. For example, see Lindsay Gordon, Sex and Music: Wicked Words (London: Virgin Black Lace, 2010), Desiree Davidson, Desiree’s Sounds of Sex and Music (Seattle: CreateSpace, 2008), and Paul Miles, Sex Tips from Rock Stars: In Their Own Words (London: Omnibus Press, 2010). Also worth noting, the very word music is etymologically indebted to the Greek muses, goddesses of inspiration who are often depicted as nubile, female water nymphs. Nymphs now vernacularly refer to excessively sexual women, and the term now provides the root of “nymphomania,” the psychological condition marked by an obsession with sex.


57 Ibid., 78.
pointing here to music’s capacity to amplify (or, in her words “express”/“enact”) interpersonal intimacy, a foundational point of interest for this project. Similarly, Nadine Hubbs argues that music, like sex, can be “both a potent source of an intersubjectively grounded sense of self, and a potent technique of self-dissolution or desubjectivation.”

Cusick and Hubbs offer a way to think about how people meaningfully engage with music that moves beyond semiotic decoding, structural analysis, or recourse to identity politics. For both scholars, musical experiences are fundamentally about embodiment and the experience/emergence of subjectivity, a point with which my work agrees. Unlike Cusick, however, I do not argue that music and sex are (nearly) the same thing. Rather, I understand musical experience, because it is a deeply embodied, nonverbal experience, as an alternate experience of intimacy similar to sex; both music and sex can amplify feelings of intimacy between co-participants through shared embodied engagement.

Scholarship explicitly addressing intimacy demonstrates wide agreement on two points with which this dissertation is aligned: intimacy is embodied, and intimacy posits

---

59 Though this project differs significantly in method from the work of cognitive psychologists and neuroscientists, it is important to acknowledge that the claims being made here through ethnographic and textual analysis may, in fact, also be scientifically corroborated. Cognitive musicologist David Huron lists eight things that might explain the persistence of music in human existence. Five of the eight have to do with interpersonal relationships: mate selection, social cohesion, group effort, conflict reduction, and transgenerational communication (“Is Music an Evolutionary Adaptation?” The Annals of the New York Academy of Science 930 [2001]: 43-61). For Huron, like myself, it is important to ask how music might bring about social bonding. He turns to a study by neurophysiologist Walter Freeman which examines the role of the hormone oxytocin in musical experience. Oxytocin primes the brain for the storage of new memories by both erasing old ones and binding new ones, and is present at high levels during traumatic or ecstatic moments, like after orgasm. Freeman’s work also suggests that oxytocin is released while people listen to music, suggesting that music and sex are experienced similarly even at the neurological level. See also Robert Jourdain’s Music, the Brain, and Ecstasy (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1997).
an intersubjective relationship. In a critique of psychoanalytic accounts which take knowledge of the self as a precondition for intimacy, Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips insist that intimacy actually results from a loosening of the hold on the self, from an opening of the subject to an/other. For them, intimacy is characterized by “giving and receiving, through embodied language, the subjecthood of others.” Maureen McLane understands intimacy as “an affair (or technology, or a discourse) of near and knowing bodies.” For Bersani and Philips and McLane, understandings of interiority and exteriority which are central to modern, Western conceptions of the self make articulating experiences of intersubjectivity nearly impossible. McLane suggests that a profusion of cultural discourses emerge around the idea of intimacy (via sexuality, for example) in an ongoing attempt to reconcile the disjunctions between intimacy as it is felt, and intimacy as it is circumscribed in language.

Following from the understanding of intimacy as embodied and intersubjective, the dearth of (ethno)musicological attention to the embodied aspect of sonic experience, and a shared observation that musical activity (though complex) is, in many ways, about human relationships, this dissertation focuses specifically on the ways in which music—a tangibly bodily experience (in addition to a cognitive one) that both inscribes and permeates the bodies/selves through which it resounds—can amplify feelings of intimacy when musical engagement is shared. I understand musical intimacy as a felt intersubjectivity brought about by musical experience when participants share an

---

60 For several essays address (many implicitly) the embodied and intersubjective aspects of intimacy, see Lauren Berlant, ed. *Intimacy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).


openness (resulting from a willingness to give oneself over, to be listening musically and open to the momentary elusiveness of meaning) to that experience and to each other. Though I came to this definition on my own, my conception of musical intimacy shares significant parallels with Scott’s understanding of the “intimate intersubjectivity” resulting from sonic, telephonic communication. He explains,

> Intersubjectivity is a liminal space between subjectivity and objectivity when experiences and feelings are shared by more than one individual consciousness, not merely in the sense of exchanged information but shared experiences that, in turn, interactively construct social lives. Intimacy refers to physical and emotional proximity or closeness, and… suggests impending, nascent, or potential empathy.63

He identifies empathy, with its ability to disrupt social division and hierarchies, as the central threat posed by intimate intersubjectivity, and a reason why aural encounters become sites of discipline.64

Not easily classifiable as a process of cognitive functioning or of pure sensation, music simultaneously relies on memory, expectation, and the resonance of sound through and among co-present subjects in order to become meaningful. Nancy argues that musical resonance—the circulation of music between subjects who share a musical experience—effects a relationship of subjects both to and beyond themselves. The ideal of the individual with an essential core is troubled through the effects of resonance—the self

---

63 Scott, 490.
64 In his discussion of telephony, Scott observes that a male character in an early 20th century training film begins an affair on the telephone. He identifies philandering and the pathologized caricature of the intimate intersubjectivity enabled by sound via the telephone.
becomes malleable and emergent in the face of musical experience. The subjects of shared musical experience, then, are established in relationship to each other through that experience of music. When subjects experience music together, then they experience a momentary intersubjectivity, an intimacy, via the subject/object transgressing resonance that acts upon them and upon which they act. As Nancy suggests, difference (between subjects) is a condition of resonance, even as resonance establishes a relationship that simultaneously troubles that difference.\textsuperscript{65}

\textit{Methodological Overview}

This dissertation explores musical experience in terms of its effect on the feelings of intimacy among participants who share a musical activity. I argue that the embodied experience of music can amplify feelings of intimacy in ways that both prompt people to seek out very specific contexts for shared musical experience and seem dangerous for those who wish to police intimacy for “vulnerable” populations, like girls. There are three primary goals of this project. First, to explore how a discourse of intimacy can be used to understand and talk about shared musical experiences from the perspective of participants as well as from the perspective of those who identify musical experiences as potentially dangerous; second, to determine how people understand the (inter)subjective effects of their shared experiences of music, why people seek out or avoid certain contexts of shared musical experience, how shared musical experiences affect interpersonal relationships, and how sharing musical experiences shapes the ways in which music

\textsuperscript{65} 11.
becomes meaningful to participants; and third, to examine the growing popularity of and attraction to gendered musical spaces for women and girls (specifically women-centered music festivals, girls’ rock camps) in terms of the sorts of shared musical experiences that are had in these contexts.

Central to this project is a belief that both the attraction to shared musical experience and the desire to control access to shared musical experience result from music’s capacity to amplify feelings of embodied intimacy between subjects. This is not to say that the complexity of musical experience can be reduced to its capacity to produce intimacy. In fact, the production of musical intimacy requires listeners to surrender—or at least be open—to a musical experience. In order to let music into our homes, our relationships, and our bodies, we must feel relatively assured that the vulnerability which results from intimacy will not lead to exploitation—lest we become “tone deaf.” This project explores how that assurance comes about by looking at why people seek out certain shared musical experiences, why they seek out certain contexts for shared experiences over others, and how sharing musical experiences with others shapes and amplifies interpersonal relationships.

This dissertation, which combines discursive analysis and ethnographic fieldwork, is one of the first full-length studies to explore musical experience in terms of its effect on the feelings of intimacy among participants who share a particular instance of musical activity. This interdisciplinary project examines the role of musical intimacy as it is understood by participants who share musical experience, the relationship of this understanding to Western ideas about the body and the self, and also as it has been taken
up in the justification of music censorship in the United States.\textsuperscript{66} As such, this work draws from and makes a significant critical contribution to several areas of inquiry including musicology, ethnomusicology, cultural studies, sound studies, and American studies.

Additionally, this project will contribute to the growing body of feminist and girls studies literature by interrogating the popularity of gendered contexts for musical experience, and by asking why music, in particular, persists as a prominent point of interest both for those looking to police girls’ behavior and for those who write critically (in order to celebrate, reclaim, problematize, etc.) about girlhood. By engaging these disciplines, my project brings together ongoing conversations about musical meaning, musical engagement, and intimacy to deepen our understanding of the complex ways in which people use and experience music.

This dissertation uses musical ethnographic methods modeled on Tia DeNora’s work in \textit{Music in Everyday Life}. Based on the conclusion that “it is probably impossible to speak of music’s ‘powers’ abstracted from their contexts of use,”\textsuperscript{67} DeNora uses ethnographic data gathered from participant observation in diverse locations such as music therapy sessions, karaoke bars, and shopping centers, in-depth interviews, and personal narratives to demonstrate the ways in which music is integral to the construction of social worlds and experiences of “self.” By focusing on how music is used and

\textsuperscript{66} Though this dissertation will offer more discussion of popular music than other types, this is not to imply that popular music necessarily works differently than other forms. Because the history of popular music in the United States is historically very intimately and transparently bound up with discourses of race and sexuality, shared understandings of how popular music functions to produce both pleasure and danger more easily reference its relationship to bodies and intimacies.

\textsuperscript{67} \textit{Music in Everyday Life} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), x.
experienced *in action* (not just on what one can say about a particular musical experience), she contends that imagined relationships to music allow the reimagination of relationships to time and space in the constant production of an emergent sociality. Music thus becomes integral to the ways in which memories are constructed and retrieved, the ways in which the self is narrated, and the ways in which relationships are experienced.

Like DeNora, who elsewhere writes, “music, as it moves through time and changes over time, provides a device with which subject-bodies orient to and configure themselves within the environments within which music plays … [and thus] has the power to shift subjective orientation,”⁶⁸ I also contend that music is integral to the ways (inter)subjective relationships are experienced. However, I argue that this happens not just through memory and narration in relationship to music, but also through feelings of intimacy that are amplified *through and in the moment of* musical experience.

As noted above, even in attempting think through the sensuousness of musical experience, there still exists a methodological quandary: as scholars, we think, communicate, and argue *through language*. Recognizing this, Barthes suggested that “Rather than trying to change directly the language on music, it would be better to change the musical object itself, as it presents itself to discourse, better to alter its level of perception or intellection, to displace the fringe of contact between music and language.”⁶⁹ One available option is to draw inspiration from George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, who have argued over the course of several books that the use of metaphor often

---

provides a linguistic marker of the mind/body connection that undeniably persists.\footnote{See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, \textit{Metaphors We Live By} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) and George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, \textit{Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought} (New York: Basic, 1999).} Explains Walser, “Metaphor mediates between bodily experience, on the one hand, and discourses of language and music, on the other.”\footnote{120. Walser nicely summarizes the case study he uses: “To summarize, distortion is perceived as powerful in contemporary popular music because our socially-guided bodily experiences with distortion lead us to perceive it that way. Through our disparate experiences with our own voices and the electronic devices that surround us, we recognize the image schema of force in the timbral quality of distortion. Thus the preconceptual ground-ing that makes distortion meaningful to us includes our most basic experiences of self and environment, but it is also historically and culturally specific. Not only does it depend on experiences with electronic technology, but it is only at particular historical moments, in particular cultural contexts, that such force images are appealing enough to spawn whole musical discourses” (124).} It is in this vein that I hope to theorize through language what is not reducible to language by re-centering my object of analysis: the felt experience of musical sound, and by attempting to deepen my understanding of it through the careful consideration of metaphor and other descriptive acrobatics used to characterize it.

There is little to no language available for describing musical experience without reference to semiotically amenable things like lyrics, community, or performers’ personae, so this project will use textual and ethnographic methods to identify traces of the ways in which shared musical experience is understood via discourses of safety, intimacy, pleasure, and danger, with particular attention paid to the ways in which these discourses are gendered. Because it is impossible for me as a researcher to get inside someone’s body such that I could completely understand the inarticulable ways a person experiences music, I have had to rely on the ways people describe their musical experiences through language that is often abstract and metaphorical (though, as suggested, I believe that identifying patterns in chosen metaphors is itself quite telling).
With that in mind, I have pursued this project as a multi-sited ethnography of musical intimacy. My project engages archival research, interviews, and participant-observation in an attempt to detect and amplify echoes indicating how the embodied experience of shared musical intimacy is understood, sought out, and staged by participants. In addition, observing participants engaging in intimate musical experiences (though I am aware that my presence may have disrupted the dynamics of this) has provided observable evidence indicating intimate, intersubjective experience, and has provided further grounds from which to generate interview questions related to embodied musical intimacy.

The participant-observation and ethnographic elements of this project followed feminist research ethics. Shulamit Reinharz identifies feminist ethnography as having three goals: “(1) to document the lives and activities of women, (2) to understand the experience of women from their own point of view, and (3) to conceptualize women’s behavior as an expression of social contexts.” For interview portions of this project, I conducted semi-structured interviews with participants from the various sites and contexts described below. As previously mentioned, speaking about musical experience can be extremely difficult and abstract, so excessive structure would not allow participants the freedom necessary to verbally construct their impressions of their shared, intimate musical encounters. More detailed methodological discussion is included in each chapter, as each site necessitated its own set of research strategies.

---


Chapter Outline

This introductory chapter outlines the theoretical and empirical contributions of this project and presents my central argument that an important and often overlooked way in which music becomes meaningful is by amplifying feelings of intersubjectivity and intimacy among those who experience music together. The following chapters provide case studies of various contexts in which musical intimacy is a key feature in how shared musical experience is used and/or understood.

In order to establish the stakes of this project, the next chapter examines American censorship discourses that seek to articulate the dangers supposedly posed by music. Experiencing music together can be a deeply intimate experience, and this intimate experience has long been the implicit subject of censorship debates and culture wars targeting music. While I do not advocate for music censorship, I do share some agreement with the principles underlying justifications put forth by those who wish to limit access to music. Music is understood to be dangerous because it can “get inside” and affect the subjectivities of listening subjects, destabilizing selves, and affecting and effecting intersubjective relationships. I argue that music is the object of such intense anxiety because the intimacy that it can foster can be seductive. This seduction can be construed as dangerous if one is lured into an intimate, intersubjective relationship with others who have been deemed “inappropriate.” This is perhaps nowhere more obvious than in racialized and classed music censorship debates which have taken as their target jazz, blues, rock ‘n’ roll, punk and, most recently, hip hop for fear that children—
especially girls—who encounter the music will be seduced into lives of uncontrollable sexual frenzy and moral turpitude.

Philip Brett links cultural anxiety about the intimacy fostered by certain musical experiences to general cultural anxiety about the body, writing, “Nonverbal, even when linked to words, physically arousing in its function as initiator of dance, and resisting attempts to endow it with, or discern in it, precise meaning, [music] represents that part of our culture which is constructed as feminine and therefore dangerous”—dangerous in its capacity to vex listeners’ senses of self, manipulating them to engage in physical (especially sexual and violent) behaviors they otherwise would have the good sense to avoid. While the postulation that music can instruct listeners to behave in such a specific manner is laughable, the construction of musical danger within this ongoing national discourse further points to the central argument of this project: music can and does produce a felt intimacy; whenever an intimate relationship is present, there is risk of exploitation, damage and seduction (via empathy). Regardless of whether academics sufficiently address the intimate effects of shared musical experience, there already exists a public conversation around just that. It is our responsibility as scholars to infuse nuance into these discussions, lest they be dominated by fear-mongers, and it is my hope that this project contributes to that effort.

75 While I was writing this dissertation in August 2012, questions about the role of music in inciting violence again attracted national attention when a white supremacist opened fire, killing seven people at a Sikh temple in suburban Milwaukee. Several outlets covered the man’s involvement in a “hate rock” band, suggesting (in some cases very overtly) that his musical experience initiated his violent behavior. As one telling example, Southern California Public Radio covered this story under the headline “Sikh temple shooter was radicalized by hate rock in Orange County” (http://www.scpr.org/news/2012/08/08/33729/sikh-temple-shooter-was-radicalized-hate-rock-oran/)
Music is not, itself, a “stimulus” that produces certain effects, but it acts with other contextual features in what Emile Gomart and Antoine Hennion call “meticulously establish[ed] conditions.” I do not believe that music necessarily generates intimacy \textit{ex nihilo}, but it can—and often does—magnify an openness that is already present. In order for intimacy to result, the participants in a given musical experience must feel that they are in a context wherein they can give way to an experience of intimacy between sounding bodies. The difficulty of speaking directly about embodied musical experiences necessitates that the case studies that comprise the subsequent chapters of this project attend to the ways certain musical experiences are sought out by participants for their specific effects, the ways they come to understand and verbally reconstruct those experiences, and the ways in which shared musical activity is staged by participants in order to precipitate these effects.

While I believe that musical intimacy is something that can potentially be experienced by almost anyone who is open to it, I choose to focus specifically on girls and women for the three chapters that comprise the remainder of this project because they are uniquely positioned in relation to both music, embodiment, and intimacy in broader social conversations—particularly those where music and certain forms of intimacy are understood as threatening. As the next chapter demonstrates, censorship discourse and discourses of intimacy tend to cite girls and women as particularly vulnerable to psychological damage or physical danger in their engagements with other people, whether that be in the context of musical activity or in other types of intimate encounters.

Importantly, I do not mean to reduce girls and women to “bodies” with this project. However, I do believe it is imperative that we recognize the ways in which feminine subjectivity within a phallic economy is bound up with a paradoxical set of messages about sexual availability and a constant threat physical violation—something from which intimate musical experience may provide (as Susan Cusick suggests) a momentary, embodied reprieve. With that in mind, each of the remaining chapters explores gender-exclusive contexts for musical experience.

The third chapter of this dissertation returns to a topic that has attracted a fair amount of interest, the 1990s feminist punk subculture riot grrrl. Unlike most who have written about the movement before me, I focus on the function of musical experience—the thing many participants name as the initial attraction—in riot grrrl rather than on an analysis of its feminist politics. In order to research riot grrrl from the point of view of the participants, I revisited the work of other writers and used archival material to explore how firsthand accounts of riot grrrl construct subjectivity, experiences of pleasure, safety, and intimacy within the context of a musical movement. I contend that the specific context of riot grrrl provided the grounds for much-desired intimate musical experiences that responded to girls’ gendered experiences of isolation, while accommodating a decentered, multipronged political agenda.

Chapter four is an ethnographic study of an intensive one-week rock music camp for girls. This chapter focuses on the way girls’ rock camps—though they are most often noted for their messages of girls’ empowerment—generate intersubjective intimacy.
between the girls through musical experience. Girls’ rock camps have been growing in popularity in the wake of riot grrrl, with the first camp being held in 2001 in Portland, Oregon. There are now more than thirty annual camps in three countries, though the vast majority are held in the United States. The growing number of camps alongside the expansion of their popularity into other media venues (notably, a how-to book and a feature-length documentary) suggest that these gender-specific musical programs are providing an important experience for girls. Popular understandings of what constitutes that import have been mediated through the voices of adult women who tend to de-emphasize music in favor of the “more important” goal of girls’ empowerment. Drawing on my interactions at a girls’ rock camp in Ohio, I resist the tendency to elevate an under-interrogated notion of “girls’ empowerment” as the primary achievement of camp. Alternatively, I rely on girls’ own articulations of their camp experiences to highlight how the specifically musical context is implicated in their experience of (inter)subjectivity.

The fifth chapter is based on ethnographic research performed during the 36th annual Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival. Every year in early August, several thousand women from around the United States (and some from abroad) set up tents in a square mile of rural Michigan forest for a full week of workshops, camping, and concerts. Attending the festival allowed me to engage in participant observation as I considered the role of musical experience in the gender-exclusive “safe space” of the festival. In this chapter, I argue that the musical experiences had in this context enable a sense of intersubjective connection for attendees, which they reference through multiple
metaphors, such as communing with “the whole,” achieving spiritual connection, undergoing healing, and experiencing erotic intimacy. Typically, “womyn’s” music festival scholarship relies on lyrical analysis alone, if music is addressed at all; more often than not, discussion of music is foregone altogether for the sake of discussing the feminist and lesbian politics and history of the festivals. For example, much recent writing about the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival has centered on the event’s exclusion of transwomen through its controversial “Womyn-Born Womyn Only” policy. Though lyrical signification and gender politics certainly came up in my research, attending the festival allowed me to explore how these issues are related to and shape the musical experience that is nominally at the center of the event.

On Scope

As an interdisciplinary endeavor, this study examines the role of music as sonic presence in the production and maintenance of interpersonal relationships as understood by participants. I do not argue that musical intimacy is the only way that people meaningfully experience music, nor do I mean to suggest that this is a way that everyone necessarily experiences music. Rather, I contend that the importance of music is not only located in the semiotically decodable meaning made of what is being heard or the role a listener plays in a larger community, but that the effectiveness of music is reliant upon (and constitutive of) the relationships established between those with whom musical experiences are shared. In order to further illuminate the complex ways music works, this project seeks to understand why and how participants choose to share musical
experiences, with whom they choose to share them, how sharing musical experiences can affect relationships, and how sharing with different people produces different effects—in other words, how the social serves the musical. My hope is that this project inspires scholars to expand the ways we talk and write about music, that we broaden our understanding of musical experience, and challenge ourselves to continually reconsider what constitutes “the musical object.” And, of course, I hope that my arguments ring true for lovers of music, and that they begin to capture (ah, but in words!) the specialness of musical experience.
Chapter 2: Musical Danger and Aural Sex

On September 19, 1985, the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation held a hearing to consider the implementation of a labeling system within the record industry. Central to the arguments justifying this measure was a repeatedly cited relationship between musical experience and sexual behavior. According to John Danforth’s opening statement at the hearing, two concerns about contemporary music were to be addressed: first, the presence of “sexual subjects” in music, and second, “violence…, sexual violence.” Several hours of testimony ensued from proponents of labeling and opponents who reasoned that labeling was akin to censorship. Even though sex and violence were nominally equally at issue, sexuality emerged as the more significant locus of anxiety during the actual hearing and in the corresponding media coverage and public awareness campaigns. Supporters of labeling centered their anecdotes and argumentation almost exclusively on the effects that encountering the music in question (which more or less included Prince, Sheena Easton, and heavy metal) would have on youth sexual behavior, with particular distress expressed over the protection of the purity and safety girls’ bodies.

By exploring the slippage between discourses of musical and sexual danger that constitute and contextualize what was colloquially termed “The Porn Rock Hearing” as well as a long history of discourse that preceded and made possible this cultural event, I argue that efforts to police musical experience implicitly posit musical danger as located
in the identity-destabilizing capacity of music, and in the embodied feelings of intersubjectivity that musical sound can enable between co-participants. Though after reading the previous chapter it may seem a questionable choice to focus on language in the following pages, I remind readers that I am drawing strategy from Lakoff and Johnson’s work, as well as Robert Walser’s point that we might use linguistic metaphor to revive the body in music scholarship. My analysis reveals an important, embodied element of musical experience that—as several scholars have noted—continues to be mostly absent in music-centered scholarship.

Through a discussion of American discourses of musical danger (for which the 1985 “Porn Rock Hearing” serves as an illustrative case study), I explore the ways in which music’s engagement with the body, though under-theorized in academic writing and difficult to articulate through language, is a fundamental and very present element of musical experience that governs how we actually use, govern, and understand music in our everyday lives. Considering the sensuous element of musical experience enables a richer understanding of the fears and motivations that undergird discourses of musical danger, while also—as I will discuss in subsequent chapters—illuminating the ways in which women and girls use music in highly staged contexts to enable certain intersubjective bodily experiences that are otherwise rarely or never available to them.

Music and the Sensuous, Sinful Body

Fears about music’s engagement with the body have a prolonged history in Western culture. Long before Tipper Gore gathered the Washington Wives in a campaign
to protect American children from the seductions of sound, medieval theologian John of Salisbury remarked that, in the presence of music,

[T]he ears are almost completely divested of their critical power, and the intellect, which pleasurableness of so much sweetness has caressed insensate, is impotent to judge the merits of the things heard. Indeed, when such practices go too far, they can more easily occasion titillation between the legs than a sense of devotion in the brain.\(^{78}\)

Anxiety arising from what Susan McClary calls “the slippage between the sensuous body and sin… in which the most innocuous of sensory responses seem to raise immediately the specter of unbridled sexuality”\(^{79}\) has persisted from antiquity and continued to characterize musical danger discourse in the United States throughout the modern era, suggesting a fundamental understanding that musical experience is embodied and that it has the capacity to overrule moral sensibility and self-control to enable or enhance feelings of intersubjective connection and desire in potentially dangerous ways.

Several examples can be culled from American history: when the saxophone became popular in the early 20\(^{th}\) century, it was called the “devil’s flute” and was believed to produce seductive sounds that would compel young girls to behave lewdly in fits of uncontrollable passion.\(^{80}\) Count Basie recalls one comment from the 1930s, claiming “jam sessions, jitterbugs, and cannibalistic rhythms are wooing our youth along...

---

\(^{78}\) McClary “Same,” 442.
\(^{79}\) Ibid.
the primrose path to hell." Adults developed paranoia about the infectious effects of rock music’s “tribal beats” on children in the 1950s, fearing that these beats called upon the body in ways that the mind could not overcome, driving youth to potential sexual frenzy, at worst, and causing them to move their bodies in lewd and provocative fashion. In 1956, the Alabama White Citizens Council accused rock and roll, “the basic, heavy-beat music of the Negroes,” of appealing to “the base in man, bring[ing] out animalism and vulgarity.” During the 1958 senate hearings addressing “payola,” author Vance Packard argued that rock and roll’s “raw and savage tone” titillated “the animal instinct in teenagers.” Raymond Durgnat, a British critic of popular music, wrote in 1966, “The connection between exuberance and eroticism is evidenced by the aphrodisiac effect of music and dance… If it’s not the wild and wicked whirl of the waltz, which is spinning our youth into its first steps on the primrose path, then it’s… the frenetic spasmodicity of the Charleston, or the sensual attack of squealing trumpets and obscenely slithering saxophones.”

At the heart of censorship is not only a broad-based fear of music’s ability to engage and stimulate the body, but, particularly and importantly, a belief that music might force intimacy with an inappropriate, racialized other. Eric Nuzum, author of an impressively comprehensive overview of censorship in the United States, writes, “censorship is less about defining appropriate expression than it is about defining

---

82 Cf. Ibid., 24.
83 Cf. Ibid., 25.
appropriate people.\textsuperscript{85} The comments above reflect racist notions that black people—and therefore black music—were more closely engaged with emotion and the body than whites. In other words, what made the sound of black music so powerful and dangerous was its supposedly distinctive ability to engage, stimulate, and initiate pleasure for the body, destabilizing self-control and, ultimately, one’s sense of self.

Religious leaders, in almost uncanny mimicry of St. Augustine, feared the effects of rock music, with its roots in black music, on congregants. One such claim was authored by Christian fundamentalist and former Bob Jones University professor Frank Garlock, who claimed that “under the influence of the jungle rhythms and melodies, [ ] normal body functions have been ‘nerve-jammed’ so they cease to operate.”\textsuperscript{86} Charles Cleall, a writer for the \textit{Methodist Recorder}, acknowledged that some Christians had come to accept that God had gifted humans with sexual pleasure, but suggested that the eroticism of rock was out of place in church because, through the encouragement of quick breathing, it deadened the mind and provided “mild titillation” of the body. “Heaven only knows what mutations this titillation may in time promote,” he fretted.\textsuperscript{87}

Even contemporary censorship scholarship occasionally reifies these problematic assumptions. For example, writing in 1993, scholars Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave recount 1950s white teenagers’ interest in R&B, with its “sensual[ity]” and its “earthy lyrics,” “[black] music was less inhibited, less bound by convention, and more

celebratory of whatever they had that was enjoyable.” Other recent examples include communications scholar Betty Houchin Winfield’s observation that, in Afrocentric music, the beat is primary and words are made to “fit the beat and overtly express human emotions,” and Michael Budds’s remarks that early rock music, with its ties to R&B, was marked by “an emphatic approach to rhythm that satisfied the important desire to dance, an intense and sometimes extravagant display of emotion, and the unapologetic treatment of subjects considered taboo….” Though the aforementioned writers are all current scholars, their language echoes overtly racist claims that black music corrupted the morality of white youth with its savage beats and its overwhelming appeal to the body.

Common metaphors used to describe music’s damaging potential include those of bodily illness and injury—music literally enters and sickens the body, and has been variously described as a “pandemic,” a “plague,” and a “poison.” Little Richard, appropriating the medical metaphor as a compliment, rather than an indictment, called rock and punk “contagious.” To others, music is a “beast” that can “jab,” it is a threat to “life, limb, decency and morals,” it has “some special hypnotic effect,” a “jungle

88 5.
91 M. Merrio, a psychiatry professor at Columbia (cf. Martin and Seagrave, 510)
92 Meredith Wilson, cf. ibid, 46.
93 Pablo Casals, cf. ibid., 47; cf. Budds, 1.
94 Cf. Martin and Seagrave, 74.
95 Ibid., 111.
strain that gets [teenagers] all worked up,98 causing high blood pressure,99 inciting “[t]eenagers [to] virtually work themselves into a frenzy to the beat of fast swing music,”100 and turning them into “hopped up sex maniacs.”101 Broadcasting director Harvey Ward justified his refusal to play disco on any of the stations under his purview by identifying it as “a contributing factor in epilepsy.”102

Scientific experimentation has been marshaled to demonstrate the negative effects music had on the body. In a 1977 speech as president of the International Academy of Preventative Medicine, physician John Diamond said that rock music with an anapestic beat (where the last beat of the measure is accented) could “heighten stress and anger, reduce output, increase hyperactivity, weaken muscle strength and,” of course, “could play a role in juvenile delinquency.”103 He surmised that this happened through music’s ability to de-synchronize the two sides of the human brain, and to incite bodily rhythms that were out of line with the human heartbeat. He claimed that the anapestic beat was particularly threatening to human health, declaring it “seductive and even addictive, with those exposed to the beat craving more of it even as it makes them weaker.”104 Diamond further claimed that even when a listener’s ears are blocked, their muscle capacity is strengthened when “good” (he does not define what this means) music is played, and that

---

97 Police officer Fred Good of Pittsburgh (cf. Martin and Seagrave, 31).
101 A 1970s newspaper item, cf. Martin and Seagrave 144.
102 Cf. Ibid., 231.
103 Cf. Ibid., 239.
listening to rock music has the opposite effect, causing all muscle systems to become weaker.\textsuperscript{105}

In the early 1970s, Garlock, “one of America’s best-known authorities on the dangers of rock music”\textsuperscript{106} invoked the concept of sympathetic vibration (the notion that one vibrating body will cause another of similar or neutral frequency to vibrate in sympathy) to argue that the type of music to which a person listens indicates something about that person’s character. Specifically, rock music sympathetically vibrates with a number of problematic “associates” (which Garlock links to Africa\textsuperscript{107}), including “homosexuals and other sex deviates,” encouraging “lesbianism,” “promiscuity, free love, free sex,” “sodomy,” “venereal disease,” “brothels,” and “orgies of all kinds.”\textsuperscript{108} Garlock claims to have seen firsthand the effects of rock on teenagers, stating that at the first strains of the music, young listeners, “hallucinate, go into ecstatic gyrations, get a far-away stare in their eyes, and act as if someone had just given them a dose of LSD.”\textsuperscript{109}

What happens, according to Garlock, is that the wills, desires, and thoughts of performers are injected directly into their music and are then transferred through “sympathetic vibration” to listeners—listeners are literally invaded by an/other, the boundaries between the two become porous and blurred. He writes, “What the musician believes affects the listener, even if the musician never says a word… Anything that is so sensual by its very nature is bound to appeal to the flesh and the basest instincts in men,

\textsuperscript{105} Your Body Doesn’t Lie (New York: Warner, 1979), 155ff.
\textsuperscript{106} N.p.
\textsuperscript{107} 22.
\textsuperscript{108} 12-13.
\textsuperscript{109} 12.
so it is only natural that sinful behavior will accompany it.”

Teenagers, he says, turn to rock music in order to feel dominated by being physically, emotionally, and spiritually engulfed in a loud, sensuous experience. Frank Garlock sums up rather succinctly the contours of fear regarding rock music’s effect on “Man,” proclaiming that “[rock] will completely engulf him with its loud, driving beat, its repeated chords and phrases, its wild sensuous sound, and its sadistic, neurotic, sensual, and even obscene words: and it will bend his mind and body until he no longer has any control over any of his actions or thoughts.”

Steve Lawhead’s book *Rock of This Age* (1987) attempts to reclaim rock music for Christian audiences by discerning which purported dangers are *real* and which are *imaginary*. Lawhead critiques ideas like Garlock’s, writing, “The implication is that the beat starts and suddenly the frail human organism is assaulted by an erotic flood tide of powerful physical urges too overwhelming to deny.” Lawhead finds this fear somewhat unwarranted, reasoning that the mind is always ultimately in control of emotions, and that the “right heart moderates all of the body’s actions.” However, he concedes that “all music affects people emotionally,” that music can bypass cognition “telegraph[ing] to the hearts of listeners,” and that music can undermine psychic defenses, luring listeners “to go somewhere [they] want to go but know [they]”

---

110 22-23.
111 41.
112 (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1987), 95.
113 97.
114 59.
115 99.
shouldn’t.” If the music is catchy enough, listeners can find themselves internalizing orientations of desire with which they do not morally agree, particularly in the areas of sex, materialism, and hedonism. He cites as an example songs on the radio that “drift sinuously by,” tricking you into singing along with a tune that happens to be a “not-too-subtle advertisement for the gay lifestyle,” converting otherwise heterosexual listeners to homosexuality through the tricky, identity-destabilizing machinations of music.

Campaigns such as Garlock’s and Lawhead’s have cognates in popular, secular culture as well. In 1985, *Good Housekeeping* published an article which drew an unsubstantiated link between teen pregnancy, crime, suicide and rock music in order to compel parents to protect their children from certain genres. The 1989 “wilding” rape of a woman then only identified as “The Central Park Jogger” was blamed in part on the popularity of Tone Loc’s “Wild Thing,” betraying persistent racist stereotypes about the violent sexual impulses of black men as well as beliefs about the power of music to compel listeners to erotic frenzy. In 1990, a critic of censorship efforts aimed at 2 Live Crew and their album *Nasty as They Wanna Be* observed that the whole campaign was “fueled in large part by black male phallic paranoia.” Though psychologists called to testify were unable to demonstrate a causal relationship between 2 Live Crew’s music and sexual arousal, which was required to establish the album’s appeal to “prurient interest,” the judge who heard the case still ruled in favor of the prosecution, deeming

116 60.
117 17.
118 Martin and Seagrave, 305.
120 Nuzum, 271.
Nasty as They Wanna Be obscene. In 1998, the Indigo Girls, a lesbian musical group, had scheduled a free concert at a high school in South Carolina. Though their songs contain very few references to sexuality, their concert was cancelled by school administrators because the performers are lesbians, implying that the students might “catch” sexuality not merely through the presence of music being performed by queer people.\(^{121}\) In each of these examples, music is attributed with immense power to magnify, reorient, or even engender sexual desire—fundamentally refiguring one’s self-perception and one’s relationship to others.

Concern for women’s and girl’s inability to withstand musical manipulation is rampant within discourses of musical danger, reflecting a gendered belief that females are less rational than males and are thus more susceptible to the whims of their bodies. Censorship discourse establishes what Susan Sontag calls “a hierarchy of competence:”\(^{122}\) at the top are those people who possess such great virtue that they are unmoved by material that may incite others of weaker, less-rational character to lead “uncontrolled lives.”\(^{123}\) In terms of music, this determination is often made on the basis of gender. John Diamond expresses concern about women’s vulnerability to music, explaining that they are “more susceptible to rhythm and gesture and pulsation than with the horological time of the left brain… it is easier for them to submit to and transmit the pulse.”\(^{124}\) Thomas Faulkner, a self-proclaimed “former dancing master”\(^{125}\) who had, in

\(^{121}\) Ibid., 291.
\(^{122}\) Cf. White, 24.
\(^{123}\) Ibid., 24.
\(^{124}\) Life Energy in Music (Valley Cottage, NY: Archaeus Press, 1981), 92-96. Diamond also offers that that women conductors are more able to produce more comforting and therapeutic music because of their innate connection to the sonorous womb (95).
the early 20th century, abandoned his craft in order to better serve Christ, was particularly concerned about the effects that music and dance had on women, writing of the female dancer, “She is filled with the rapture of sin in its intensity; her spirit is inflamed with passion and lust is gratified in thought. With a last low wail, the music ceases, and the dance for the night is ended, but not the evil work of the night.” One former “deviate,” reportedly told Frank Garlock that “the best way to get chicks turned on is to make love to the rhythm of rock ‘n roll. Any girl will go all the way under the right circumstances.” Garlock paternalistically recommends that any young woman who “values her purity” not subject herself to such manipulative circumstances.

Culturally, girls are understood as “subjects-in-crisis” who are struggling to navigate their way to adult womanhood. As such, girls are taken to be particularly “at-risk” of being psychologically and physically destabilized and derailed through their musical engagements, because they have not yet developed the maturity or security in identity to determine what sorts of pleasurable bodily engagements are good for them, and what sorts may lead to peril. To take a recent example, Carole Platt Liebau, author of *Prude: How the Sex-Obsessed Culture is Ruining Girls (and America, too!)* (2007), posits a direct relationship between girls’ musical practices and their attraction to sexual danger. She contends that popular music is particularly threatening to girls because it can do three things: foster feelings of togetherness, intensify emotions, and channel rebellious

---

127 19.
128 Ibid.
impulses—all of which, together, inevitably lead to “heartbreak, loss of self-respect, pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases.”130 Or, in short, encountering the “wrong” music leads to such somatic problems as depression, sexual deviance, and illness.131

In Packaging Girlhood (2006), a parental self-help book that offers a more tempered perspective than Liebau’s, authors Sharon Lamb and Lyn Mikel Brown proclaim that they “will not tell you to turn your TVs off, throw away [your daughter’s] Polly Pocket dolls, or forbid her to see certain movies or listen to rap songs.”132 Despite this promise and their urging of open, critical dialogue between adults and girls, they alert parents that girls are “vulnerable to sounds around them,” such as “sex in lyrics.”133 They warn of the constant danger posed by the “auditory assault on girls waiting in the lunch line as she [sic] is listening to the radio.”134 Again, music’s engagement with the body emerges as the mechanism through which it becomes threatening: girls are literally being “assaulted” through the bodily portals of their ears. In fact, the authors advise taking great care in monitoring girls’ musical behaviors, informing readers that music allows listeners to “experience vulnerability” that “feels good,”135 potentially seducing them into

130 She contends that most listeners gain the majority of pleasure from their understanding of lyrics, but that for some, “gratification” comes primarily from the music and secondarily from the lyrics, though listeners “are able to recognize themes (such as aggression or sex) in the music itself. And the more controversial the music is, the more likely its listeners are to pay close attention to its lyrics” (121). There is no description of what constitutes “controversial music” that follows this claim, though based on Liebau’s examples of Rihanna, The Pussycat Dolls, Nelly Furtado, Britney Spears, rapper Nelly, and the Black-Eyed Peas, it seems as though R&B, pop and hip hop—music associated with people of color and low culture—are the primary offenders. In fact, at one point in her “Aural Sex” chapter, she specifically calls out hip hop for its “suggestive beat” (125).
131 (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin), 2.
132 117.
133 Ibid.
134 133.
dangerous, intimate encounters as they explore the pleasurable openness enabled by listening.

American ideas about musical danger intersect with a number of other ideologies about race, science, religion, sexuality, and gender. Many writers and critics have drawn on these other discourses as they have scrambled to understand and articulate the particular ways in which music acts on the body and on subjectivity, concluding that, above all, music is intensely *bodily*, and that it enables listeners to be (or desire to be) intimately engaged with others (via sex, usually).\(^{136}\) Musicological scholarship has tended to skirt these thorny issues, leaving unanswered important questions about the bodily and subjective effects of sonorous experience. Despite this disciplinary oversight, the affective element of musical experience demands attention and, as we have seen above, prompts unending speculation from a variety of voices. If music scholars continue to reason that this is not their purview, that it is too difficult to articulate through language, or that such concerns are not sufficiently intellectual to be worth their attention, then conversations about music and intersubjectivity are up for the taking—and the misappropriating. In order to contextualize the stakes of (not) attending to these questions from a scholarly perspective, I turn to the so-called “Porn Rock Hearing” and its primary instigator, the Parents’ Music Resource Center (PMRC) for the remainder of this chapter. This example offers the most concentrated and widely publicized effort to demonstrate music’s potential effects and to constrain musical experience on the basis of these effects in recent American history.

\(^{136}\) Dissanayake’s essay in *Music and Manipulation* posits that musical behavior “evolved in ancestral humans because it contributed to their survival and reproductive success” (31).
Porn Rock and the Parents’ Music Resource Center

In 1985, a group of Washington, D.C., women led by Tipper Gore formed the PMRC, a committee aimed at better controlling children’s access to popular music identified by the group as too sexually explicit or violent. The PMRC recommended the implementation of a music-labeling system similar to that used by the Motion Picture Association of America to rate films in order to assist parents in making more informed decisions about what music their children encounter. The PMRC’s hope was that more restrictive control over the musical practices of children would directly curb social maladies such as teen pregnancy and sexual violence. The United States Senate agreed to hold a hearing on what had been termed by the PMRC as “porn rock” to discuss the potential dangers of popular music. Three members of the PMRC, plus musicians Frank Zappa, John Denver, and Dee Snider, and several invited “experts” spoke and submitted statements.

According to statements and materials issued by the PMRC, much of music’s capacity to negatively influence the behaviors of children derives from lyrical content or from the on- and off-stage behavior of performers who are viewed as potential role models. However, among references to semiotically significant elements of musical experience such as lyrics, album covers, and stage antics is an implicit, recurring concern with the “the music itself.” Ideas about the effect of music on the body—particularly girls’ bodies—and that effect’s relationship to subjectivity surface during close examination of the fears articulated by the PMRC and their supporters. This is revealed
through repetitive and anxious reference to music’s influence on sexual behavior and intimacy, which emerge as central concerns in and around the senate hearing.

To start, despite the fact that sexuality, violence, and Satanism are all cited by the PMRC as problematic musical themes that engender correspondent social problems, the music at issue is referred to using a sexual epithet: “porn rock.” Furthermore, in the context of the hearings, sexuality is always listed first in the aforementioned trio of aberrations, and the majority of the lyrics and performer images denounced during the hearings and in corresponding media coverage are sexual in nature. For example, at the hearing, Millie Waterman, vice president of the National Parent-Teacher Association, testified that all songs containing “sexual references” (regardless of what those references actually were) are dangerous for children. In an op-ed written for The Washington Post coinciding with the hearing, George Will stated that porn rock had the capacity to literally strip children of their morals by immersing their ears in “a plague of messages about sexual promiscuity, bisexuality, incest, sado-masochism, satanism, drug use, alcohol abuse, and, constantly, misogyny.” In the course of the hearing, the continued emphasis on sex prompted Frank Zappa to at one point burst out in question, “Is the PMRC attempting to save future generations from SEX ITSELF? [...] Is the next step the adoption of a ‘PMRC National Legal Age for Comprehension of Vaginal Arousal?’”

---

138 Senate 1985, 89.
140 Senate 1985, 63.
The answer to Zappa’s question may best be summed up as “yes.” Despite Gore’s claim that what the PMRC was combating was “a sick new strain of rock music glorifying everything from forced sex to bondage to rape,” any non-monogamous, non-heterosexual, or non-procreative sexual behavior, including masturbation, homosexuality, bisexuality, sadomasochism, and promiscuity were listed during the hearing as dangerous potential outcomes of the wide availability of “porn rock.” Any and all sexual behavior became doubly upsetting to the PMRC and their allies when it involved women or girls. For example, both Prince’s “Darling Nikki,” a song whose lyrics reference a masturbating woman and the piece that prompted Tipper Gore into action, and Sheena Easton’s paean to female sexuality, “Sugar Walls,” were repeatedly cited during the hearing and in the corresponding media coverage as paradigmatic examples of dangerous music, despite the fact that neither of these songs contains violent or sexually abusive lyrics.\textsuperscript{141}

\textit{Rising to the Challenge}, a 1988 video produced by the PMRC to alert parents to the potential dangers of the music their children were encountering, begins by showing scenes from PBS’s long-running children’s show \textit{Sesame Street} while a narrator explains that musical experience has long been a part of teaching and shaping children. However, the narrator ominously warns, MTV has become an important instructor for “youth of the entire world,”\textsuperscript{142} and the music played on MTV nefariously glorifies substance abuse, suicide, violence, the occult, and explicit sexuality. Though each of the aforementioned

\textsuperscript{141}Notably, nearly every newspaper interview with or about the PMRC mentioned the members’ concern for their daughters. Sons were not mentioned.

\textsuperscript{142}According to the film, children listen to music 4-6 hours per day, totaling roughly 11,000 hours of listening to music between 7\textsuperscript{th} and 12\textsuperscript{th} grade—more time than is spent in a classroom between first grade and high school graduation (2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. VHS. Vision Videos, VV8808-2. 1988).
themes is treated in succession with a dedicated section of the film, the narrative consistently turns to a discussion of sexuality regardless of the ostensible focus of any given film chapter. During the section on “substance abuse,” for example, the film’s male narrator cites the Beastie Boys’ encouragement of teenage girl audience members to expose their breasts during concerts as the most egregious example of the dangers of the band’s music. Similarly, the examination of violence in the second section of the film zeroes in on sexual violence toward women in music, and the theme of virgin sacrifice in heavy metal music features prominently in the segment dealing with the occult. Within the narrative of the film, whatever potential music has to initiate listeners into deviant activity, its ultimate danger is its ability destabilize mores of (sexual) intimacy.

More than Words

Though the official title of the Porn Rock hearing listed both the “contents of music and lyrics,” implying that there was more at issue than just words, much of the testimony centered on the lyrical elements of the music in question. In fact, Frank Zappa was the only participant in the hearings to point out the incongruity between the stated purpose of the hearing and the reduction of music to lyrics in much of the argumentation presented by the PMRC. He noted, “[T]he PMRC starts off talking about lyrics, but when they take it over into other realms they start talking about the videos. In fact, [then-senator Al Gore] misspoke [him]self at the beginning in [his] introduction when [he was] talking about the music does this, the music does that. There is a distinct difference
between those notes and chords and the bass line and the rhythm that support the words and the lyrics.”

This does not mean, though, that the members of the PMRC actually believed lyrics alone were the problem. If, in fact, words were the sole musical element in need of modification in order to protect the children, then the primary recommendation of the PMRC (which participants representing all sides of the conversation found reasonable) would not have been to make the lyrics more available by printing them on the outside of all album covers. Presenting explicit lyrics in a silent, decontextualized format—without “the music itself”—could assist parents in making “informed judgments,” whereas lyrics encountered in their musical context would lead to uncontrollable sex and violence. After several speakers mentioned that they were in agreement with this strategy for making music safer, RIAA president Stanley Gortikov finally called attention to the odd line of reasoning, stating, “If questionable lyrics such as those protested here today were printed on the outside of an album, would we be again castigated by parents for daring to expose such explicit language to younger children, and maybe be called before a committee to have to explain ourselves for daring to reveal such objectionable material?” Gortikov’s question went unanswered and the point was dropped.

Across the 160 pages of transcripts and supplementary materials for the hearing, explicit lyrics repeatedly are identified as the main culprits in the damage being done to children by “porn rock.” However, it is implicit throughout the hearings and the press

\*143 Senate 1985, 57.
\*144 Ibid., 115.
\*145 Ibid., 116.
coverage that surrounded the PMRC that words alone are not the issue. In an interview with Los Angeles Times writer Patrick Goldstein, Susan Baker pointed out that one of her concerns with Sheena Easton’s “Sugar Walls” (a song that is cited repeatedly by many of those who testified in the hearings as particularly offensive) was “the way she sings those lyrics, using this very sexy, erotic voice.”

Sheila Davis, a lyricist and academic, mentions the “synthesized orgasmic beat” of Frankie Goes to Hollywood’s “Relax” in her testimony regarding popular music as an accelerant that pushes along social acceptance of “illegal or immoral” behavior, and Kandy Stroud decries the “orgasmic moans and howls” and “hard, pulsating, musical burlesque” of songs like “Darling Nikki.” “Vulgar lyrics supported by uncomfortably provocative sound effects,” she concludes, “result in musical pornography.”

Despite the amount of discussion devoted to dissecting lyrics, “the music itself” and the body continue to resurface during the PMRC’s campaign. The mechanism by which music affects listeners is repeatedly referenced using somatic language and metaphors. Professor of music Joe Steussy, who was asked by the PMRC to provide a statement at the hearing, offered that music affects listeners through “coordinated multisensory input;” music is “stimulative” and pleasurable, making it particularly apt for mind control. Steussy argued that heavy metal, in particular, undermines consciousness.

149 Ibid.
150 Senate 1985, 120-1.
and self-control through its “simplicity, the repetitive beat, and the uniformity of timbre and dynamics.”

After Steussy spoke at the hearing, child psychiatrist Paul King, who was also invited by the PMRC to make a statement, posited a direct link between sexual promiscuity, violence, and listening to heavy metal. In a line of reasoning reminiscent of Nyong’o and Lawrence’s analyses of disco (as discussed in the previous chapter), he stated that adolescents are drawn to heavy metal because it provides an all-consuming, whole-body experience that obscures the “emotional hunger” they experience as a result of having incompletely-formed identities. King warned, “Young teens who already think too much with their hormones and too little with their heads, succumb to heavy metal bombardment.” Another participant in the hearing, sex therapist Martha Winter Gross affirmed King’s conclusions, offering her professional opinion that music has the capacity to “[rob] children of their innocence” and exploit feelings of subjective crises that characterize adolescence. Teenagers are in a state of confusion about their relationships in society, and music causes their “psychological defenses [to] break down,” fundamentally reshaping the ways in which they relate and become attached to others in their social worlds.

While the potential consequences of musical experience outlined by the PMRC and by people like Steussy, King, and Gross seem dire, the logic that allows them to reach such conclusions is one that this project supports: music does have embodied

---

151 Ibid., 125.
152 Ibid., 129.
153 Ibid., 130.
154 Ibid., 161.
155 Ibid., 162.
effects, it can destabilize subjective boundaries, and it can enable intensified experiences of intimacy between people who share a musical experience. The PMRC and their allies approach this widely-experienced element of musical engagement through a lens of fear—for the safety of their daughters, mostly—but their insights about the nature of musical experience (abstracted as much as possible of the language paranoia) are worth taking seriously, and lend additional weight to the scholarly call to more fully consider the complexity of musical engagement outside semiotic paradigms of analysis.

“Aural Sex”

It is implied by the PMRC and their allies that music can be seductive, because it can literally get inside of and move listeners’ bodies—the music itself becomes intimately internalized in and through the bodies of listeners. Perhaps the most infamous statement to emerge at the hearings, which was issued by South Carolina Senator Ernest Hollings, reflects this. Hollings’s call to arms—“By God, rescue the tender young ears of this nation from this—this rock porn… It’s outrageous filth and we’ve got to do something about it!”156—indicates both the heightened degree of fear that motivated the PMRC’s efforts, and succinctly demonstrates the posited link between sensuous musical experience and sexual intimacy. In Hollings’s figuration (which is evocative of John of Salisbury’s) music is physically threatening the subjectivities of children, titillating them through the portal of their ears—or, if you will, a stand-in vagina—and seducing them into inappropriate and potentially dangerous intimate relationships. Carol Liebau, reciting

156 Notably, this quotation adorns a wall at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland as part of a permanent exhibit regarding music censorship in the United States.
many of the PMRC’s arguments twenty years after the “porn rock” hearing, cleverly terms this sort of musical process “aural sex,” and argues that girls must be protected from it.

Many individuals have implied that there is very little separating musical experience from sex, suggesting that the former often leads directly to the latter. Rev. Jesse Jackson complained in 1977 that it was time for the recording industry to accept at least partial responsibility for the increasing rate of pregnancy among black teenage girls by limiting the amount of “sex rock” produced. As justification for his position, Jackson cited a Jet magazine survey which had claimed that ninety percent of one thousand unmarried and pregnant girls at a North Hollywood high school had had sex while listening to music with suggestive rhythm and lyrics.157 Similarly, Illinois’s superintendent of education suggested that an increase in the number of illegitimate children and venereal disease was related to the increasing prevalence “suggestive pop tunes,”158 and Kansas Senator Sam Brownback blamed prolonged exposure to rap and rock music for an increase in the teen pregnancy rate. In May 1984, U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Coop decried rock music, claiming that it would negatively affect youth listeners’ ability to have happy, satisfying sexual relationships.159 In perhaps the most extreme example, in 1975, a reverend in Tallahassee, Florida, claimed that in his study of 1,000 unwed mothers, 984 claimed to have gotten pregnant while listening to

---

158 Cf. Ibid., 252.
159 Nuzum, 288.
He surmised that “[t]here’s a definite relationship between illicit sex and any music with a syncopated beat.”

For Tipper Gore, in particular, concerts—where the co-presence of bodies is integral to the musical experience—emerge as a major concern for those wishing to protect children and be protected from music’s ability to “stimulate and inflame.”

Toward the end of *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society*—a book written to coincide with and bolster the work of the PMRC—Gore explicitly links several incidents of sexual assault and violence to musical experience at rock and hip hop concerts. Among those listed are two 1981 incidents in which young women were raped outside concert venues, an attempted rape of two girls in 1984 New Orleans, two 1985 instances in which girls were raped at concerts put on by rock band Motley Crue and punk band X, and a rape in Michigan that occurred after a Judas Priest concert. Though Gore’s suggestion that music can have such specific effects that it would direct people who were otherwise disinclined from such things to commit sexual assault seems implausible, it makes clear that, for the PMRC and similarly-minded individuals mentioned above, what is at stake is no less than the integrity of individual identity, personal boundaries, and the sexual safety of girls’ bodies—and *this* is what both motivates efforts to control or censor music, necessitating a deeper scholarly engagement (one that does not begin from a place of fear) with music’s effects on subjectivity.

---

160 Ibid., 246.
162 Gore, 108 and 145.
Conclusion

I certainly do not advocate the efforts of the PMRC or those organizations and individuals with similar objectives, but I do believe that the discourse of musical danger propagated by the likes of the PMRC does, at least, provide us with reason to consider how music is different from other forms of media—to think about “the music itself,” and the widely shared (if not always easily- or well-articulated) belief that music experience has deep, affective, and effective components that have great power over our senses of self. As scholars, we need not accept the alarmist warnings of censorship advocates, but we do need to seriously consider what it is about actual musical experience that enables the PMRC and their forebears to make the sorts of claims they do, and recognize that these claims seem plausible enough that they eventually found a forum on the senate floor.163 When stripped of fear-mongering language, musical danger discourse reveals something fundamental to musical experience that is not sufficiently captured in analyses of formal and lyrical content.

The core beliefs undergirding musical danger discourse implore us to recognize that music does affect listeners in sensuous, embodied ways; that it does have the capacity to destabilize one’s sense of individuated selfhood; and that it enables intimacy among people who share a musical experience whether as listeners, performers, or both.

---

163 To take an illustrative example, Gore recounts a stream of violence that occurred in Pittsburgh after an LL Cool J and Run DMC concert. If, as Gore suggests, it is the “suggestive and directive” lyrics that are cause for concern, it is curious how she would explain music’s role in this particular event when the songs performed did not lyrically advocate violent behavior. Gore is signaling that there is something about the specificity of music—and, in fact, she at one point in her book names music’s unique capacity to bring us together in pleasure—that makes it particularly frightening to the sensibilities of a wealthy, middle-aged, white mother who only wishes to protect her daughter’s body from the frenzy that certain types of music supposedly initiate.
To this point, Susan McClary insists that, if we intend to examine the ways in which music becomes socially meaningful, we need to better understand the ways in which power and subjectivity operate in ways that are unique to music: “To assess music from the outside as though it were but one commodity among many, or as though its meanings resided solely within its lyrics, is to fail to locate its pleasures, its means of manipulation and therefore its politics.”

Sensuous, embodied musical experience, like sex—something to which music is so often linked—is an integral player in the production of intersubjectivity, which perhaps explains (though it does not really justify) the “slippery slope” from music to STDs identified by Liebau, from music to pregnancy suggested by Jesse Jackson, and from music to rape articulated by Gore and the PMRC. Judith Butler explains that the establishment of a relationship with an/other offers both pleasure and risk, containment and possibility:

As bodies, we are exposed to others, and while this may be the condition of our desire, it also raises the possibility of subjugation and cruelty. This follows from the fact that bodies are bound up with others through material needs, through touch, through language, through a set of relations without which we cannot survive. To have one’s survival bound up in such a way is a constant risk of sociality—its promise and its threat. The very face of being bound up with others establishes the possibility of being subjugated and exploited…. But it also

---

164 McClary “Same,” 38.
establishes the possibility of being relieved of suffering, of knowing justice and
even love.\footnote{Judith Butler, \textit{Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?} (London and New York: Verso, 2010), 61.}

We would do well to think of music in terms of its capacity to lay bare the fundamental
relations which sustain us, to enable intimacy and intersubjectivity, and, yes, to pose risk.
To quote Susan McClary once more, musical experience is “a site where we learn how to
experience socially mediated patterns of kinetic energy, being in time, emotions, desire,
pleasure, and much more.”\footnote{McClary “Same,” 33.} It is in that vein that I take up the remaining chapters of this
dissertation wherein I explore how and why women and girls use the capacity of music to
enable to intimacy in order to explore, shape, and respond to their social worlds.
Chapter 3: “The Point Was Simply to Make Some Noise”: Riot Grrrl and Embodied Musical Experience

“No other kind of music, before or after that moment, has been able to change my internal chemistry the way Bikini Kill did that day. I remember Kathleen’s voice shivered through me the first time. The second time it picked me off the floor. The third time it sang with me.”

“This is about splitting, dividing, cracking. Being many and not just one. This is about boundaries: lines are being drawn, mouths are being shut, bodies are being stopped. This is about control. This is about nausea. This is about having two skins. This is about melancholy. This is about silence. This is about being safe… This is about being loud…. This is about the about the unnamed.”

Riot grrrl, a feminist subcultural movement as infamous for its music as its gender politics, emerged out of the indie and punk music scenes in the Pacific Northwest and Washington, D.C. in the early 1990s. The “do-it-yourself” (DIY) ethos of those scenes provided an opening through which young women were able to capitalize on the subcultures’ anti-establishment politics to articulate their continued frustration with persistent misogyny within punk scenes and more broadly. This was accomplished

168 Tammy Rae Carland, I ♥ Amy Carter #2 (March 1993), 2.
169 Like Sara Marcus (Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution [New York: Harper, 2010]), I also struggle with what to call riot grrrl. I use “movement” very loosely and primarily for linguistic thrift. The idea of a movement is not only disingenuous to the rhizomatic way in which riot grrrl was variously articulated as an idea, a badge, an ideology, and a set of experiences, but also to its own internal political commitments which were, paradoxically, to not have any one-size-fits-all set of political commitments. For similar reasons, unlike several other authors who have written about the movement, I have opted for the more inclusive term “riot grrrl participants” instead of “riot grrrls” to refer to the young women involved in the movement. Imposing the name of the movement as a personal identity is falsely homogenizing and counter to many of its stated goals. Additionally, referring to the women of the movement as “participants” allows me to get around the binary-reifying power of terms like “performers” vs. “audience.”
through three main mechanisms: political activism, the distribution of zines (self-published, informally circulated, and often photocopied booklets comprised of original and reproduced text and images), and music. Riot grrrl spawned a number of well-known bands including Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, and Sleater-Kinney, and, despite her persistent efforts to disavow it, elevated Bikini Kill member Kathleen Hanna to poster girl status for the movement. As with most movements, it is disingenuous to identify conclusive birth and death dates for riot grrrl—especially given the various metamorphoses it has undergone (for example, girls rock camps, which I discuss in the next chapter, began as an offshoot of riot grrrl). However, most writers agree that the movement in its most widespread and influential form lasted from 1990 to about 1994—less than five years. Despite the relatively short lifespan of its initial iteration, riot grrrl has become part of the contemporary American feminist culture canon, and is frequently cited by scholars and journalists alike as a paradigmatic example of “third-wave” feminist activism for its flexible, anti-essentialist politics and its ability to fuse the ideas of ivory tower feminist theory with popular culture.

Regardless of the esteem laid upon the movement, riot grrrl is relatively undertheorized in the academy—especially compared to its more masculinist counterpart, punk. Even the popular press has produced only a small body of literature, despite the fact that, in many circles (music, punk, feminist) Kathleen Hanna is basically a household name. The reasons for this are likely many, including riot grrrl’s (ironically) well-documented self-imposed media blackout, its informal media distribution networks, and a cultural unwillingness to take seriously the voices of “girls.” As I explore below, within
the popular and scholarly literature that does exist, much has been made of the feminist identity politics at play within riot grrrl, the relationship of riot grrrl ideology to punk ideology, and the linguistic and signifying content of zines, song lyrics, and participants’ sartorial choice.\textsuperscript{170} The DIY ethos undergirding riot grrrl encouraged this, with its neoliberal assertions that anyone could (and should) lay claim to their personal agency through political activism and media production. However, despite the fact that many participants have suggested that it was the musical aspect of riot grrrl that first got them involved,\textsuperscript{171} there has not been a sustained investigation as to what particular appeal music might have had, making that the case. In a recent interview, Hanna recalls that, in terms of media attention toward riot grrrl, all anyone wanted to talk about was how the bands were “girl bands. “When you add the feminism thing on top of that,” she adds, “forget it, you’re never going to talk about your music.”\textsuperscript{172} This is not to say that musical experiences had in the context of riot grrrl and the politics were entirely unrelated—in fact, as I argue below, the musical experiences served (and were served by) a certain kind of relationality and decenteredness that inhered in riot grrrl ideologies.

In order to enrich scholarly understanding of riot grrrl (and other music-centric subcultures) as a musical phenomenon, this chapter of my dissertation takes a cue from Joanne Gottlieb and Gayle Wald, who gesture toward the significance of embodiment within riot grrrl:

\textsuperscript{170} Even the recently opened Riot Grrrl Archive at NYU’s Fales library boasts their possession of a blue dress that Kathleen Hanna wore.  
\textsuperscript{171} i.e. Jessica Rosenberg and Gitana Garofalo, “Riot Grrrl: Revolutions from Within,” \textit{Signs} 23, No. 3 (Spring 1998): 813ff.  
The ways in which riot grrrls perform on and through their bodies reaffirms the very themes articulated in their songs. The abuses of girls’ and women’s bodies are constantly represented by riot grrrls, both in their music and zines; since such abuses are generally associated with women’s alienation from their bodies, the ability to be embodied—the deployment of the body in performance—provides an antidote to its previous violations.\(^{173}\)

Drawing from this insight, I ask why and how \textit{musical experience} in particular was sought out and deployed for its unique, embodied effects within the context of riot grrrl, how these effects aligned with the movement’s ideological commitments as articulated by participants, and how musical effects shaped the movement. I argue that participants in riot grrrl sought out and deployed musical experience as a way to experience an embodied sense of intersubjective collectivity that could contain a multi-faceted, centerless political agenda while providing an antidote to their gendered experiences of isolation and violation.

\textit{Message over Music?}

Much of what has been written about riot grrrl focuses on characterizing and analyzing its feminist political agenda. Conclusions as to what exactly this agenda entailed are wide-ranging, from the very broad (promotion of a nebulously-defined “feminist consciousness”) to the very specific (expression of frustration resulting from women’s exclusion from the center of coastal 1990s punk culture). Janikka Bock argues

\(^{173}\) 268.
that riot grrrl “set out to reveal the psychological and physical forces that ‘attack’ the
temale body and threaten its wholeness and integrity,”\textsuperscript{174} though she devotes no space to
ideas about why music, in particular, was a primary element of that process. Based on
insights culled from interviews conducted in the late 1990s, Jessica Rosenberg and
Gitana Garofalo conclude simply, “Regardless of how they learned of it, for the girls
involved, riot grrrl has changed the way they think and act and how they see themselves
in their everyday lives.”\textsuperscript{175} In an introduction to riot grrrl aimed at a young adult
audience, Cherie Turner emphasizes repeatedly that riot grrrl was first and foremost
about young women expressing anger, with music serving as one of the mechanisms
through which messages of frustration were dispersed.\textsuperscript{176} For each of these authors, music
is, at most, a medium for feminist messaging—if it garners any mention at all.

Other interpretations of riot grrrl are careful to highlight the fact that the one of
the movement’s central features was music, though their interpretations of music’s role in
the movement typically rest on the uninterrogated assumption that its fundamental value
was its ability to signify through language. Simon Reynolds and Joy Press rather
dissmissively conclude that the sounds of the movement are most notable for their
“puritanical elevation of content over form, message over music, that stems from the
proselytizing, ‘inspirational’ nature of the movement.”\textsuperscript{177} The unpolished raucousness of
riot grrrl bands, they argue, was designed to serve that message, signifying a denial of

\textsuperscript{174} Riot Grrrl: A Feminist Re-Interpretation of the Punk Narrative (Berlin: VDM Verlag Dr. Muller, 2008),
26.
\textsuperscript{175} 810.
\textsuperscript{176} Everything You Need to Know about the Riot Grrrl Movement: The Feminism of a New Generation
\textsuperscript{177} The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock ‘n’ Roll (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1996), 327.
masculine investments in expertise and showmanship—an act that ultimately failed to achieve its feminist potential because riot grrrl bands ended up sounding like “English punk circa 1978, US garage circa 1966—some of the most masculinist rock ever.”\textsuperscript{178} The Experience Music Project (EMP) in Seattle, Washington, curates a publicly available online exhibit about riot grrrl consisting of video interviews, audio recordings of songs, and a multi-section written narrative. Considering its titular importance in the name of the organization, music unsurprisingly warrants more attention in the EMP’s analysis of riot grrrl than in the above-mentioned sources. However, the exhibit relies on familiar frames of analysis in interpreting the centrality of music to riot grrrl, proclaiming its service as a mode of self-expression and a platform for political messaging (i.e. “The musical aspect of riot grrrl encouraged uninhibited female self-expression and creativity, and demanded that women be taken more seriously as artists”).\textsuperscript{179} In fact, one of the sections of the exhibit is called “The Message behind the Music.” Despite their provocative above-mentioned claim about musical embodiment within riot grrrl, Gottlieb and Wald argue that organizing around a musical genre had two main purposes: one, to provide a platform for gathering in order to network and create community, and two, to access and deploy for feminist purposes a certain performance of upfront sexuality that inheres in rock and punk. At multiple points in the article, Gottlieb and Wald locate musical significance in the capacity to signify in linguistic terms, stating that participants were drawn to “[rock] music’s frank expressions of sexuality” and punk’s “foregrounding of a

\textsuperscript{178}328. \\
potent combination of sex and anger.” Even at the end of nearly 400 pages of meticulously researched and presented riot grrrl history, Sara Marcus concludes that the movement was primarily about generating a platform for the articulation of authentic “statements of female anger.” Interpretations such as these unfairly marginalize musical experience as subordinate, rather than related or even integral, to the “more important” political work that riot grrrl has been credited with achieving, and are at a mismatch with what many participants recall about their own experiences within the movement.

As a whole, scholars and critics who write about riot grrrl typically neglect a sustained consideration of why musical experience specifically was sought out by participants in the movement. Reynolds and Press dismiss the music as failing its feminist political project for too strongly signifying masculinity through sound, the EMP takes for granted music’s capacity to signify as a sufficient explanation for its importance, Gottlieb and Wald only briefly (albeit provocatively) mention musical embodiment, and Marcus ultimately reduces music to its function as conduit for messages of gender-based frustration. Surely if the needs and motivations of participants were met through semiotically meaningful acts alone (as the aforementioned authors imply), then the widespread production and distribution of zines—with their directly meaningful visual and verbal components—would have sufficed. Music would not have added anything, and it certainly would not have been cited by many participants as a primary attraction of riot grrrl. Thus, failing to more fully theorize the role of musical experience in the

---

180 252-3.
181 327.
movement is to both reduce music to language and to ignore what many of the participants themselves recount as being most significant and appealing about the movement.

This is not to say that all participants value music only for its non-linguistic effects. As just one example, one participant explains the significance of music *exclusively* in terms of its ability to signify linguistically:

There's music--people are exposed to it through summer camp, or their older sister's in a band. It's a good way for young people to find out about ideas. You like the beat, or whatever, you buy it, you listen to the words, you start thinking about them. This isn't stuff you hear on the radio. It seems like music is just always there. In the past, it has always been a way for people to get ideas across, [for example,] freedom gospel tunes from days of slavery. You get ideas across through communication. If you keep it to yourself, there can be no change. If one other person listens, there could be change. You have to speak out, allow people to listen to your ideas and what you're saying. If anything is going to change or be different, you have to say what should be different and why and how can we go about it. It needs to be out there for people to see, hear. Communication is a necessary factor for any idea.\(^{182}\)

However, for many participants, the use of music as part of riot grrrl was not only or even primarily about "self-expression" or the communication of a linguistically capturable message. On the contrary, for many it was about lessening the emphasis on the isolated

---

\(^{182}\) cf. Rosenberg and Garofalo, 823
self and on rigid definitions and boundaries (linguistic and otherwise) altogether. They focus instead on the subjective and semiotic ambiguity engendered by musical experience as well as its embodiment as a momentary response to and/or relief from a world full of unresolvable contradictions regarding feminine norms. Music is semiotically (significantly) ambiguous in ways that other sound is not. To be inclined toward musical listening is to position oneself on the precipice of meaning, to revel in the fluidity, emergence, and refusal of significance. To experience music is to engage in the moment-to-moment process of *making* and being *unmade* as the elements of musical sound continuously interact with, blend into, distinguish themselves from each other and an emergent, shifting sense of a musical “whole” (a song, a line, a phrase, an album). Through its play with the psyche and the body, music fundamentally troubles the distinction between part and a whole, between being made and unmade as it invites and envelops a listening subject.

The following quotation, taken from a piece that Nicole Panter wrote about her experience with punk, makes clear the significance of music’s embodied, collective effects:

Imagine the exhilaration of knowing that you are part of something that is completely and utterly new and different. Imagine that all your life you have felt cut off from the rest of humanity at the most elementary level… Then walk into a room where for the first time in your miserable, horrifying life, you feel a part of things… There’s no need to explain what this music, this noise, makes you feel…
There’s no need to explain your hurt or your anger of the damage you feel because it is perfectly self-explanatory in this place, in this music.\textsuperscript{183} One participant on a still-vibrant Bikini Kill message board describes her musical experience in terms of the senses of release and collectivity it enabled: “This is the kind of energy that I seek to experience collectively and communally….”\textsuperscript{184} For her, as for Panter and many of the participants in riot grrrl, musical experience is as much about providing an alternative to feelings of isolation as it is about claiming any sort of clearly-defined (bounded), “empowered,” politically salient identity. To feel a part of a group is enough—the group does not necessarily require an efficacious label (though, of course, it may have one).

As Panter points out, articulating what that experience is like via the tools provided by language is difficult. Several riot grrrl participants have noted the failure of language to fully capture their experiences in the movement, recognizing that with language often comes a sense of alien(ating) imposition of definition, boundaries, and order. Julia Downes uses a physical metaphor of confinement in her reflection on the difficulty of capturing riot grrrl in words: “Writing can destroy and distort meaning, intentions, and experiences by twisting them into an uncomfortable order: confinement in language and linearity.”\textsuperscript{185} Acknowledging the failure of language to fully capture the affective intensity and complexity of their experiences prompted riot grrrl participants to

\textsuperscript{184} “Read Stories!!!” \textit{The Bikini Kill Archive}. www.bikinikillarchive.wordpress.com/posts-2/ (July 22, 2010).
insist on a media blackout. Erika Reinstein, a participant in riot grrrl from its earliest days in Washington, D.C., wrote in her zine, “I feel like I have so little control of my life as it is without some reporter telling me who I am,” a rejection of the inclination toward rigid, confining definition. Similarly, Rachel Carns recalls her suspicion that any effort of the media to define riot grrrl would bring with it an undesirable external imposition of order that would short-circuit the messy sense of collectivity and safe space that many young women had found so appealing. She explains, “It was like all of a sudden all the girls were in the same room, but somebody [the media] was, like, trying to take the room away from us or something.”

Namely, the blackout meant that participants agreed to deny interviews to members of the press, choosing instead to disseminate information and self-representations through an underground network of zine production and distribution generated by the participants themselves.

The preference for zines over more traditional mainstream media circulation was emblematic of the punk-sourced DIY ethos of riot grrrl. Zines also allowed for a complex, sometimes incoherent simultaneity of perspectives and experiences that, rather than being ushered tidily into one essentializing agenda or storyline, allowed for contradiction, rupture, and conflict alongside a sense of emergent, shifting collectivity—the spirit of which gave shape and purpose to intersubjective, embodied musical

experience within the movement. To get a sense of the scope of issues confronted by participants in riot grrrl, I offer the following from *off our backs* writer Melissa Klein:

Girls began drawing parallels between different experiences: shame at being fat and bitterness at caring so much about our looks; secret competitiveness with other girls, coupled with self-dislike for being jealous; the unsettling feeling that we could not communicate with a boy without flirting; the sudden, engulfing shock of remembering being molested by a father or stepfather when we were too small to form words for such a thing. Straight and bi girls talked about having to give anatomy lessons every time we had sex with a boy. Queer and questioning girls talked about isolation and about mothers bursting into tears when they learned their daughters were gay. Girls who wanted to play music talked about not knowing how to play a guitar because they had never gotten one for Christmas like the boys did. Girls who played music complained that they were treated like idiots by condescending male employees when they went to buy guitar strings or drum parts. We began to see the world around us with a new vision, a revelation that was both painful and filled with possibility.

What I find most significant about this multiplicity being drawn under a single label is that it destabilizes the identity-reifying effects of labels altogether. If riot grrrl is all of these things at once, then it is simultaneously (paradoxically) about multiplicity and

---

187 Shank suggests that this emphasis on ambiguity as a response to contradiction is drawn from indie music, another scene through which riot grrrl claims lineage (*Silence, Noise, Beauty: The Political Agency of Music*, Duke University Press, forthcoming.)  
collectivity that is accessed and materialized through the act musical listening and shared
musical experience—something for which analyses that focus on the political thrust of
riot grrrl and its use of things like fashion and musical genre as signifiers of identity
cannot account.

I recognize the limitations of my own writing to fully capture what riot grrrl was
and is for the participants who were and continue to be drawn to it. I do not presume to
offer a definitive account of what the movement did or did not mean or do for
participants. However, I do believe that in the pages that follow, my interpretation of the
aural aspect of riot grrrl, culled as it is from the printed word (zines, interviews, etc.) can
deepen and enhance analyses of the movement by acknowledging (rather than distilling
into simpler pieces) one of its chief complexities: the role of musical experience.

Grrrls and Girl Love

Before delving into the role that music played, it is imperative to explore further
the understanding of feminine identity and the role of “grrrl love” at play in riot grrrl, as
that provides the context in which collective, intersubjective musical experience was
desirable, became possible, and was staged in very particular, gendered ways. The
translation of “girl” into “grrrl” was initiated during the spring of 1991. Would-be
Bratmobile band member Jen Smith wrote a letter to friend and future bandmate Allison
Wolfe proclaiming the need for a “girl riot” in the vein of what Smith had just witnessed
worked with Tobi Vail and Kathleen Hanna to produce the zine Riot Grrrl, wherein they
adopted and modified Smith’s phrase, replacing “girl” with “grrrl.” This lexical move served as a way to co-opt the moniker “girl” with its connotations of innocence, passivity, and naïveté, while (paradoxically) inserting into it a guttural, aggressive reference to the frustration and energy that motivated them. By replacing the center of the word with the onomatopoetic “rr,” the linguistic sign of the individual (“I”) was literally obfuscated by affective sonic gesture. The decision to rewrite normative femininity through this mechanism aided the movement’s emphasis on multiplicity and the disruption of meaning through contradiction and paradox, because the term both brought with it juxtaposition of simmering anger and childhood innocence.

Focusing on the latter side of the aforementioned juxtaposition, Gottlieb and Wald observe elements of fantasy and nostalgia in the reclamation of “girl” (even as it is recast as “grrrl”) “for the apparently close relationships between girls prior to the intrusion of heterosexual romance and its spin-offs, sexual competition and sexual rivalry.”189 Emily White, one of the few journalists to produce media coverage that riot grrrl participants found relatively unobjectionable, likewise described the movement in terms of desire for a lost utopia of girlhood.190 A passage in Bikini Kill #1: A Color and Activity Book (itself an appropriation of a childish meme—coloring books) reads,

The [riot grrrl] revolution is about going to the playground with your best girlfriends. You are hanging upside down on the bars and all the blood is rushing to your head. It’s a euphoric feeling. The boys can see our underwear and we

---

189 266. The authors identify Bikini Kill’s song “Rebel Girl” as using the trope of childhood to speak directly back to the “categorization and (self-)division of women.”

don’t really care. I’m so sure that lots of girls are also into revolution and we want to find them.\(^{191}\)

Angela Seguel, a twenty-one-year-old who got involved in the Washington, D.C. riot grrrl scene in 1992 remembers riot grrrl as a place where girls “could be really close”: “We could snuggle with someone in bed or on the couch or hold someone’s hand. Like girls do.”\(^{192}\) As Seguel demonstrates, embodied intimacy and connection outside the heterosexual economy of desire was important for many who participated in riot grrrl.

Tammy Rae Carland wrote of her desire for intimacy as motivating her participation in riot grrrl, proclaiming, “I am bound and determined to have honest, exciting, and intimate relationships with women despite all this shit.”\(^{193}\) Similarly, one of Bikini Kill’s early slogans (in addition to “Revolution Girl Style Now”) was “Stop the J-Word Jealousy from Killing Girl Love.”\(^{194}\) Another participant, Mary Fondriest, recalls, “I remember sitting on the couch together was really significant because we were next to each other, we were touching—shared physical space”—behavior which Sara Marcus equates with “childish[ness].”\(^{195}\) To wit, in addition to “Revolution Grrrl Style Now,” the other prominent slogan to emerge out of riot grrrl was “GIRL LOVE,” a call for unadulterated—sometimes even erotic—girl-to-girl-to-girl adulation and connection modeled on childhood. Kathleen Hanna remarks, “Girls’ first erotic experiences are


\(^{192}\) Cf. Marcus, 239.

\(^{193}\) I ♥ Amy Carter #2 (March 1993), 15

\(^{194}\) Klein, 213.

\(^{195}\) 118.
usually with each other, but we’re taught to forget that.” The emphasis within riot grrrl on recapturing a gendered, but pre-heterosexualized model of intimate relationships through the adoption of “GIRL LOVE” created a context in which young women gave up the “i”/ “I” for the chance of having intimate, collective experiences. Given the prominent role that music played in riot grrrl, in the remainder of this chapter I explore how this intimacy among young women—“GIRL LOVE”—was both enabled and materialized through the intersubjective effects of shared, embodied musical experience.

**Screaming Bodies**

Musical sound cannot be disambiguated from the bodies that produce it—it both emanates from and resonates through/in the bodies that initiate it. This is particularly clear in the case of the human voice, though it is likewise true of instruments and those who make them sound. In order to consider the significance of embodied musical sound within the gendered frame of riot grrrl, it is important to first recall McClary’s discussion that, within a western framework, the body brings with it connotations of femininity, and

---

196 Cf. White, 408.
197 Music was not the only mode. Along with zines, some riot grrrl participants produced small, personal booklets called “friendbooks.” Friendbooks are stapled-together, multi-color pages (in the pasted-together collage style of zines) that are sent around among contacts. Each person in the “friendbook” contributes content related to the theme of the book, which included things like poems, photos, lyrics, or just whatever a person felt like posting. In one of the “friendbooks,” for example, the pages are inscribed with lists of things that each person likes including mostly bands, but also foods, activities, animals, writers, and in one page provided by Milly Itzhak, “communication and connection” (“Friendbook for and by Kelly”). These particular items allow participants to highlight relationships and share sources of pleasure with each other while also destabilizing norms of ownership and individual-reifying, monographic cultural production through communal production and sharing—further magnifying the centrality of relationship and connection in riot grrrl via other media.
vice versa, with each term invoking the other.\textsuperscript{198} The undulating of one suggests the undulating of the other—undermining the rule of masculine rationality. The containment of the feminine body is enacted through social mechanisms such as beauty norms and physical threats of sexual assault. These regulatory mechanisms that a woman encounters throughout her life “define precisely the dimensions of her physical freedom.”\textsuperscript{199}

Drawing from Bourdieu and Foucault, Susan Bordo argues that the body, then, becomes the site of intense regulation and containment, “a \textit{practical}, direct locus of social control”\textsuperscript{200} that demands (among other things) that women contract the space they occupy. Through the course of her project—much of which centers on eating disorders among women—Bordo compellingly argues that, in an “other-oriented emotional economy… the control of female appetite for food is merely the most concrete expression of the general rule governing the construction of femininity: that female hunger—for public power, for independence, for sexual gratification—be contained, and the public space that women be allowed to take up be circumscribed, limited.”\textsuperscript{201} When women take this containment upon themselves, it becomes a way of exhibiting such masculine virtues of mastery and control; the “tightly managed body,”\textsuperscript{202} with its clear, hard lines, is protected by the mind from its own eruption of desire.

It is no coincidence, then, that riot grrrl attracted a number of participants seeking to disrupt gender norms, many of which have to do with the body, through the act of

\textsuperscript{198}“Same as It Ever Was.”
\textsuperscript{199}Susan Bordo, \textit{Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body} (Los Angeles: University of California, 1994), 21.
\textsuperscript{200}165.
\textsuperscript{201}171.
\textsuperscript{202}Ibid., 211.
being loud and experiencing loudness by and as young women. Because the voice is an aural gesture of embodied presence and action, the sound of the voice (like the body) must be managed through gender norms. To take up too much aural space or physical space, to be too aurally or physically aggressive, to be too easily heard or seen, to have an audible bodily presence that contacts and enacts on others through sound is to trouble norms of passive femininity.

In the prologue to her book, Marcus recounts a riot grrrl music scene through the figure of a body singing in “abandon.” Marcus goes on to describe the performer (eventually revealed to be Kathleen Hanna) as “pushing the words from her body,” literally using sound to expand her physical presence while simultaneously issuing a product (sound) that acts, permeating the boundary between internal and external for both the singer and the listener. When the song is over, Hanna sways from side to side, tugging on her dress to cover her body. Her twitchy actions suggest a sudden onset of nervousness that she may have, for a moment, been too much. In this scene, the embodiedness of sound is made visible, in that Hanna’s physicality is ultimately made to account (by Hanna herself) for her momentarily-unbound sonic presence. It is this link between the body and the sound—variably the sounding body/the embodiment of sound—that motivates my reading of riot grrrl with an emphasis on the relationship of musical experience to (embodied) intersubjectivity as an aspect of the movement’s antiessentialist feminist project. To make sound, to be sounded by another’s volume, and

\footnote{In fact, Kathleen Hanna recounts receiving letters from people who threatened to hurt or kill her as punishment for her refusal to be silent.}
to be made part of a shared resonance is to trouble norms of passive, contained, and unthreatening feminine embodiment, and to enter into a momentary collectivity that refuses clear (rational) division and order.

Though references to the loudness of riot grrrl music are perhaps reductive of the variation among different musicians, several authors have focused specifically on the use of the scream as a potent mechanism for troubling norms of femininity and disrupting meaning and order. Rosenberg and Garofalo write, “At a time in their lives when girls are taught to be silent, riot grrrl demand[ed] that they scream.”206 The scream engages the whole body to disrupt the order of language (and, with it, gender) with what one participant describes as raw “emotion it carries as a weapon” and “a strike against rationality and the abstract postmodernism of the academy.”207 Gottlieb and Wald explain that screams “work as linguistic signs having no particular referent outside of the context in which they are uttered; the scream can be read as a kind of jouissance, a female body language that evades the necessity to signify within male-defined conventions and meanings.”208 The scream signifies an affectivity of both rage and pleasure, unsettling the tidy logic of exclusive categories and binary reasoning. “[T]hese screams,” write Gottlieb and Wald, “can communicate a profound ambiguousness about consent and coercion, a fine line between orgasm and rape… punk screams are a wordless protest against the overdetermined femininity that these female performers—performing as women—must

206 810.
208 261.
occupy," thus destabilizing the very notion of singular, individuated identities/selves altogether through the undulating and piercing sounding of the body. To quote Emily White, “It didn’t matter if what the girls said was politically correct, or if they were good at their instruments; the point was simply to make some noise.”

The capacity of sound to inflict upon and engage listeners, to have power over and through them is central to the ways in which musical experience was understood and deployed by riot grrrl participants. Shared musical experience constituted a feminist act because it simultaneously enabled intersubjective, collective experiences of “girl love” reminiscent of girlhood relationships, and because it enabled a shared, cathartic bodily experience that served as an antidote to the experiences of physical pain and violation (i.e. sexual assault) that circumscribed young women’s movement. Several participants have taken care to note the role that riot grrrl in general, and the music of riot grrrl in particular, played in countering their sense of loneliness and seclusion.

In Marcus’s estimation, the musicians in Olympia who would eventually come together to form one of the foundational riot grrrl scenes were looking for “community strong enough to keep them from feeling terribly alone.” Marisa Meltzer likewise reports that the participants in riot grrrl sought to remedy gendered feelings of isolation, some of the causes of which have been identified by various participants as cultural images of girl-on-girl jealousy (thus inciting the nostalgic desire for a recapturing of prepubescent “girl love”), experiences of sexual violence, and continued exclusion.

209 262. 210 399. Shank argues that this destabilization of order and certainty occurs through other musical strategies as well, including rhythm and timbre. 211 100. 212 Girl Power: The Nineties Revolution in Music (New York: Faber and Faber, 2010), 14.
from full participation in musical public spheres, such as the punk scene. Erin Smith, a member of Bratmobile, recalls sitting alone in her room playing electric guitar along with Beat Happening records, sensing a collective, cathartic reprieve from a “kind of isolation that fueled all of us.” Many of the comments on the Bikini Kill Archive website report a similar feeling of isolation that was mitigated by their access to the sounds of riot grrrl bands. One commenter wrote, “I was instantly gripped by the combination of unstructured guitar, frenetic drumming, and most of all, the grown-up grrrl screams like the tightly controlled tantrum I had bottled up inside of me. It felt like a fucking release…. It was primal, it was messy, and most of all, it was loud.”

*Girls to the Front*

Because being wholly, fearlessly, physically engaged in and consumed by the sounds of riot grrrl was so central to the draw and power of the movement, there was a great deal of emphasis put on participants’ access and proximity to the music—so much so that “girls to the front” became a non-negotiable policy at riot grrrl concerts. One participant featured in the riot grrrl documentary *It Changed My Life* stated her frustration with attending other concerts where girls were sidelined, comparing them negatively to the Bikini Kill and Huggy Bear concert she had just attended: “Tonight we could do what we want and nobody gave a shit. So I’d like to say I fuckin’ enjoyed it!”

The significance of creating a musical context where participants could actually

---

213 Cf. Marcus, 66.
215 Dir. Lucy Thane (Independent, 1993).
*participate* without the usual fear of physical or sexual danger cannot be overstated. Outside of riot grrrl, public musical performance settings are “potentially experienced by women as [...] uncongenial or unsafe place[s].”\(^{216}\) Lori Twersky observes that girls have been historically reluctant to attend rock and punk concerts where they might be “mauled by a group of loaded, firecracker-throwing fifteen-year-old-boys, many of whom regard concerts as mystic licenses for hostile forms of sexual behavior.”\(^{217}\) The threat of bodily danger precluded fuller participation by women and girls in other musical contexts, preemptively foreclosing the sort of uninhibited shared musical experience (for both performers and audience) that participants found so powerful and attractive.

Punk concert culture (where riot grrrl had at least some of its roots) could be particularly off-putting. Corin Tucker recalls that going to a punk show as a young woman was unappealing because it was typically “a really violent atmosphere.”\(^{218}\) The exclusion of girls and women from fuller participation and access to the sounds of punk performance was magnified because these shows often did not involve elevated stages or risers on which bands could play, necessitating that the audience and the musicians all shared the floor. As a result, only people in the front of the audience could see the band—and at punk shows, boys were usually at the front. White explains, “The girls got tired of this. But most of them didn’t want to dance in the pit—it hurts your boobs, and getting touched by a bunch of sweaty male strangers has all-too-familiar nightmarish

\(^{216}\) Gottlieb and Wald, 257.
\(^{218}\) In *Don’t Need You: Herstory of Riot Grrrl*, Directed by Kerrie Koch (Urban Cowgirl Productions, 2006).
connotations for many girls." Angela McRobbie has famously argued that, for these reasons, girls’ musical experiences and subcultures often look different from boys’ inasmuch as clubs and the street historically avail girls to threats of harassment and assault—perpetuating (rather than diminishing) the sense of isolation and containment upon which several riot grrrl participants have remarked. Natalie Cox recalls that the start of riot grrrl “was just about girls being in a safe, comfortable place together,” and the desire for an antidote to a lack of physical safety and a coextensive sense of individual isolation motivated several young women to participate in the movement. In other words, the movement had a twofold appeal: it offered a site of physical abandon and collective, intersubjective experience.

With the perceived lack of safety experienced in public spaces and surrounding musical performance settings more specifically, it is readily apparent that the creation of safe musical spaces—and the public acknowledgement of what had made certain spaces unsafe for women in particular—had to be an integral element of riot grrrl. Musical performances were carefully staged in order to ensure intimate and safe environments wherein an embodied experience of collectivity could emerge for participants. A principal strategy for effecting and providing access to experiences of musical intimacy was to get girls and young women to move from the margins of the crowds to the front where they could be closer to the source of the sound, closer to the bodies of the performers, have access to the performance area, and be more generally participatory in

---

219 399.
220 *Feminism and Youth Culture.*
221 *In Don’t Need You.*
the musical event. At riot grrrl shows, participants were often invited into the performers’ space to sing along, dance, or share their stories—to become intensely involved, making porous (such that musical sound could trespass) the categorical boundary that separates audience from performer.

While involved with riot grrrl, Kathleen Hanna proclaimed an urgent need “to actively recreate the [musical performance] environment,” to construct contexts where grrrls could “feel safe” and “good enough” such that experiences of intersubjectivity were not only possible, but intentionally facilitated through communal participation in musical events. At performances put on by riot grrrl bands, efforts to reinvent the musical environment with this in mind prompted the regular circulation of flyers demanding “girls to the front.” One such concert flier included in Kathleen Hanna’s papers as part of the Riot Grrrl Collection archive reads:

At this show we ask that girls/women stand near to the front, by the stage. Please allow/encourage this to happen. This is an experiment. Why?? Because I am a female performer who has been verbally and physically assaulted while being on stage and it’s really scary when men are taking up the first few rows, to me, I mean. And also: a lot of time several girls/women will have trouble with the same

---

222 It Changed My Life; cf. Marcus, 126. There is widespread misunderstanding of riot grrrl’s approach to creating safe space. Several authors have mistakenly claimed that riot grrrl shows were gender-exclusive, imparting a feminist essentialism into riot grrrl’s philosophy that, quite simply, was not accurate. Bock repeatedly refers to riot grrrl’s safe spaces as “separatist” and the editors of Third Wave Agenda mention riot grrrl’s “women-only” shows. This sort of misperception reflects a cultural tendency to assume that anything identifying as feminist in such an in-your-face fashion must necessarily be simultaneously man-hating. On the contrary, riot grrrl shows were centered on creating spaces where women felt safe, but that was not necessarily paired with a separatist agenda. Men were welcome to and did, in fact, attend riot grrrl shows.

223 It Changed My Life. This is also the title Marcus used for her book on riot grrrl, further highlighting the importance of this policy within the movement.
guy or group of guys. But cuz the girls don’t know each other and are scattered about, we can’t warn each other about said jerks [sic] presences or protect each other effectively. If we are in a big gang, we are less isolated from each other and more likely to start talking and dancing together and having some FUN. I mean, if yr a guy could you just realize for a minute that us girls have no way of knowing if you are ‘good boy’ or a bad boy’ (as if these distinctions really exist). And, like, it is not cool or ‘punk rock’ in anyway for guys to smash into us or rub against us while we are trying to watch a show. You know? I am sick of going to shows where I feel completely unwelcomed and banished to the back cuz I just get grossed about by moshing, harassment, etc…. **IT IS NOT SUBVERSIVE TO ACT LIKE YR UNCLE.** And Also, I really wanna look at female faces while I perform. I want HER to know that she is included in this show, that what we are doing is for her to CRITICIZE/LAUGH AT/BEINSPIRED BY/HATE/WHATEVER… Her opinion is more important to me than some guy from Melody Maker and so I (along with my friends) are gonna make the one for real effort to let her know this. Because this is our fucking show: The GIRLS the QUEERS the WIMPS the OUTCASTS…. And the kids who wanna act like their PARENTS are the ones who aren’t welcome. DIG.

The content of this flier is telling, in that it provides multiple insights into the role shared musical experience played in the movement, and demonstrates that the “girls to the front” policy had several functions beyond its obvious feminist message that respond specifically to gendered experiences of violence, embodiment, and collectivity.
First, it helped to limit the threat of male-initiated physical or sexual violence that had disconcerted performers and precluded girls and women from fuller participation in other musical contexts.\textsuperscript{224} Within the context of punk, for example, “young women who entered the mosh pits sometimes found themselves the victims of sexual assault, as their bodies were groped and their clothes torn.”\textsuperscript{225} Bikini Kill was reportedly the first band to insist upon the “girls to the front” policy at their shows, though other bands quickly followed suit in recognition of the importance of fuller musical participation on the part of young women. Hanna recalls that, after the policy had been widely adopted, it was “super schizo to play shows where guys threw stuff at us, called us cunts and yelled ‘take it off’ during our set, and then the next night perform for throngs of amazing girls singing along to every lyric and cheering after every song.”\textsuperscript{226} One participant recalls attending a Bikini Kill concert:

As soon as the band started playing, a cadre of bullies started getting violent—pushing and slamming all the young ladies standing up front against the stage. We all had huge bruises on our legs and hips the next day but no one would budge an inch. This went on for about two songs as Kathleen [Hanna] repeatedly pleaded with them to stop, but of course it only got worse. So she said: “Any girl who wants to dance without being hurt can come up and dance with me.” Then she reached into the crowd and pulled each of us onto the stage one by one. We all

\textsuperscript{224} According to Marcus, one man who attended a Bikini Kill show turned out to be a murderer.
\textsuperscript{225} EMP.
\textsuperscript{226} “My Herstory,” Letigreworld.com. 30 September 2012.
danced in a circle of joy behind Tobi Vail for the rest of show. We were all so
happy we were crying and laughing and hugging.  

What started out as a harrowing experience in which young women participants were
facing violent attempts by men to force them out of the musical experience became a
“circle of joy,” embodied, enabled, and signified by dancing and hugging. Susan
McClary remarks, “[T]he musical power of the disenfranchised—whether youth, the
underclass, ethnic minorities, women, or gay people—more often resides in their ability
to articulate different ways of construing the body, ways that bring along in their wake
the potential for different experiential worlds.” In this scenario, the female body
literally moves from being primarily a site of masculine violence and policing to part of a
feminized, pleasurable collective that is enabled by the sharing of a specific musical
experience.

Second, the “girls to the front” policy helped to create an alternate environment
that served as a counter to the social mechanisms such as parental authority and a
persistent threat of physical or sexual abuse (referenced here through the “creepy uncle”
figure) that kept young women subjects isolated from each other in ways that allowed
gendered forms of assault and violation to persist in the world at large. Throughout Girls
to the Front, Marcus understands the motivations for those participating in riot grrrl as
emerging from their experiences of bodily threat, restraint, or violation. For example,
she describes the young women who participated in riot grrrl as being prompted by

227 “Read Stories!!!” The Bikini Kill Archive (March 7, 2010).
228 McClary “Same,” 39.
229 See also White.
experiences of “rape, incest, and child sexual abuse,” eating disorders adopted in the name of beauty norms, and run-ins with “the man on the bus who said ‘What’s your number, sweetheart?’ and wouldn’t back off.”\footnote{Marcus dedicates a number of pages of her book to detailing the sort of scientific and journalistic reports that construct girls as always in danger of sexual assault. In that way, she reproduces the problematic binary that positions girls and women as either helpless victims or agents of social change, foreclosing a more nuanced understanding that better accounts for the ways girls and women are both constrained and enabled by gender norms.} According to a statement included in the 
*Bikini Kill* zine co-authored by Hanna and Tobi Vail, the “grrrl-style” revolution was a matter of “physical survival”\footnote{Ibid., 85.} in the face of perpetual threats to girls’ and women’s bodily integrity.

In what Marcus designates as “the closest [Kathleen Hanna] ever came to a vision statement,” Hanna articulated a desire for the music of riot grrrl to respond specifically to the embodied experience of pain resulting from physical and sexual abuse of girls and women. During an interview with author and punk activist Mark Anderson, she explained,

> I’ve had so many people come to me with stories of sexual abuse and being battered by their parents. People talking about sexual abuse and getting beat up and emotional abuse in their houses is so important, and making bands around that issue is, to me, the new punk rock—can be the new punk rock…. I’m really interested in a punk rock movement—an angry girl movement—of sexual abuse survivors.\footnote{Cf. Ibid., 91.}

According to Marcus, Hanna was inspired to form her second riot grrrl band, Viva Knievel (many of whose songs addressed sexual abuse lyrically), after working with

---

\footnote{230 \footnote{231} \footnote{232}}
teenage girls who had been sexually assaulted and seeing the supportive relationships that the girls formed with one another. The musical experiences enabled by the band were intended to provide a mechanism through which those sorts of supportive relationships could be developed and expanded. The desire to see riot grrrl as a response to the sexual conditions of girls and women was not isolated to Hanna alone. A 1997 Riot Grrrl Press catalog lists titles, descriptions, and ordering information for over 160 zines, many of which mention sexual abuse and/or sexual pleasure in their short descriptions. Correspondingly, the majority of the zines examined during the research for this project devoted multiple pages per edition to issues of sexual assault. The same pattern can be observed among zine flyers that were circulated as advertisements at riot grrrl events.

Though several scholars and journalists have remarked upon the prevalence of sexual abuse and sexual pleasure as topics of discussion within riot grrrl, a common, often-implicit conclusion emerges implying that musical experience served no *distinct* purpose relative to these concerns. All riot grrrl activities—from from the image- and text-based zines to the activist meetings to the music—are presumed to serve the singular function of claiming an “empowered” feminist identity. As a telling example, Janikka Bock identifies riot grrrl concerts as “sites for networks and consciousness-raising,” arguing that the primary function of concerts was in providing a public venue wherein participants could draw strength by laying claim to a “collective identity” as victims of male violence. In her interpretation, “riot grrrls often engaged in the denial

---

35
31
of their bodies.” She explains, “instead of viewing the body as a potential site for sensuous feeling and pleasure, it is seen as a target of physical and sexual abuse. Thus, the rejection of the body is based on hatred of the body and fear of the body’s multiple horrors.” Bock’s analysis frustratingly forecloses any consideration of the embodied aspect of musical experience, despite riot grrrl participants’ reference to it as a chief attraction and effect of the movement.

Several participants specifically mention a magnified feeling of being in their bodies and accessing collective, physically-charged energy through their musical experiences. Kathleen Hanna declared, “I want to be in my body on stage because it’s so often to feel the music and have women being really supportive, and to get that energy back.” Similarly, a post on the Bikini Kill Archive site reads, “When I was 15, I was into drugs, was suffering from anorexia, and felt like I didn’t fit in any place. No one should ever feel the way I did. Bikini Kill made me feel something again. Something raw and real. And to this day whenever I put on any BK albums, I feel electric.”

One commenter, referencing the imbrication of embodied and psychological effects of listening to Bikini Kill, credited the music with providing her “a physical and psychic

235 30.
236 30.
237 To be fair, Bock’s analysis aligns in part with sentiments like Tammy Rae Carland’s, though Carland leaves open the possibility of recuperating embodiment for “pleasure and/or resistance”:
I’ve been thinking about how I think about my body. Or rather how I don’t think about my body. About how I was taught not to consider my body as a site for pleasure and/or resistance. It was the place where I stored memory and secrets, and it was the thing that attracted unwanted attention. In other words, it was an awkward container.... The vagina is a simultaneous site of lust/desire and fear/disgust. And this dichotomy is internalized as much as it is an external construction (“Girl Talk [from I ♥ Amy Carter #4],” in Girl’s Guide to Taking Over the World, eds. Karen Green and Tristan Taormino [New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1997], 46).
239 Comment on “About,” The Bikini Kill Archive (June 22, 2010).
space where [she] could wholly exist.”

To quote Erin, a riot grrrl participant who was interviewed by Rosenberg and Garofalo, “With the music aspect—it’s not so much emotional as physical—yelling, running around, playing guitar, getting it all out.”

Similarly, a comment on the Bikini Kill Archive website proclaimed that experiencing the music of riot grrrl is “good to sing/scream/dance/freak out to.” When an analysis is predicated on the refusal of the body, it cannot account sufficiently for the “fuzzy-edged erotics,” the electric feelings, the rawness, the feeling of safety, or even the desire to dance. Such an analysis cannot explain why it mattered at all that there was a call for “girls to the front.”

Marcus summarizes it thusly, “[Riot grrrl was] mustering for battle against the idea that to be a girl was to be in grave danger that you could never fully escape, only manage by narrowing your life, your range, your wardrobe, your gaze.” The response offered through the movement was not a rejection of the body, as Bock contends: it was to create a different, context for embodiment (as suggested above by Gottlieb and Wald) that may be in alignment with the sorts of things addressed in the lyrics of their songs and in zines, but which is not reducible to linguistic signification. One of the more famous tactics employed by riot grrrl was Kathleen Hanna’s gesture of writing “slut” and “bitch” on her stomach with the intention of “allow[ing] women, particularly feminists, to be at

---

240 Comment on “About,” *The Bikini Kill Archive* (February 9, 2010).
241 823.
242 Comment on “About,” *The Bikini Kill Archive* (June 3, 2010).
243 Marcus, 109.
244 93.
once angry and sexual” to respond to physical violation, but also to lay claim to desire and bodily pleasure. The movement functioned to provide an antidotal musical context where bodily danger was abated so that the body did not have to be, where an expansive idea of subjectivity—a sort of signification- and isolation-defying out-of-boundedness that enabled a sense of intersubjectivity prevailed in the context of musical experience.

Third, the “girls to the front” policy provided young women more direct contact with the performers, giving them access to the stage area for fuller participation (in some cases turning audience into performer and vice versa), and involving them more comprehensively in shared musical experience. The disruption of hierarchy and order, the refusal of musical sound to fully submit to semiotic certainty, and its ability to transgress boundaries allowed participants to feel not only a sense of connection and communalism with others, but also an almost inarticulate sense of fullness that contrasted starkly to a common feeling of restriction, isolation, and containment.

Despite their above-cited insights into the role of embodiment in riot grrrl as a musical phenomenon, Gottlieb and Wald focus explicitly on the signifying actions of the

245 Maria Raha, Cinderella’s Big Score: Women of the Punk and Indie Underground (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2005), 207. Even on the Bikini Kill Archive website, which is run by Hanna, fans of Bikini Kill and riot grrrl are still sharing their sexual assault stories in the comments.

246 Often, the idea of violated bodies and subjectivities was juxtaposed with feminine desire and pleasure. For example, there are several pen and ink drawings in Molly Zuckerman’s zine. Most often, these are of naked women masturbating. The drawing on that back cover of the zine is of a naked woman hanging from a noose with black censorship bars over her eyes, breasts, and vagina. One zine, called “The Evolution of a Race Riot” was described by its founders as “a collaborative zine using pieces of hearts, minds, skin, & blood collected from a loose network of colored punks, grrrls, geeks” (Mimi Nguyen, “The Evolution of a Race Riot [flyer],” ca. 1996). The names of several of the bands likewise fuse female sexuality with violence and/or pain; Bikini Kill is a name that simultaneously sexualizes and desexualizes femininity, as do zine names like Moon Queen Screams and Muffin Bones wherein feminine sexuality and the abject are twisted together.
performers. Their analysis stops short of considering the circulation of
meaning/pleasure/embodiment between all participants in a musical experience. Renee T. Coulombe observes that, in riot grrrl, “the feedback loop from audience to performer is
small, intimate, real, and uncensored”247 and, in some cases, it is so thoroughly
transgressed as to be hardly identifiable. The distinction between who was performing
and who was audiencing was rendered unintelligible, ultimately generating a
cacophonous collectivity that, at least momentarily, appeared to defy clear division and
thus clear hierarchy—gendered or otherwise. According to Allison Wolfe, “In a lot of
ways it just felt like kind of a group feeling, like this whole kind of community was
emerging.”248

Wolfe’s description, with its emphasis on group feeling and emergence, is echoed
elsewhere. In a riot grrrl concert review written for the zine Cupsize, musical experience
is described as “a feeling of complete musical communion… an overall glow of
possibility and beauty.”249 For “group feeling” or “communion” to dominate, a sense of
individuality must be subordinated (if only momentarily), and for the sense of possibility
to emerge, fixity must be suspended—something which music enables through its denial
of tidy segmentation and direct signification, its ability to permeate bodily surfaces
(Marcus describes musical sound as being “like a tattooer’s needle, jabbing repeatedly at

247 Renee T. Coulumbe, “The Insatiable Banshee: Voracious Vocalizing… Riot Grrrl … and the Blues,” in
Audible Traces: Gender, Identity, and Music, eds. Elaine Barkin and Lydia Hamessley (Los Angeles:
Carciofoli, 1999), 267.
a single spot”\textsuperscript{250}, and its defining character of undulating, all-consuming resonance. Participants have accordingly observed that coincident with group feeling, riot grrrl concerts were places where the rules of order and reason did not predominate in the usual way, describing their musical experiences as ones of “joyful chaos,”\textsuperscript{251} “epiphanic bliss,”\textsuperscript{252} and, simply, “magic”\textsuperscript{253}—a far cry from the worlds of masculinized violence (at punk concerts and beyond) that had driven young women to seek the alternative riot grrrl became.

\textit{Contradiction, Ambiguity, and the Star System}

Riot grrrl is characterized by embodied musical experience with its fraught relationship to language, an investment in collective rather than individual experience, a conscious disavowal of hierarchy, and a corresponding ability to hold under one name a series of contradictions (toughness and vulnerability, pleasure and abuse, childlike singsong and screaming).\textsuperscript{254} Given this, capturing, containing, and responding to (and, eventually, sustaining) riot grrrl in its initial form was deliberately difficult. The absence of a unified narrative and clear identity, however much it frustrated the reporting process, did not stop media outlets from putting forth condescending, overly-simplistic explanations of the movement as it attempted to suck the movement into a spiraling

\textsuperscript{250} 48.
\textsuperscript{251} Monem, 7.
\textsuperscript{252} Marcus, 10.
\textsuperscript{253} It Changed My Life.
\textsuperscript{254} See Bock; Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, “Third Wave Activism and Youth Music Culture,” in Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism, eds. Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Klein; Marcus; White.
vortex of coverage”\textsuperscript{255} that eventually flattened the complexity of riot grrrl and magnified internal tensions over the direction of a growing movement. In late 1992 and 1993, popular media zeroed in on riot grrrl and tried to make sense of a movement that refused to name an essence. Common, dismissive conclusions ensued: riot grrrl was portrayed as either a cute, girly sartorial trend of no real political significance, or as a site of militant violence and misandry so terrifyingly extreme that it served more to alienate young women than it did to attract them. As a sampling, news article titles included: "The New Activists: Fearless, Funny, Fighting Mad” “Revolution, Girl Style,” “Grrrls at War,” “Riot Grrrls: Mean, Mad, and Defiantly Underground,” “Feminist Fury: Burn Down the Walls that Say You Can’t,” “From the Youngest, Toughest Daughters of Feminism: Self-respect You Can Rock To,” and “It’s a Grrrl Thing: Punk rock, explosive politics and no boys allowed--will riot grrrl refocus feminism or fry in its own fury?” \textsuperscript{256} Kathleen Hanna suggests that “part of what made people so venomous in their attacks on riot grrrl in the underground and mainstream press, and to [her] face, was the fact that it was not cohesive and easily consumable.”\textsuperscript{257} By disseminating narratives in which participants were caricatured and individual women were elevated to the status of leaders and stars of the movement, the relentless media blitz eventually fractured the sense of centerless collectivity that had characterized riot grrrl.\textsuperscript{258}

\textsuperscript{255} Reynolds and Press, 323.
\textsuperscript{257} Cf. Juno, 103.
\textsuperscript{258} Reynolds and Press and Marcus offer concordant conclusions.
When Alice Wheeler, a *Newsweek* photographer with connections to the late ‘80s punk and grunge scenes, showed up to take pictures for an article on riot grrrl that the participants had, based on Wheeler’s reputation, cautiously approved as an exception to their media blackout, they insisted that Wheeler only use group photos. There was a persistent insistence on the collective, and a complementary refusal of the ideal of an individual “star.” In fact, one of the slogans to emerge from the movement was “Kill Rock Stars,” a phrase that also serves as the name of the still-active indie label on which bands like Bikini Kill and later Sleater-Kinney recorded. Melissa Klein, who interviewed Kathleen Hanna for a later piece, recalls, “I originally intended to talk to her about riot grrrl, but sensed her hesitancy to assume the mantle of spokesperson for a movement so amorphous and intent on collectivism.”

One participant, expressing her frustration with the way *Newsweek* and other outlets were covering riot grrrl, wrote “riot grrrl is about destroying boundaries, not creating them... Seeing ourselves described by these mainstream writers puts boundaries in our minds.” The media intrusion into the movement may have been the most powerful agent in its eventual dissolution. The media’s tendency to shoehorn riot grrrl into a familiar identity-politics narrative, with its reductive, singular understanding of the goals and characteristics of the participants, further relegated to the margins the collective, experiential component of riot grrrl. Laments Tobi Vail, “The whole conversation became one of identity instead of one about activism or music or culture.”

---

259 “Riot Grrrls,” *off our backs* (February 1993), 7.
When *Newsweek* ran the story about riot grrrl against the wishes of those interviewed, pictures of just one young woman were included in the printed story and quotations were taken from only one interview subject regardless of the explicit requests that no one be singled out as a sole or comprehensive representative of the movement. Despite the experiences of participants like Angie Hart, who recalled not being drawn to riot grrrl as a particular, feminine identity, but rather as an intimate collective experience (“It was more just like, Oh, there’s girls here!... All eight of us are going to stand in the front next to each other and hold hands at a show”262), the ideology of individualism and unity put forward in the media eventually seeped into the movement itself. Suspicion grew that certain participants were attempting to capitalize on media interest to, at best, lend additional weight to their interpretation of what riot grrrl should be, and, at worst, to self-promote at the cost of riot grrrl.

The circulation of individualist narratives weakened the communalism-without-conformity ideal that women in the movement had so desperately attempted to foster, and had for a moment begun to live out—especially through musical experience. Internal strife bubbled up around questions of whose interests were represented or addressed most consistently by the activist work of the movement and in the media: whether the movement was too focused on a specifically white and middle class feminine experience, whether the experience of sexual assault had become a sort of badge of authenticity that eased one’s entry into riot grrrl and delegitimized or marginalized other forms of

---

262 Cf. Marcus, 134.
victimization (racism, poverty, etc.). A handful participants, such as Kathleen Hanna (deemed deserving) and Jessica Hopper (deemed undeserving, and ultimately ostracized by other participants), were singled out and made to occupy the role of spokespeople—poster girls who provided snapshots both visual and verbal that confined riot grrrl and gave it the gloss of a solitary identity and a coherent, exclusive politics, rather than the fluid, paradoxical site of collectivity it more accurately sought to be.

The effects of hierarchy and false unity within the movement were not unanticipated. From the very beginning of riot grrrl, participants disavowed hierarchy and conformity, having already recognized the damaging effects of such orders of power in their lives. Hanna explained the motivation for imagining riot grrrl this way: “Even if it’s not getting punched, it’s the emotional violence and hierarchy in the family—which is the same hierarchy that puts man over woman, it’s the same fucking shit that is white over black, human over animal, boss over worker.” Weary of the effects a hierarchy might have within the movement, she repeatedly refused to be identified as a founder, leader, godmother, patron saint, etc. of riot grrrl (though, notably, she has continued to be canonized as such). It was to be a movement “without any intrinsic meaning or substance.” When offering to get the zines of U.K. writers distributed in the United States, Hanna told interested parties that she’d be working through Riot Grrrl Press, but that the writers seeking American distribution “[did not] have to be a riot grrrl—whatever

263 Marcus’s book contains an excellent discussion of these debates within the movement in the later years of riot grrrl, particularly as they occurred at riot grrrl conventions that occurred around the country.
264 Marcus, 235ff.
266 Marcus, 223.
that is.”\footnote{267} When forthrightly asked by a journalist to define what a riot grrrl was, Hanna refused to answer with anything more than “Ummm….”\footnote{268} Alison Wolfe wrote in the zine \textit{Girl Germs}, “There’s no copyright on the name so if you are sitting there reading this and you feel like you might be a riot grrrl then you probably are, so call yourself one.”\footnote{269} As Bikini Kill member Tobi Vail remembers it, she just wanted girls to start bands, and was deeply disappointed when hers and Hanna’s band started to become idolized as rock stars, finding the whole thing “pointless.”\footnote{270}

Marcus offers, “Riot grrrl had started out as a way for girls to resist the outside world’s attempt to define them. Paradoxically, it had wound up \textit{intensifying} those external definitions.”\footnote{271} The press’s imposition of a linear, unified narrative, with its insatiable desire and reward for “stars” forced a separation between the audience and the performers, and in some cases the performers from each other, that detracted from the pleasurable, intersubjective value of shared, embodied musical experience, gutting the movement of its most distinctive and effective feature—and foretelling the eventual dissipation of the movement (at least in its early form) itself. The end was clearly nigh when, in 1994, shortly after the media coverage of riot grrrl exploded, first-generation riot grrrl band Bratmobile broke up. On stage.

\footnote{267} Comment on “About,” \textit{The Bikini Kill Archive} (February 11, 2010).
\footnote{268} Cf. Juno, n.p.
\footnote{269} Cf. Downes, 29.
\footnote{270} Cf. Marcus, 278.
\footnote{271} 221.
Conclusion

Riot grrrl was many things to many people. For some participants, it was first and foremost about the chance to form and articulate feminist politics, but for a number of others the musical experiences provided by riot grrrl have been the primary appeal. Music, because it offers aesthetic experiences that refuse precise meaning and are not reducible to linguistic signification, because it is a phenomenon of resonance that establishes relationships between ostensibly “separate” subjects and bodies, because it is a temporal experience that refuses a core—refiguring its internal relationships as it (re)sounds, and because it contacts and transgresses bodily boundaries, enabled a collective, de-centered experience that served and materialized riot grrl’s politics. Within riot grrrl, intersubjective relationships were enabled through musical experience without an accompanying demand for sameness; embodied isolation was abated without a persistent threat of sexual or physical violence that too often haunted young women’s experiences of intimacy; and the division and order imposed through language alone was thwarted through the messiness and musicality of riot grrrl’s sound. Whether this happened during live shows, where it was explicitly staged through the enactment of the “girls to the front” policy, or as girls (as they still do, according to the Bikini Kill Archive website) first encountered riot grrrl through recorded sound, musical experience with all its aesthetic ambiguity and refusal to honor boundaries drew participants into an intimate, intersubjective relationship with (an)other sounding body(ies).

In one of the reflective passages in Girls to the Front, Marcus recalls her feeling the boundaries separating listener and performer collapse in a musical moment; upon
hearing Bikini Kill’s song “Rebel Girl,” she senses Hanna’s voice going “over the edge; she’s become something else. Listening, being one with her ‘I,’ we go inside out, too.”

Echoing the process that drew so many participants from a sense of isolation into a momentary experience of musical intersubjectivity—a communal intimacy borne of desire and (sometimes eroticized) pleasure, rather than violation and pain—Marcus describes the chorus of “Rebel Girl” as being “written as something to be sung along to, first alone but then in a group: moving from the lonely bedroom or bathroom mirror to the front row of a show… They make of each other that girl. They make her themselves.”

The double-meaning initiated by the semantic ambiguity of this last sentence (*they make her [by] themselves/they make [of] her[,] themselves*) is significant: it points to the ambiguity inherent in a movement that thrived on contradiction and multiplicity, that was centerless such that it could attract and experientially respond to the experiences of so many. The notion of musically-enabled intersubjectivity central my project is echoed in Marcus’s joyful recollection of aural experience in riot grrrl: there is a “her” up there on stage, but that “her” is also “me,” and also “them.” We not only become “one with her,” as Marcus describes, but she becomes one with us—without demanding a shared essence or sameness. The relationship is reciprocal in that sonic moment: we all make all, we all are all as the music resounds through the bodies of all who are present.

When that reciprocity was short-circuited or otherwise made impossible through the elevation of “poster girls,” and coincident internal race- and class-based frictions

272 110.
273 111.
were magnified by (if not completely borne of) the monolithic representations positing a center/essence to Riot Grrrl, then the movement in its strongest and most effective/affective form faded. After hierarchy began to palpably emerge, participants’ energy was directed away from experiences of “epiphanic bliss” and “group-feeling” amid the sounds of the movement and toward self-protection as they fought for continued inclusion and representation in the tidy and singular identity-based narrative that could not contain multiplicity, contradiction, or ambiguity. In other words, by 1994, the inclusive, pluralistic, and lateral call of “Girls to the front” became the exclusive, individualizing, dividing, and marginalizing “Girl to the top.”

274 See Marcus for a fuller history of these conflicts.
Chapter 4: “We Sang Together, So Now We’re Cool”: Musical Intersubjectivity at a Girls’ Rock Camp

Twenty-two girls arrived at rock camp on Monday morning. After being checked in by their parents and unloading sleeping bags, pillows, and a week’s worth of clothing, the girls started getting settled. Some nervously found a place to sit and silently admire the shining lines of guitars they would soon get to play, while others wasted no time grabbing instruments, finding friends from previous camps, and getting back to the business of making music together.

While waiting for the remaining campers to arrive and for camp to officially begin, Mary, a counselor, wandered over to Maggie, a new camper, and started playing guitar while Maggie sang. Moments later, River, a returning camper, meandered over and started quietly singing along, adding her own vocal harmony. Maggie and River smiled at each other as River moved in closer and started singing more audibly, matching her timing and inflection with Maggie’s. The effect of those three minutes—the musically-established relationship between Maggie and River—was apparent for the remainder of camp. Regardless of the fact that Maggie and River were not in the same band, that they did not know each other prior to camp, that they had different backgrounds, musical styles and interests, and personalities, and that River had a network of friendships that had carried forward from previous years at camp, the two girls quickly

275 Names of all of the campers and counselors interviewed for this project have been changed.
established a palpable bond, finding opportunities wherever they could to sing and write music together, and sharing knowing waves and glances throughout their week at camp.

Girls’ rock camps have grown in popularity in the last ten years, with several dozen now occurring annually throughout the United States, Canada, and Western Europe. Though these camps are organized around girls making music together, and, when asked, the campers routinely emphasize shared experiences of music as the chief value of the camp, predominant understandings of the value and purpose of rock camps focus on girls’ empowerment and self-esteem building. The emphasis on “girls’ empowerment” is symptomatic of the undertheorization of “music as a particular and irreducible form of human expression and knowledge” in feminist and girlhood studies literature, as well as in music scholarship more generally.276 The music itself becomes secondary to its use as a vehicle (either through lyrics or through particular performance strategies) in the signification of feminist (or non-feminist) messages. While the existing literature has offered a number of provocative analyses of girl musical cultures, it cannot sufficiently address what happened when River and Maggie sang together on the first day of camp. My objective is to reconsider through a discussion of girls’ rock camps the subjective effects of musical experience as a way to expand understandings of girls’ engagements with music beyond thinking of music as merely a medium for semiotic content.

This chapter commences with a critique of the “girls’ empowerment” discourse that pervades much understanding of the value of girls’ rock camps. I base my analysis

---

276 Shepherd and Wicke, 2.
on both the interpretations presented to me firsthand by adult camp volunteers and organizers, as well as on accounts of rock camp captured elsewhere, and on contemporary girls studies scholarship. Then, I draw from my own ethnographic work performed in July 2011 at a week-long girls’ rock camp to offer, based on the girls’ articulations of their experiences with music and at camp, an alternative perspective that challenges the neo-liberal notions of individual agency that underlie “empowerment” discourses and that ultimately foreclose richer understandings of musical experience.

_Interrogating Empowerment_

Shortly after I returned home from the Girlz Rhythm ‘n’ Rock camp in July 2011, a one minute, forty-three second video featuring Girls Rock! Los Angeles appeared online as part of the _Los Angeles Times_ “Framework” series.\(^\text{277}\) The description accompanying the micro-documentary promised a “whimsical look at girls getting their rock on” at one of the rock camps that have sprung up in the twelve years since Riot Grrrl veterans organized the inaugural camp in Portland, Oregon. Given my recent experiences at a similar camp, I was eager to click on the link to the video and start watching. Disappointingly, rather than the innovative take on girls’ rock camps for which I had hoped, the film primarily relied on worn, problematic tropes for representing girlhood. Despite the filmmaker’s reverent reference to the “girls’ empowerment” and “self-esteem”-boosting goals of the camp, there are no girls’ voices heard for almost the entirety of the video. Girl presence is visually and narratively confined to shots of

campers posing for the camera and disembodied hands moving around guitar fretboards while an adult woman provides a hopeful voiceover proclaiming girls’ empowerment. The only girl voice heard is not even declarative—it comes in the form of a question at the very end of the video when one of the campers asks what she’s supposed to be doing when she’s told to make her “rock face.”

In many ways, this video serves as a metonym for contemporary discussions of girlhood in both popular and scholarly media. The foregrounding of adult voices is typical in writing about girls’ lives despite many authors’ paradoxical commitment to emphasizing girlhood agency and resistance. Equally common is a tendency to focus on how girls are being “empowered” without fully contextualizing the discursive constraints from which that “empowerment” must necessarily emerge. Furthermore, analyses of musical experience within girl culture often minimize (to the point of casual dismissal) the specificity of musical engagement in favor of continued glorification and/or hand-wrangling over girls’ semiotic en- and de- and recoding of the visual and lyrical elements of popular musical performance.

With the rise of girls studies in academia and the advent of popular empowerment discourses under the pink, bedazzled banner of “girl power” came a trend in which the girl subject’s relationship to popular culture was reconsidered: once construed as merely a helplessly passive consumer, the girl subject was recuperatively reimagined in terms of her cultural agency rather than her victimhood. The long-overdue interest in girls as active makers and consumers of culture stands as a much needed—though still problematic—corrective to earlier studies of youth culture. The cultural practices of
youth have been important sites from which to investigate social change and social reproduction, and, as a result, youth culture has been understood primarily in terms of resistance to hegemonic power structures. Because early studies of youth tend to focus on the actions of boys, cultural practices were historically analyzed primarily in terms of public, masculinized forms of resistance. Girls studies scholar Catherine Driscoll explains, “Youth as a struggle with hegemonic tendencies has seemed to be more easily identified in the cultural activities of young men, and feminist cultural studies thus inherits from cultural studies (as well as feminism) a tendency to represent and discuss girls as conformist rather than resistant or at least to study them almost exclusively with reference to that division.” As a result, girls’ modes of cultural participation were not only marginalized, but girls’ relationship to mass culture was construed only as of one of insurmountable servitude.

The popularity of the 1990s pop mantra “girl power” helped to usher in forceful correctives to these patterns of omission, such as the advent of girls studies as an area of scholarly inquiry and an onslaught of media interest in girls’ cultural practices. The focus on girls’ in/ability to develop resistance strategies is perhaps owed to girls studies’ roots in both feminism, with its historical goal of women’s empowerment, as well as youth studies, with its emphasis on subcultural resistance. However, the combined efforts to speak back to girls’ earlier marginalization in studies of youth culture generally

280 11.
overemphasized the transformative capacities of girls’ putatively voluntaristic resistance to, appropriations of, and productions of popular culture with little attention paid to the ways in which girls’ subjectivities—the basis from which they can “speak” as subjects at all281—are continuously produced and constrained by discourses of, gender, race, class, and sexuality. As girls studies scholar Marnina Gonick keenly notes, “girl power” as a rubric for girls’ empowerment has gained popularity precisely because it fails to sufficiently threaten the neoliberal ideologies of white, middle-class individualism and personal responsibility.282

The marginalization of girls within both feminism and the study of youth cultures has resulted in competing discourses of girls and girlhood within girls studies. On the one hand, there exists a wide variety of girls studies literature that focuses explicitly on girls’ empowerment, situating girls as eventual feminists who challenge norms of passive femininity through individual acts of resistance. One commonly identified form of resistance is girls’ cultural production. As one example drawn from the dearth of published scholarship written specifically about girls’ rock camps, Nyala Ali proclaims that the zine and music production and consumption initiated by riot grrrl and taken up in girls’ rock camps signals an important shift toward autonomy for feminine subjects. “What becomes important,” she explains, “is the agency resulting from such activities…

Girls Rock Camp is indeed unique in its efforts to offer girls much-needed self-empowerment through the DIY creation and production of media.²⁸³ Danielle Giffort makes a similar, though more measured implication when she states that the rock camp she studied “incorporates ‘do-it-yourself’ (DIY) projects into their program to show girls how they can be cultural producers and become empowered through that process,” and subsequently makes the observation that “all [girls’ rock camps] have adopted a similar grassroots project of empowering young girls through rock music production.”²⁸⁴ The optimistic conflation of cultural production with girls’ agency and empowerment is not, of course, limited only to this minute body of rock camp literature, but is common among girls studies literature more generally.²⁸⁵ To cite a musical example, Carol Jennings argues that girls turn to rock music in order to resist pressure to be silent. Though she briefly mentions the pleasure the girls derive from musical experience, Jennings’s analysis focuses on only two things: the feminist significance of the lyrics written by the band she is interviewing, and the band’s strategies of self-presentation meant to garner them respect as feminine subjects performing in a masculine genre.²⁸⁶

Another commonly identified way in which girls articulate resistance is through engaging in masculine activities as a way to resignify “girlhood.” Ali’s interpretation of

²⁸⁴ “Show or Tell?: Feminist Dilemmas and Implicit Feminism at Girls’ Rock Camp,” Gender and Society 25, no. 5 (October 2011), 570 and 573.
²⁸⁶ 176.
what happens at girls’ rock camps places an overly celebratory and simplified gloss on the putative gender-transformative capacity of that experience. In her analysis of the feature-length documentary *Girls Rock! The Movie*, she makes a number of claims about what happens at the longest-standing Portland, Oregon camp. In the film, Beth Ditto, who serves as a vocal instructor at the camp, has the girls engage in a call and response activity. She yells, “Girls!” and they yell back, “Rock!” Ali interprets this as a significant moment of camp in that it “promotes an empowering assertion of girlhood in the face of socially ingrained sexism,”\(^{287}\) though she ignores that the girls are still compelled to enthusiastically resubscribe to the gendered position of “girl” in order to issue their “empowered” declaration.\(^{288}\) Her tendency to simplify girlhood resistance at camp is readily apparent throughout her article, such as when she mentions that the act of having campers play on “regular” (that is, not miniaturized or glittery pink) instruments “arguably ‘de-essentializes’ girls by teaching them to be less traditionally feminine.”\(^{289}\)

Even Gifford, who offers a nuanced critique of the political necessity of using the more palatable “empowerment” (rather than explicitly feminist) discourse at girls’ rock camp, occasionally slips into declarations of the effectiveness of girls’ acts of resistance. For example, she claims, “When girls scream into microphones and strum their guitars, they are challenging the notion that playing rock music and being a cultural producer is

\(^{287}\) 153.

\(^{288}\) Ali spends a great deal of time talking about the ways that riot grrrl participants used the male gaze against itself by inscribing their bodies with words like “slut” in order to articulate control over their own embodiment, though she minimizes the ways in which this act simultaneously reifies gendered embodiment through the rearticulation (however strategic) of feminine norms.

\(^{289}\) 148.
something that only boys and men do. And quite possibly, these actions can snowball into something bigger.”

Arguments like Ali’s and Giffort’s are familiar among girls studies scholars—many of whom similarly interpret girls engaging in “masculine” activities as somehow fundamentally disruptive of gender relations. In an article based on research for their larger project, *Girl Power*, Currie *et al* define “girl power” as “the ability to critically reflect upon processes through which girls are positioned in the social world.” The authors identify articulations of “girl power” in girls’ demonstrated willingness to resist “emphasized femininity” (normatively defined as white, middle-class, and male-oriented) that made their classmates popular by engaging in activities typically coded as masculine, like skateboarding and web design. For them, any articulation of non-normative femininity on the part of girls is importantly subversive and has the capacity to radically transform the discursive conditions that produce the girl subject, even as they define girls’ “success” in terms of their ability to become empowered “women,” meaning they must continuously occupy a femininely gendered subject position as they paradoxically “resist” feminine normativity.

This is not to say that performances of non-normative femininity have no capacity whatsoever to transform, but rather to caution against a tendency to overstate girls’ agency. Reappropriations of “girlhood” via the label “girl”—and what “girls” do—cannot, in themselves, detach girlhood from its history. Rather, discursive formations are

---

always citational, and their citationality constrains and enables the range of meanings generated through “contemporary usages,” 292 whether they are “resistant” or not. Explains Judith Butler, “Neither power nor discourse are rendered anew at every moment; they are not as weightless as the utopics of radical resignification might imply.” 293 In other words, any iteration of “girl”—whether imagined in terms of newly unfettered agency or perpetual victimization—is always a citation of the norm of “girl,” even if the aim of the speaker/actor is to undermine that norm.

The belief pervading the above-cited example and undergirding a number of popular girls’ empowerment initiatives (including many girls’ rock camps) tells us that, if girls participate in cultural production, they can exercise control (agency) over which messages they receive and how they receive them; if they participate in masculine activities, then they can defy gender norms. Therefore, girls must be “empowered” to participate in certain activities by programs that build their self-esteem. Though I doubt any of the adults associated with the girls’ rock camps would use the phrase “girl power” without scare quotes or sarcasm—and, in fact, none of them did in the hours I spent talking with them—an investment in girls’ “empowerment” looms large in their interpretations of the fundamental value of the camps. Elizabeth Venable, who contributed an essay on girls-only space to the 2008 zine-inspired how-to manual on which many camps have relied in order to get started, Rock ‘n’ Roll Camp for Girls: How To Start a Band, Write Songs, Record an Album, and Rock Out!!, explicitly disavows

292 Butler Bodies, 227.
293 Ibid., 224.
“girl power” rhetoric when describing her first experience at rock camp.

“I’d been a little wary going into that room,” she recalls, “not wanting to be put into that box that defines its contents as being ‘girl power.’ Girl, girl, girl! Go Girls!! For me, that can make it feel like I’m being surrounded by cheerleaders when what I need is a coach.”

But, the line between “girl power” and “girls’ empowerment” is a thin one, and, as Anita Harris points out, a commitment to a DIY ethos and individual responsibility is easily converted to “a discourse of choice and a focus on the self.”

There are three central, problematic assumptions that result from this sort of thinking about girls’ rock camps. First, “empowerment” discourses reify simplistic notions of subjectivity and personal agency by placing undue emphasis on individual girls’ capacities to effect social change to their own benefit. Even though Giffort, as a particularly relevant example, critiques the neoliberal underpinnings of “girl power” discourse, such as its emphasis on personal choice and self-reliance, her emphasis on girls’ cultural production as tools of agency within the context of the camp she studied reify individualism and autonomy. Consequently, girls’ individual shortcomings (rather than contextual constraints) are potentially blamed if they fail to effect the sorts of personal and social changes promoted by camp. Second (and relatedly), within “girl

---

294 Ali’s essay on Girls Rock Camp does the same.
297 As a telling example, Janet, one of the counselors interviewed by Giffort, describes the decision to orient the camp where she volunteers around “concrete, hands-on workshops that promote self-reliance, independence, intelligence, strength” (580).
power”/“girls’ empowerment” discourse, girls must speak from a position of “girlness,” thereby paradoxically reinforcing gender difference while also “overcoming” it.

My final critique, and the one on which I will be focusing for the remainder of this chapter, is particular to rock camp. If the adults are to be believed that the primary accomplishment of camp is “empowering” girls by giving them voice and confidence, then it would seem that the camps’ focus on music-making is purely incidental. At best, it serves as a medium for the sort of self-affirming and/or resignifying practices that are believed to be the signposts of girls’ agency. In fact, several of the adults involved in the camps have said as much, though (as I detail below) the girls that attend camp offer a very different perspective on the value of camp—one that relies much more heavily on their shared musical experiences therein.

The Counselors’ Take

Prior to attending the rock camp where I sought to gain insight into how the girls themselves made sense of their experiences, I was able to interview three volunteers from other camps around the country, each of which (like the camp I attended) belongs to a loose international network called the Girls Rock Camp Alliance. Their interpretations of camp, which I complement with accounts of other adult counselors captured elsewhere and interviews performed with the adults volunteers at the camp I attended, reveal a tendency to emphasize girls’ empowerment at the expense of talking about musical experience at camp. Each woman discussed in this section indicated a degree of investment in increasing girls’ sense of their own agency and obligation to effect change,
which is reflected primarily through a perpetual deployment of “empowerment” discourse. When I asked Jen, who runs a “women in rock” music history workshop at Girls Rock Austin, what she thought the main goal of camp was, she said she hoped girls would learn “that they can use their own voice and that their opinions are valid and what they think is valid, and that they are assertive and believe in themselves.” Lauren, who presents workshops with Jen at the Austin camp, explained that the role of rock camp is, in essence, to give girls confidence in their own voices so that they can challenge systems of oppression. When asked about her goals, she stated:

I want them to have the confidence—even if it’s not in music—to go into other male-dominated areas and feel like, “Oh yeah, I can do this!”… I want them to recognize that… they can infiltrate and they can sort of take back some of the power, and their voice—whether it’s being recognized on stage or elsewhere—needs to be heard, and they need to be able to speak up.

Each of these statements points toward the ubiquity of empowerment discourse as it relates to girlhood, which (at least in the case of rock camps) results in the minimization of the role of music.

Other counselors I interviewed began their descriptions of the value of camp with reference to music, only to quickly subordinate it to girls’ empowerment. Zoe, one of the counselors at the Girlz’ Rhythm and Rock Camp where I did my fieldwork, stated, “[Camp is] more than just ‘music lessons.’[…] It’s an opportunity to be empowered as a young woman and to be exposed to a new way of thinking.” Her co-counselor Mary followed, “I’ve told other people probably about 30% is doing music here, and 70% is
relationship-building, trying to [...] empower them in life, not just as young women, but also in life.” Similarly, Joan, founder of one camp, remembered seeing one of the organizers of the Portland camp on a news program explaining, “Really, we’re a self-esteem camp. It just sounds more fun to say we’re a rock camp.” Joan elaborated, “One thing I always say to people is that for [co-ed] School of Rock-type camps, music is the ends, and for us music is the means.” In similar fashion, Ali focuses on the ways in musical experiences at rock camp are only significant in that they provide the means through which girls gain access to a riot grrrl-sourced DIY approach and to adult musician role models who are women, all of which culminate in the girls’ abilities to sing feminist lyrics “that [speak] to the political, economic, technical, and cultural circumstances that are unique to the current era.”

If the girls’ sense of self-confidence is improved and they can engage in “gender resistant” activities, then camp has been successful. Whether or how musical experience mattered is implicitly of little consequence.

Riot grrrl veteran Carrie Brownstein, who has worked with the Portland camp, explicitly dismisses the musical element of camp as secondary to the more important work of enhancing girls’ self-esteem and sense of personal agency. “Rock camp,” she explains,

isn’t music camp. The campers are not just learning technique as much as they are learning how to communicate in a way that they aren’t usually allowed to…

When girls are allowed to let go and not be called crazy, or to yell without being
called angry, then they learn that the world they live in is limitless—or at least that the possibilities are. Girls discover that they draw their own boundaries, that they can push those boundaries through art, that they can be heard… To reach the back of the room and beyond with a sound you create, that will change your world [emphasis mine].

Giffort includes a similar comment from one of the camp volunteers she interviewed for her work:

Rock camp, consequently, is about more than girls screaming into microphones or strumming their guitars—or as Donna, a board member and counselor, explains, “It’s not just about the music.” Kathi [another interview subject] clarifies how the organization “gives girls a way to express themselves through music . . . you know, giving them confidence, giving them a voice, giving them a community with other likeminded girls. It fosters all these things, and music happens to be the mediator.” Production and performance of rock music functions [sic] as a political tool for personal empowerment and collective resistance, something that these volunteers see as feminist.

Brownstein’s emphasis on girls changing the way they constrain and bound themselves, and “Donna’s” emphasis on girls being given voice—which Giffort sees as a sort of personal empowerment—is typical of the ways other camp organizers speak about camp. This framing denies that music matters in any particular way while simultaneously

---


300 576.
reifying a problematic commitment to girls’ unrestrained agency and individual responsibility.

Media coverage of girls’ rock camps, of which there has been a fair amount given the rapidly expanding network of camps emerging around the United States, typically reflects this pattern as well. Nearly every article I encountered—whether scholarly or journalistic—mentioned building self-esteem as a primary goal of the camps while consistently deeming the music “less important.” Clearly, “girls’ empowerment” has emerged as one of the easiest and most attractive stories to tell about programs aimed at feminine adolescents, due in no small part to its all-American promise that individual fortitude is the key to a successful life. Furthermore, the interest in girls’ empowerment on the part of scholars, adult volunteers, and popular media has resulted in musical experience being downplayed as merely a conduit for feminist expression.

It seemed strange to me that the counselors I interviewed—all of whom were musicians themselves—would imply at any point in our conversations that music was replaceable by any number of other activities around which a camp could be organized. And, in fact, follow-up questions indicate that they do not fully believe this. When I asked the counselors if it mattered that the girls rock camps were music camps and not,

---

say, sports or creative writing camps, their responses indicated a sense of something distinct about musical experience, something that allows for a different kind of relationship to emerge between the girls themselves and between the girls and what they generate at camp, though they struggled to capture that difference in language without additional reference to empowerment.

When I asked Zoe why she thought it mattered that rock camp centered on music-making, she began by explaining her belief that music has an absolute, unspeakable “energy,” before returning to the use of music to increase girls’ sense of their own agency. She went on, “the music empowers the girl to express, to release. The music that they create empowers their ability and their—I think it makes them, um, it gives them self-worth, like, ‘Wow, I created that!’” Zoe’s first impulse was to cite the lyrics of the songs the girls write as the locus of that difference, but, as she continued to talk, she returned to what might be called the “ephemeral” effects of music and the potential connections they forge between girls:

There are some things that are hard to talk about, but, if you can describe being abused in a creative way, through a song, and express to somebody your experience in an environment that is supportive of that, so much healing occurs—not just for that young lady that was finally able to put on paper that experience, but for those other girls who happen to be sitting there who haven’t found the words, who haven’t been able to express, to be sitting there in the same room and go, ‘Wow. She just sang about something I’ve experienced.’ Then all of a sudden they’re not alone.
She continued,

Sound waves put off energy and when you’re creating music and you—okay, I’m just going to say A minor, because that chord—I do an A minor and it’s like, ‘[sigh] Okay, everything’s better now.’ It’s my sad chord, but it’s also—there’s energy that comes from that chord that speaks directly to me, and it heals me. And other girls are going to respond to other chords or other waves. It becomes healing on a level—and it’s almost spiritual because it’s hard to explain in any other way.

We can’t see it, we can’t touch and yet it absolutely exists. It is absolute.

Lauren, too, emphasized that musical experience—and, in particular, making music—is a sort of process that binds people: “I would say that it’s more collaborative than some other outlets than some of the other things we’re talking about [like sports]… If there’s no goal of winning or anything like that, not to say that it’s fail-safe, but there’s less room for failure so there’s more room to just sort of be okay with experimenting with sound.”

Giffort’s argument about the necessity of employing “implicit feminism” by “emphasizing more socially acceptable angles” at rock camps offers a way to understand the adult interpretations of camp as a site for “empowerment” as a politically strategic choice which “reflects larger societal concerns about girls that have surfaced in recent years—that girls’ self-esteem is plummeting and that corrective action must be taken to give girls their ‘voice’ back.” Counselors want to be “explicit in telling campers how cultural production is a tool of social change—that is, campers should know that rock camp is ‘not just about the music’…. Without making these connections in a more
explicit way, some worry that an important point of the organization might get lost.” My own ethnographic research suggests that it is not the messages of empowerment that are “getting lost” by the girls, but rather the capacity of music to have particular subjective effects that is getting lost for scholars and, to a degree, camp counselors. Focusing on feminism or gender resistance at camp both minimizes the unique “music-ness” of music. This happens in two ways: first, by neglecting consideration of music’s relationship to subjectivity beyond its ability to work as a semiotic system of decodable signs; and second, by being at a mismatch with the ways campers describe their experience at camp. What they most value about camp isn’t feeling “empowered,” but the musical moments they are able to share with other girls.

At Camp

In mid-summer 2011, I spent a week at the Girlz Rhythm ‘n’ Rock Camp in central Ohio. The Girlz Rhythm and Rock Camp (GRRC) was founded in 2003 by Suzie Simpson, a well-known local event planner who currently works at a non-profit LGBTQ organization that serves central Ohio. Suzie had become interested in organizing an event similar to the Rock ‘n’ Roll Camp for Girls that June Millington (member of all-women rock band Fanny) and her partner had started as part of the Institute for Musical Arts outside of Northampton, Massachusetts. Like Millington’s camp, the GRRC is an overnight camp, rather than a day camp like the majority of other girls’ rock camps around the country. Suzie explained to me her reasoning that opting for an overnight

303 584.
format accelerates and intensifies “bonding” among the campers, thereby enhancing their camp experience—a sentiment with which the campers I interviewed tended to agree.

Each year, Suzie tries to admit about 20 campers, though the camp I attended had 24 registered, with one no-show, one homesick camper who left a few days early, and four girls on the waiting list. By her own account, Suzie “can’t help [her]self” and has a hard time turning down interested parties.304 The advertised age range for campers is 8-18. However, the year I attended, Suzie allowed one of the counselors to bring her niece and daughter who were both younger than 8 years old, but who participated as fully as the other campers. In the initial years of the camp, it was designated for girls ages 11-18, but there was a significant desire to attend camp on the part of girls ten and younger that Suzie did not want to ignore.305 In terms of the girls who populate the camp each year, Suzie describes the campers as “a pretty diverse group”—the result of her committed effort to make the camp accessible for a variety of girls. Each year, about half of the campers are on full or partial scholarship to help pay the $350 tuition, and the year I attended that number was closer to 75%. Suzie informed me that she was adamant that the camp be available to more than just white middle-class girls, and that she did not want it to be a “rich girls’ camp.” Seven of the 21 campers, both of the “junior counselors” (former campers who had come back to help as volunteers), and one of the five full-time staff members were people of color, and of that group, all were black with

304 At the time of writing, Simpson was considering adding a second camp to accommodate the increasing demand.
305 When I asked her how the girls’ ages affected camp, she said that young girls are more attentive, and write “better songs.” When I asked her to explain, she shared her impression that the older girls’ songs are typically all about romantic relationships. This was not true in my experience—in fact, the most romantic songs were written by girls aged 9-13 who comprised the band Shimmer Glitter Glamour.
the exception of one camper who was of South Asian descent, and one junior-counselor who identified as black and Mexican-American. In the past, a girl with Down Syndrome had also participated and, according to Suzie and the other adult staff members, the other campers treated her well and included her in their activities.

Since the full-time staff and the guest artists who come in to facilitate workshops work on a volunteer basis, costs for running the camp are minimal (thus allowing the multiple scholarships). Partnerships with several local business, including a t-shirt company, restaurants, and the national music chain Guitar Center\textsuperscript{306} combined with one-time donations such as ticket revenue donated after local performances by Ani DiFranco and Pearl Jam, and individual food and instrument donations from community members and local musicians have allowed the camp to acquire a store of instruments and equipment like a sound system and tents for the campers to use each year.\textsuperscript{307} The primary annual expense is reserving a suitable space for the duration of the camp. Since its inception, GRRC has been housed at multiple locations, but for the past several years has taken place at a YMCA-owned campground about 20 minutes outside of Columbus city limits. The facilities available at the campground are limited to a single barn-like lodge outfitted with a kitchen area, a small stage, two plumbed bathrooms, two small storage lofts, a large deck, and several long tables and chairs. Given the limits of these accommodations, the campers sleep in groups of three to four in large cabin tents scattered on the hillside that separates the lodge from the woods. Throughout the week,

\textsuperscript{306} Guitar Center makes significant yearly donations to the camp and to the Girls’ Rock Camp Alliance as part of a recent image redesign to become less overtly masculinist.

\textsuperscript{307} At the end of camp, Suzie regularly lets campers without their own instruments borrow the camp’s guitars until the next year.
campers must use the shared campground showering facilities since the bathrooms in the lodge building do not offer necessary accommodations for bathing. Most of the activities, including rehearsals, lessons, mealtimes, workshops, take place in and around the lodge building, which also stores all of the equipment, supplies, and food.

The camp begins on a Monday afternoon and ends the following Saturday, culminating in a public outdoor concert that takes place on a permanently erected wooden stage built on the grounds by the organizers of an annual bluegrass festival that also occupies the space for a week each summer. As the campers arrive, they are asked to leave their cell phones and mp3 players either with their parents or with the camp staff. Though several of the girls articulated frustration with this rule, those that had forfeited their technological devices did agree that not having them allowed them to be more focused on what was happening at camp. As one part-time volunteer, Susan, put it, iPods allow the girls to “be into themselves” when they’re supposed to be “connecting.” “It’s camp!” she exclaimed. As campers were arriving, several of the girls who had attended previously (most of whom were older) exchanged hugs before gathering together to play and sing songs like Ingrid Michaelson’s “The Way I Am” and “Falling Slowly” from the movie Once.

After all of the campers had arrived, Suzie gathered everyone inside the lodge so that the full time staff members could announce the rules of camp. There were four basic expectations by which the campers were expected to abide. The first rule, which was emphasized as supremely important, was that the campers were to respect each other. Suzie did not go into detail about what this meant, but in my interviews, the girls
frequently referenced the importance of this rule, and shared that they felt that others honored this expectation, making camp a welcoming and accepting environment. The three other rules were that campers were not to use the soundboard without the help of a staff member, that campers were to be clean and conscientious when using the two small shared bathrooms in the lodge, and that returning campers should remember to include first-time attendees.

After the campers had had a chance to make casual introductions and reconnections, gotten acquainted with the rules and logistics of the upcoming week, and eaten dinner, they were placed into bands. The girls were grouped by the counselors based on which genres of music they were interested in exploring for the week, who they thought they might like to have in their band, and (loosely) by age. Band size ranged from three to seven members, and some girls filled in as “guest” artists in other bands interested in particular instrumental capabilities, like Ella, an 11-year-old saxophonist and core member of the band Shimmer Glitter Glamour, who was asked to play on another band’s song. Girls who had attended camp in previous years typically sought each other out in this process. One group assembled based on a pre-arranged decision to list country as the genre they were most interested in exploring. The previous year, they had been a hard rock band.

A typical day at camp is only semi-structured—intentionally so, according to Suzie, who emphasized that having an overnight camp allowed for maximum flexibility (something for which many of the campers expressed a great deal of appreciation). After breakfast, the girls practice their instruments, work on creating signs carrying their band
logos, and take turns rehearsing in bands on the small stage in the lodge building. The volunteer staff members and local guest musicians, if any are there, mill around to help with individual musical instruction, set up the stage, run the mixing board, or address problems that might arise. Most days after lunch, the girls have workshops facilitated by volunteers from around the state. The year I attended, topics included song-writing and music production, belly dancing, hand drumming, music theory, karaoke, and a “women in rock” workshop hosted by one of the educational outreach coordinators from the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland. Remaining time in the afternoon and evening is spent much like the morning, with the girls talking to each other about such varied things as their moms and other camps they had attended, running around the camp, and working on writing and performing their songs. After dinner, campers resume working on their music and also work together on a song that they write and perform as a camp. The song the year I did my research, “The Golden Rule,” was about bullying—a theme suggested by Suzie. Each camper was asked to write a few lyrics about being bullied from any perspective. The counselors collected what the girls had written, organized the girls’ compiled lines into an order that had logical flow and included something from each camper, and then handed the lyrics back over to the girls so that they could turn them into a song, collectively deciding on melody, instrumentation, and structure.

Each band is responsible for writing two songs during the week and for participating in the writing of the group song. All of these songs (including ones written by the junior counselors) are performed on the last day of camp. Friends and family are invited to this concert, which is followed by a camp-closing potluck before the campers
pack up their things and return home later that afternoon. During camp, the girls are free to play whichever instruments they would like and often switch around within bands playing, perhaps, drums on one song and bass on another. Given the shared space and loose structure (one counselor referred to it as “organic”) in which all the bands must simultaneously operate, it was not uncommon for more experienced campers to (without prompting) help newer ones with songwriting and/or with instrument-playing.

My role at camp morphed over the course of the week, likely because of the “organic” structure. When I arrived, I introduced myself to the counselors, the parents, and the campers as a researcher—an identity which was reinforced by my solicitation of signatures on consent and assent forms. From the beginning, I had decided that I wanted as comprehensive a perspective as possible, so I tried to help out where I could, driving a load of equipment down Sunday afternoon before camp began, loaning my digital piano to camp for the week, giving the girls fresh bottles of water from the “off-limits” refrigerator when they asked for them, moving tables and chairs, and setting up equipment when necessary. Aside from that polite work, I was spending most of my time talking with the girls in the early part of the week, taking field notes in between conversations. I focused on building relationships with the campers presuming it might make the end-of-the-week interviews more comfortable for them and easier to make sense of for me. However, the campers and the full-time staff quickly transitioned into treating me like another counselor. I was called upon to run an impromptu music theory workshop, to help some bands write and refine keyboard parts, to gather campers when it was time for a meal or a new workshop, to comfort campers who were homesick, and to
answer campers’ questions about what was happening when (as much as those questions could be answered, given the aforementioned loose structure of the camp).

In an effort to be a responsible and informed researcher, prior to arriving at camp, I had reviewed the girls studies literature that looked specifically at music cultures, mined the library databases for any scholarship about rock camps, read the girls’ rock camp how-to manual, watched the feature-length documentary Girls Rock!, perused as many newspaper and magazine articles as I could locate, and interviewed volunteers from other camps in preparation.308 In the course of my week at camp, I interviewed 16 of the 22 campers. Because of the research protocol to which I was beholden, the girls I interviewed ranged in age from 8-17 years old, though (as previously mentioned) there were a couple of campers who were younger than eight in attendance. I also spoke at length with two of the full-time adult volunteers and both of the 18-year-old “junior counselors” who had previously been campers themselves. Each of the interviews lasted between 20 minutes and an hour and was recorded using a digital audio recording device. I opted to use a mix of individual and group interviews, depending on who was available to talk at any given moment. Though I used semi-structured interviews, asking the same open-ended questions to each camper, I found that interviewing girls in pairs or groups elicited much longer, more engaged responses as they built on and responded to each other’s comments and ideas. I informed each of the girls I interviewed that she was free to ask me any questions she wanted as well. Several asked questions about my musical

308 Both Ali’s and Giffort’s articles about rock camp were published after camp had ended, so there was virtually no scholarship specifically about rock camps when I attended.
experience, and one young camper asked to take my list of interview questions and rephrase them as she interviewed me. I obliged.

Musical Intimacy, Empowerment, and Vulnerability at “Weirdo Camp”

Given the persistent emphasis on girls’ empowerment discussed above, I had become concerned that maybe it did not matter all that much that girls’ rock camps were music camps—a central axiom for my project. Or, even if it did matter in some way, the girls themselves (having been so thoroughly confronted with the incessant promises of girl power) would not have any other language available for talking about camp. I was already all too aware that the linguistic tools available for describing musical experience are frustratingly limited, so expecting the girls to be able to provide an alternative to the “empowerment” narrative threatened to be a long shot. However, much to my delight, when asked about camp, the girls primarily wanted to talk about listening to and making music—not empowerment—and they possessed many ways of talking about their engagements with music that had little to do with attempts to use musical activity as a platform for resisting or reshaping gender norms. That said, the widely shared conclusion among scholars, counselors, and journalists that, as Ali puts it, “Girls Rock Camp uses the creation and performance of music as a means for campers to assert an unapologetic sense of self while simultaneously taking part in a strong community of collective female identities” is ill-suited to describing how the girls themselves make sense of their week at camp.

\[^{309}\] 147.
When I asked the campers what their favorite part about camp was, several responded that they were most grateful for the chance to make music with other people. Take, for example, the following conversation I had with the four teenage members of the band Sasquatch.

Martha: My favorite part about camp, I think, is the people here and, like, being able to play and have a focus on music for a week. I mean, it’s just normal. Everybody here loves to play music so they’re just, like, walking around singing and stuff. And usually, like, most other places, I’m the only one randomly singing songs and dancing and stuff. People are like, “What the hell are you doing?” I’m like, “Eh.”

River: It’s not like every day that you can just, like, randomly burst out in song and have people join in with you.

Darrow: And do harmonies.

River: And have people harmonize and sound amazing! […]

Darrow: Yeah, I like the chance to be able to collaborate with other people.

This set of responses highlights the pleasure the girls derive from making music together, and their sense that camp provides a distinct context wherein their musical activity works to create relationships, rather than being a potential point of social marginalization. Noticeably absent is any mention of a sense of “self-empowerment” that they develop over the course of the week. In fact, only when I asked the campers how they would describe the camp to other people who knew nothing about it did they reference its function as a site for girls’ and women’s empowerment, suggesting that their failure to
reference this discourse at other points in our conversations was not simply attributable to a lack of awareness. On the contrary, it seemed that they are keenly aware of their obligation to “be empowered,” especially in the eyes of those outside the camp.

As discussed above, the counselors tended to de-emphasize music as simply the means for empowerment at camp, and thus imagined their purpose differently than the girls did. They saw themselves as “role models” who could show girls how to live successful lives where, as Zoe described, they had options beyond motherhood. Jen and Lauren mentioned camp as a place where girls could be introduced to relevant professional skills, such as self-confidence, that could prepare them for successful careers in music and non-music industries. However, when I asked the campers if they thought it mattered the camp was a music camp and not, say, a basketball camp where they could presumably also develop self-confidence and other skills, they overwhelmingly said yes, and were able to explain why with impressive fluency.

To begin with, several girls indicated a sense that music has a unique material status that does not align with distinctions between subjective interiority and objective exteriority that govern modern conceptions of the self/other relationship; its function is connection, not division. Take, for example, 16-year-old Makela’s explanation of why it matters that camp is organized around music making:

I just feel like music is just important because it’s a way that, um, I just feel like you’re able—I don’t know, it awakens a connection in you that’s different than other physical things in life. I say this sometimes, like, with my favorite songs, it

---

Ali does a bit better—she mentions that girls are able to write politically engaged, feminist lyrics by the end of camp, though, as I’ve noted elsewhere, the reduction of “music” to “lyrics” is problematic.
speaks to my soul. I feel like certain songs, it’s like, I don’t know, touch me in a way that other things can’t. It’s different. Yeah, it’s like a connection. Like, emotionally, physically, and spiritually and stuff like that… Music, it, like, takes you inside your own self.\textsuperscript{311}

Hope, a white 15-year-old who mentioned repeatedly that she loves to attend concerts for the feeling that she gets when she shares musical experiences with other people, said “I think listening to [music] with other people just kind of connects you to them more.”

Both Maggie, a 16-year-old black girl who was attending camp for the first time, and Alyson, a 13-year-old white girl who had attended previously agreed that music enabled their friendship in the context of camp. Maggie also shared her sense that music had engendered her increasingly close friendship with long-time camper River, whom she did not know prior to arriving at camp, almost \textit{ex nihilo} on the very first day of camp. She explained,

> When I first got here, the very first day, me and Mary [one of the counselors] started—well, I didn’t know how to play an instrument, but I started singing and she started playing and then River came over. We were singing [Jason Mraz’s song] “I’m Yours” and all harmonizing. We didn’t know each other then, but it was like we were all here for one thing, so it was kind of, like, getting to know each other through song. And after that it was, like, we didn’t even have to talk that much. We sang together, so now we’re cool, so we’re just, like “hey!” I, like,

\textsuperscript{311} Some campers, in an attempt to talk about connection relied on the popular trope of music as a “universal language,” such as when Alyson stated, “Music is the language that connects all cultures and everything. Because music is the same wherever you go.” Makela similarly commented, “No matter where the world is or where you are, I mean, music will always be the same.”
didn’t really even talk to her. She said hi, I said hi, and that was pretty much it. And then, we started singing and it was like we were singing, we were harmonizing, we were like “Oh, this is great!” and then afterwards we started talking almost like were already talking. It was cool.

Taken a step further, and in accordance with the girls’ accounts of the role music plays in their lives, music can provide a momentary release from the burden and responsibility of autonomy—the very thing “empowerment” would demand they strengthen. River explained, “Music is just my way of dealing with things, kind of… it helps me calm down, or, like let everything just, like, go away for a little bit and just, like, lose myself in the music.” The notion of “losing oneself” or being entirely overtaken by musical experience was echoed by other campers as one of the primary desirable effects of musical experience, such was when Darrow informed me, “I always wish I was in, like, an insane asylum in one of those padded cells, but I didn’t have a straightjacket on. And then there was, like, an awesome stereo system behind the padded walls that was coming from all directions and I could just be, like, in there, playing whatever music I like, in my padded cell… And just be like, ‘I’m in the music!’”

Carrie Brownstein gestures in this direction in her foreword to the rock camp manual when she explains (despite also claiming, as cited above, that “Rock camp is not about the music”) how the specificity of sonic experience—which is both something internalized and consuming—is actually integral to rock camp. When the bands get on stage, rhapsodizes Brownstein, “They’re not even thinking about the moment because they’re in the moment, and it’s fleeting, so they better make the best of it. And they’re
thinking about the sound, how it’s bigger than they are, bigger than camp, bigger than all
the forces that will conspire against them, and they know for that moment they own the
sound: it is theirs.” Makela’s comments about what she likes best about camp are
similar in tone, with her emphasis on the Gestalt-like qualities of sound. She said, “It’s
nice to come here and be able to have a band and have other people that have different
skills than you, or have other ideas so that you guys can work together and have a big
sound.” In these cases, music’s function is not to “empower” the individual with a greater
sense of personal agency. Rather, music enables interpersonal connection—even as it
“gets inside,” it troubles one’s sense of self in the service of communing something
“bigger” of which multiple are indistinguishably part.

Conversations with campers reflect their sense that music is deeply personal,
something they can “have,” but only inasmuch as it establishes them in relationship to
something or someone else with which or with whom the music also resonates. River
explains,

Music can be a way to communicate with people on a deeper level than just
talking because, like, there are songs that have so much emotion and, like,
underlying meaning in them. You could sing one word, you could say one
sentence and then mean something totally different. It’s a way you can express
your feelings without completely sharing them with the whole world. Like, you
can be the only person who actually knows what you mean.313

312 9-10.
313 This sentiment is not unique the girls at this particular camp. In fact, Shannon O’Brien, who was quoted
in Rock ‘n’ Roll Camp for Girls, shares a similar sentiment, explaining, “Being in a band is one of the most
fulfilling aspects of my life. I play music with other people because music creates a bridge from one person
Though River locates her analysis partially in textual communication via lyrical significance, she still asserts that music has a distinct capacity to create connections between people that are not entirely based on lyrical interpretation (“Like, you can be the only person who actually knows what you mean.”)

Experiences of musical “sharing” that River and others mention have to be carefully managed, as it puts the personal at risk. When I asked if she liked listening to music with other people, River responded, “Yeah, I like listening to music with other people, but like Darrow said, I’ve got some songs that I’d listen to with other people and some songs—it’s almost like they’re my songs. And when I listen to them with other people it’s just weird, because it’s like this is my special song.” Nakame, a quiet and reserved black 14-year-old stated that she usually preferred not to listen to music with other people because, as she explains, “they have their own thoughts about it and sometimes I don’t agree with their thoughts. And sometimes, like, music’s like a very personal thing to me and I don’t like it when other people say weird stuff about it. Like stuff I don’t like.” Alyson shared a specific instance in which she had played a song that she “loved” with one of her best friends only to feel betrayed when her friend did not have the same emotional response to it she had experienced—a situation that other girls mentioned as well. She recounted,

to another, through sound and intention” (59). Likewise, Laura, one of the campers featured in Girls Rock! The Movie (DVD. Directed by Arne Johnson and Shane King. Los Angeles: Liberation Entertainment, 2008), states, “Personality connections—they can be superficial, or they can be deep, but a musical connection always feels deeper. Me and Gilly and Marye [her bandmates] weren’t, like, best friends, but, when you play together, you’re one person.”
I was playing [the song] for her and I went into the kitchen to get something. When I came back she was just laying there and I was like, “Do you like it?” and she was just like, “Yeah. It’s fine.” And I was like, “But I love it! How can you just like it?!” Then I played the demo for her which is the one I really like, but she was like “Yeah, I like the other one better.” I was like [fake crying noises], “Yeah, well, alrighty.” Then I turned my music off.

The belief that music has the capacity to affect—and effect—relationships, to trouble and even override one’s sense of individuality and autonomy means that musical experience can make the girls feel extremely vulnerable.

As the following story from Maggie demonstrates, this vulnerability and the resulting connection can be uncomfortable and even threatening when it teeters into unwanted, possibly sexualized intimacy.

[When there’s music,] you don’t even have to talk and like someone can totally know what you’re feeling. Like, I went to this coffee shop. I was in Colorado or something, I don’t know. But anyway, so we went to the coffee shop and this lady—I mean, this teenager—was up there and was like, “For the first time, on the stage,” and her name was, like, Kathleen or something. And she got up and sung this—it was like a country song?—but the words were like, I was just looking at her, like “Oh my god, like, I just walked in. We never met.” But the way I was looking at her, I felt like, “I know what you’re saying.” It was, like, an original song and then afterwards I was just talking to her. And she was like, “It seems like we were connecting.” And I was like, [hushed] “Yeah.” It was a little
weird, but we were. It was weird. I didn’t want to talk to her anymore, but I liked it. And I was like, “See? I know what she’s talking about.” We had an understanding. Well, because it was a little weird the way she said it. Like, what you mean “connected”? I was just, like, “Why are you creepin’ on me?”

For Maggie, the intensity of the connection she felt with the coffee shop troubadour veered into threatening territory when she felt it might have taken on sexual undertones. Once that happened, the fleeting moment of connection between Maggie and singer disappeared as she re-established her defenses against intense musically-enabled intimacy.

The sense of vulnerability wrought by musical experience necessitates the girls-only space that camp is. The particular context of camp, understood by the girls and constructed by the organizers as a sort of “safe space” precedes and enables girls’ willingness and ability experience musical intimacy with other campers. I asked the four white teenage members of the Big Grand Country Band if they thought the welcoming and accepting atmosphere of camp (for which several of the campers had stated their gratitude) had an effect on what it was like to make music there, Makela answered, “Yeah. I mean, to make music you have to be comfortable with you and you have to know somewhat who you are and who you want to be and what’s going on inside. If we were at a camp where all of us were being timid and didn’t really want to, like, be our
totally full, crazy selves, then the music would totally reflect that. It wouldn’t be as open and awesome as it is.”

Several campers recalled being fearful prior to camp of not fitting in or of encountering what they imagined to be mean girls. The mean girl, as she currently stands, is a common trope in representations of girlhood. She is defined by her “use of meanness in addressing conflict or negotiating power because [she is] expected to uphold feminine norms, such as being nurturing or kind, and [is] not permitted the use of overt aggression.” Nicole Landry argues that mean girl behavior occurs in response to broader constraints that characterize girls’ lives, such as power hierarchies based on race, sexuality, class, and gender. When she asked her participants what sorts of social injustices they experience regularly, they listed issues with authority figures, “sexual harassment, physical abuse by boys,” and racism—most of which are things that the GRRC is able to mitigate by being a relatively diverse, girls-only space. Landry observes that girls indicate a fascination with and fear of the mean girl, finding mean girls to be a

---

314 Similarly, advice offered in Rock ‘n’ Roll Camp for Girls suggests attending to relationships in order to maximize musical experiences: “Remember: It’s natural to feel shy the first time you get together to play music with other people. Don’t rush it. Take some time to get to know each other. Hang out, talk about where you’re from, what school you go to, what music you listen to, what kind of song you want to write… Get comfortable with each other and then get started with the music.”

315 Nicole E. R. Landry, The Mean Girl Motive: Negotiating Power and Femininity (Black Point, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, 2008). Landry links a growing interest in “girl power” with the emergence of the mean girl, arguing that, after a history of exclusion from studies of childhood aggression “the mean girl has succeeded in bringing girl culture into the limelight.” Though, in consideration of Simon Frith’s argument that “juvenile delinquency” emerged as a concept when working-class youth (boys, primarily) were gaining power, I would suggest that perhaps Landry has the cause and effect backward here. Perhaps a fascination-bordering-on-terror with girl culture initiated a national interest in mean girls. Either way, her point remains: the figure of the mean girl looms large.

316 Ibid., 13.
“perpetual and prevalent” element of surviving adolescence as a feminine subject, something which I also noticed among the girls at camp.317

Take, for example, 13-year-old Martha’s memory of being nervous about being alienated at camp before she arrived:

I guess I kind of wasn’t thinking that everybody would be nice to me because, like, I was thinking it would be all like 16-, 17-, 18-year-old girls who were all, like, super with themselves and don’t want to talk to anybody. I was, like, 13 then, so I was like, “They’re never going to talk to me. I’m going to be the only person sitting in the corner with my guitar.”

Expectations of alienation were common. Kai, who started attending as a camper and now volunteers as a counselor recalled,

On the way there, I was trying to pump my mom for information. I was like, “What is this?” And she was like, “It’s a rock camp.” And I’m like, “They’re going to make me sing rock music? Kiss? Metal? Rock? That stuff’s scary. I don’t want to go.” […] I thought it was just going to be, like, a bunch of girls who already knew each other and they were, like, I was going to be set to make one type of music.

Gabby, the other camper-turned-counselor also expected that camp would be “scary” because she “just thought the girls were going to be mean.” The members of the Big Grand Country Band responded similarly.

317 Ibid., 58 and 65.
Lindsay: This might be a harder question for some of you to answer since you’ve been coming so long, but before you came to camp, what did you think it would be like?

Hope: I remember exactly what I thought it was going to be like… I was like, um, okay everybody’s going to be like, all punk rock-y, and everybody’s going to be like scream-in-your-face “blah-blah-blah,” like bad “hind-end,” like wear all black. I thought it was going to be all hard rock-y.

Jade [giggling]: Did you bring a whole bunch of black clothes?

Hope: No, I brought regular clothes. But, like, I thought, like, I wouldn’t fit in. But I did. It’s everybody’s camp.

Joey: …I was like [in a higher-pitched voice] “Oh, I’m probably going to miss my mom. And what if everybody’s mean? And what if everybody doesn’t like me?”

But, then all the older girls were really nice and everything, so it was cool.

Makela: I don’t really remember, like, exactly what I thought it would be like. I guess since I saw [Girls Rock! The Movie], I thought it would be around the same as that. But I guess I had the same old thing, like “Oh my god, what if I don’t like anyone?” or “What if everyone’s weird or mean?”

Joey: Well, everyone’s kind of weird.

Makela: Yeah, but, like, in a good way. But then you come and you’re like “Oh my god! This is the best thing ever!” And everyone’s nice and awesome and we have fun and so it’s cool… It’s not like when you’re at school or you have other
friends and you just, like, don’t want to be a complete freak. Whereas here we’re all a bunch of weird—”

Joey: Weird—

Hope: Weird freaks!

Joey: Weirdo camp!

Jade: Yeah, weirdo camp!

Makela: I feel like sometimes being a musician and having almost, like, your life be not, like, controlled, but your life is, like, music. And I feel like sometimes people don’t really, like, I don’t know, get it. Like my sister. Sometimes I’m like “Oh my god, I have to write this song!” And I’m in my bedroom and she’s like, “I don’t know why you do that,” or “Blah blah blah.” No one, like, gets it unless you’re on the same page and you do the same thing.

The hierarchies that are usually wrought from social difference and that provide the context in which “mean girls” come to dominate are less apparent in the particular context of the camp. Alyson reported:

[Camp is] very unjudgy. There’s like no judgment here. When you go to school or when you go places, you really have to worry about what people—I really worry about what people think, or, like what my hair is like, or whatever, what guys think. But here, first of all, there’s not really guys, so you don’t have to worry about that that much, and everybody just accepts you. I walk around looking like, in my opinion, crap, but it doesn’t matter.
As the girls noted above, rock camp is “weirdo” camp, so the identity signifiers (such as sartorial style, body type, sexuality, class, race, etc.) usually used to identify common ground and mutual interest do not necessarily have the same influence over girls’ relationships at camp. What does establish commonality, however, is an intense interest in music—something that can typically be taken for granted within the context of GRRC.

For the girls—and especially for Makela—there is a sense that making music together enables a sense of interpersonal connection that overrides or at least weakens the divisions wrought by other social differences, but those interpersonal connections are, at the same time, predicated on a sense of belonging and affiliation based on an investment in musical experience. In fact, the only negative thing I heard spoken about other campers was in relation to whether or not they were perceived as being sufficiently interested in the musical aspect of camp (notably, this did not correspond with musical ability—only interest). The members of Sasquatch expressed frustration with some of the younger campers whom they felt had been made to come to camp by their parents. There was a sense that those campers were just there for “play time” and a general wish that Suzie would be able to “weed out the people that shouldn’t be [there].”

**Gendering Camp and Self-Surveillance**

Though musical experience seems, according to the campers, to be more significant than messages of girls’ empowerment at camp, the conditions of possibility out of which their experiences of musical intersubjectivity like those encountered at GRRC emerge are gendered. Like Alyson, several of the campers I interviewed indicated
that, if boys were present, making music together at the camp would not produce the same intersubjective effects among the girls because they would reinitiate some of the gender- and appearance-based hierarchies from which they felt they were relatively free at camp.

The gendering of camp as a girls space provides the girls a sense of “safety” that is the precondition of their capacity to become vulnerable to each other in the act of sharing musical experiences. In each interview, I asked the participants how they thought camp would be different if it weren’t “girls-only,” and it was clear that the introduction of boys would, in the girls’ minds, threaten to undermine their ability to enjoy camp. The girls’ responses included statements like, “Oh my god, it would be awful,” “It would be really, really weird performing with boys,” “Everything would be louder and everything wouldn’t be as peaceful,” “I would kill myself,” and “I wouldn’t come anymore.” As I probed a bit further, it became clear that a major consequence of having boys around would be the girls’ intensified self-surveillance, which, if we turn to girls studies scholar Anita Harris’s “can-do” girl and invoke Foucault’s notion of the panopticon,318 is a primary mechanism through which the sense of an autonomous (empowered) self—the thing that pleasurable musical experience can (at its most powerful) trouble in favor of an expanded sense of shared experience—is achieved. The empowered “can-do girl,” as Harris calls her, is motivated, autonomous, and driven toward personal and professional success. Extensive networks of surveillance and disciplining technologies have emerged to keep “can-do girls” on track toward success, lest they become wayward “at-risk girls.”

Consequently, girls engage in heightened, internalized self-surveillance as a response to the demands that they be appropriately managed in ways that reflect a “can-do girl” ethos.

At camp, the girls indicated an awareness of the compulsion to self-monitor in their everyday lives, and experienced camp—because it was gender exclusive and “weirdo camp”—as a place of momentary reprieve. The addition of boys to the camp would, they report, result in heightened self-policing and would severely hinder their enjoyment of rock camp. Given the girls-only environment of camp, Hope reported feeling that she “didn’t have to censor [herself] just because [she’s] weird on the inside.” Maggie shared, “I feel like I would not be able to walk around looking stank at nighttime. Like, when I be putting my pajamas on, I be lookin’ crazy.” Alyson followed, “Oh yeah, we’d have to take showers, always be putting makeup on.” Nakame thought that “lots of girls would probably shower all the time, like, a lot, and our hair would be different. Especially my hair. We’d probably be wearing different clothes and we wouldn’t talk about as much things. And I’d be way uncomfortable.” The members of the Big Grand Country Band riffed on this for awhile:

Martha: If you’re just having girls, then it’s a lot less of stuff going on and you don’t really worry about how you’re acting.

Joey: I feel like we wouldn’t be as comfortable. Like, we were just talking about how we were comfortable talking about things and doing the songs.

Lia, a camper featured in *Girls Rock! The Movie*, shared a similar sense: "If boys were allowed it would very different and not fun. Some people would be less comfortable, and it would change the music. There’d be more arguments, too, because the boys would want to name the bands Red Skulls or something weird like that.”
Hope: We talk about our boobs, and—

Makela: And, like, being so sweaty and like—

Joey: Yeah, I don’t want guys to see me like this! I smell bad, and I look bad, and I’m hairy, and no!

When I asked Maggie about the specific effect she thought a masculine presence would have on music-making at camp, she answered,

I don’t think it would be as, I don’t know, free? I don’t think we would express ourselves as much. At least I don’t think I would. I’d be, like, what do I sing about? Because if I sing about something personal, most of the time, the first person I share it [with] is not, like, some guy… I would tell, like a girlfriend that could probably understand.

Maggie’s response was echoed by Hope and Jade, members of the Big Grand Country Band. Hope explained, “Women, we have a harder time opening up and writing lyrics in front of people and presenting our music to people” and Jade confirmed, “Yeah, women I feel like they’re a lot more self-conscious, they care a lot more about what other people think than men do.” These responses recall the campers’ descriptions of music as something that enables vulnerability to others. That vulnerability, because it is very powerful and risky, must be carefully managed in highly constructed contexts—here in distinctly gendered terms—if the girls are to extract what they experience as the most prominent pleasure of music camp: sharing musical experience. Or, in other words, we can turn the earlier formulation offered by the counselors on its head: “girls’
empowerment” (or at least the girl-centric context for it) is the means, music—or, rather, shared musical pleasure—is the ends.

Conclusion

As we can see from the articulations of the participants at the girls’ rock camp, one of music’s defining effects is its ability to disrupt the subject/object delineation and create interpersonal connection, relationships, and intimacy—things which are, in many ways, misaligned with investments in girls’ empowerment, self-esteem, and autonomy that are supposedly at the heart of girls’ rock camps. The infatuation with individual agency and personal responsibility (which is perhaps neoliberalism’s most distinctive effect) both ignores the complexities of power and subjectivity, and also participates in a widespread dismissal of what music can do to people in favor of an emphasis on what people do “to” or “with” music. To perceive music as merely a tool for self-expression is to erase the aesthetic and affective dimensions of musical experience—the exact things that campers value as the most pleasurable and important elements of camp.

Accounting for the intersubjective and boundary-transgressing effects of musical experience—especially in the context of shared performance—allows consideration of the ways in which music enables intimacy of the sort outlined in the opening anecdote of this chapter. When Maggie and River sang together without ever having spoken a word to each other, the connection they established emerged as through their shared experience of making music together. Predicated as it was on an assumed commonality of an appreciation for music-making, a familiarity with contemporary acoustic pop, age, and
gender identity, their momentary sharing of temporal sensibility and their co-constitution of musical sound amplified their sense of relationship and intimacy in ways that were palpable to both the ear and the eye for the remainder of their time at camp. As Maggie noted above, they basically got to fast-forward past all of the small-talk usually involved in establishing a relationship with another person and arrive promptly at (musically-enabled) intimate connection. For the girls at camp, music is the stuff friendships are made of and strengthened by not because of some shared commitment to the semiotic content of lyrics and the “gender-resistant” possibilities of adopting masculine hobbies, but because of the vulnerability engendered by the subject/object and whole/part blurring properties of musical sound.

To be clear, I am not arguing that “empowerment,” however problematic does not play any role in the girls’ experiences at camp, I only mean to suggest that it matters that rock camps are centered on musical experience, and that such experiences are sometimes at odds with ideologies undergirding empowerment discourse. In fact, Kai, one of the campers-turned-counselors narrated her own increasing sense of voice that was facilitated by camp. “I think it’s important for girls to come here so they can find their own voice,” she said.

I know with me coming here, I was very, very shy. And every year I came I became more, like, ‘Baaaahh!’ I am the way I am now, like, I’m not afraid to speak my mind, I don’t care what other people think, I’m gonna say it because that’s just what I have to do. Being a girl, no one listens anyway, so I have to make them listen. So, like, coming here and, like, the workshops we do help us
feel a little better about being a chick—‘being a chick!’—being a girl and, like, how we feel about ourselves on the insides.

However, if the campers I spoke with insist on anything, it’s that music *matters* in very powerful and distinctly musical ways, though the degree to which it affects the girls at camp is dependent on extramusical features such as the girls’ sense of safety and belonging. To ignore that—even with the good intentions that the camp counselors certainly have—is to misrepresent girls’ experiences and the role of music at rock camp, all in the service of reifying a problematic discourse of girl power.
Chapter 5: Sylvan Sounds: Musical Intersubjectivity at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival

“Michfest is small temporary city in the woods, conceptualized and created by women, to provide us a space to make and listen to music, talk, laugh, flirt, love, get outrageously down and dirty, heal, cry, and experience deep joy and connection. Or maybe it’s just a giant naked party in the woods.” – Tara

The most comprehensively controlled, longest-running, and largest site I explored for this project is the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival,\(^3\) a decades-old, week-long event that draws thousands of women to rural southwestern Michigan every August for a week of music, camping, healing, nudity, and, yes, sex. The Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival was founded in 1976 by Lisa Vogel, then only 19 years old, her sister Kristie, and their friend Mary “Digger” Kindig. The trio modeled their festival on other women’s music festivals—which were aimed primarily at lesbians—that had sprung up earlier in the decade, including the Midwest Women’s Festival, the National Womyn’s Music Festival, and the Boston Women’s Music Festival. In the ensuing years, several similar women’s music festivals have emerged around the United States, though Michigan remains the largest and longest-running.\(^4\)

\(^3\) The alternate spelling of “womyn” is meant to remove the reference to “man” and “men” from the word. A variation often used for the singular noun is “womon.” For the sake of consistency, I have left this spelling as-is in quotations and titles, but I have used the conventional spelling of “woman” and “women” elsewhere.

\(^4\) Bonnie J. Morris identifies 27 festivals, 11 of which began in the 80s, ten in the 90s, and six in the second half of the 70s and notes the coincidence between an increased number of festivals and the Reagan-Bush politics out of which the aforementioned music censorship debates grew (Eden Built by Eves: The Culture of Women’s Music Festivals [Los Angeles and New York: Alyson Books, 1999]).
During its first years, the festival was held in rural Western Michigan on a quarter mile of land. A wooded plot near Hesperia—a small town only a few miles off the Lake Michigan shoreline and abutting the Manistee National Forest—was leased by the Vogels’ and Kindig’s non-profit We Want the Music Collective, which still serves as the administrative organization for the festival.\footnote{Boden Sandstrom, "Performance, Ritual and Negotiation of Identity in the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival," Ph.D. Dissertation (University of Maryland, 2002), 64.} In 1982, a square mile of woods in the national forest about 20 miles from the original site, referred to by attendees as “The Land” was purchased in the name of the festival. Given the rural location of the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, the Land becomes the site of the “largest town in Oceana County for one week.”\footnote{Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival Program 2011, 1.} Attendance at Michfest, as it is colloquially known, has historically ranged from 3,000 to 9,000 attendees from around the United States, Canada, and overseas, with more women making the trek during anniversary years. When I went in 2011, attendance, though still in the 5,000-6,000 range was down from about 8,000 in the previous year—the 35\textsuperscript{th} annual festival.\footnote{All of these numbers are estimates based on conversations that occur on the very active Michfest Bulletin Board. Official numbers are not published (http://www.michfest.com/forums/index.php.)}

In its current form, Michfest runs for seven days each August—a Monday through a Sunday, with performances and workshops primarily concentrated between Tuesday and Sunday.\footnote{Several women volunteer on longer-term crews that spend up to a month living on, preparing, and eventually cleaning up the Land for the festival—building and taking down infrastructure, grooming the roadways and parking areas, hauling supplies, etc.} In addition to the roughly 40 musical performances that occur across three stages, there are numerous other activities at the festival. There are designated meditation and quiet spaces, health care and counseling services, support group meetings,
impromptu volleyball games, the 5K “Lois Lane Run,” butch and femme parades, sweat lodges, a barter market, a teen tent, open mic events, a festival quilt to which participants can add their own work, movie screenings, and over 250 daytime workshops. Workshop topics range widely and include such foci as hula hooping, aerial flying, Thai yoga, jewelry-making, breast-casting, qigong, civil liberties for lesbians, gender identity (such as the controversial issue of trans-inclusion at the festival, which I discuss in more detail below), dancing, environmentalism, grief and loss, sexual tips and demonstrations, and relationship strategies.

The designation of space for particular people or activities is one of the ways in which the festival is highly managed in order to maximize participants’ comfort and sense of safety. The 650 acres of fern-covered woods are divided among performance areas, workshop spaces, resource tents, parking areas, tented food prep and eating areas, open-air showers, “Janes” (a gynocentric riff on “Porta-Johns,” temporary latrines that are brought in for the festival), a market place, and thirteen different camping areas. In addition to general camping spaces open to anyone, there are also areas designated as (among other things) family-friendly, chem-free, quiet, for solo campers, for campers over 50, and the intriguingly titled “Twilight Zone,” an adults-only stretch of woods that is known for its kinky all-night soirees. There is even a designated space for the infamous evening drum circles making them accessible to anyone who wants to join, but also contained so that they can be avoided.

My own interest in the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival is prompted by its organization around musical experience and its extraordinary, decades-long appeal. The
festival has a sort of legendary status among queer and lesbian women, serving for many as a pilgrimage on which thousands of women from North American and around the world embark every year in search of a music-centered week that will “recharge their batteries” for the rest of the year. In order to undertake the research for this chapter, I purchased a week-long ticket and attended the festival for the first time. Drawing from interviews conducted with festival attendants, my own field notes, and secondary research on the festival, I argue that the musical experiences had in this ostensible “safe space” enable a consuming sense of connection for attendees that is a primary draw and value of the festival. Musical intersubjectivity is referenced through multiple discourses that point to its non-linguistic potency, such as metaphors of “the whole,” spiritual connection, healing, and erotic intimacy.

Womyn’s Identities and Feminist Politics

There is relatively scant academic or popular literature on the Michigan Womyn’s Festival. This omission is somewhat surprising, given the long life of the festival, but likely has a number of explanations, including long-held stereotypes that the festival is “just” a throwback to outdated, essentialist second-wave feminism or lesbian separatism, that it is too “feel-good” to be worth consideration, and that it is too un-reflexive as to be aware that its “womyn-born-womyn” policy is exclusionary and that it is therefore a site of unacknowledged privilege. Women’s music “herstorian” (her term) Bonnie J. Morris

326 I had been invited to attend with friends when I was younger, but was not able to attend for financial or scheduling reasons. By the time I had the necessary resources, most of my friends had soured on the festival because of its trans-exclusive “Womyn Born Womyn” policy, which I discuss more fully below.
notes, “Women’s music festivals have become, like flannel shirts, Birkenstocks and granola, a cliché of 1970s lesbian culture—and yet the festivals, particularly elder sisters [the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival] and [the National Womyn’s Music Festival] continue to thrive in the present day.” The ongoing appeal of women’s music festivals to older and younger generations of women warrants a more engaged analysis. As with the other case studies that comprise my larger project, the scholarly attention (as well as most of the media attention) granted the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival has been through an analytical lens that marginalizes music in favor of things like the feminist and lesbian politics of the event. And yet, music is clearly an important element of the festival—it is, after all, in the name. Despite participants’ continued allusions to it, little has been made of the interplay between musical experience, the production and experience of a safe space for women, and the embodied sense of intimacy (sexual, spiritual, and otherwise) that many women describe at the festival.

In writing about separatism at women’s music festivals, Kath Browne critiques feminist scholars who are quick to dismiss the festivals as excessively fraught with conflict and difference, and thus hopeless sites of resistance or reimagining. She argues that this rush to dismissal misses a primary and important element of women’s music festivals—the pleasurable and affective dimensions. However, she does not consider that the experience of music is integral to the pleasurable and affective dimensions of women’s space, going as far as critiquing another scholar for focusing too much on music.

in her own study of the festivals. Ann Cvetkovich and Selena Wahng, regular attendees of Michfest who reference music in the title their article about the festival (“Don’t Stop the Music”) express in their opening paragraphs, “Had we had more time, we would have talked about how [musical] performance is redefined at Michigan, where being onstage and being in the audience are like nowhere else.” After this initial concession, they devote the rest of their article to discussing the meaning of community, love, and labor at the festival with little further mention of aural experience.

Morris, a long-time festival participant and scholar whose research contributed greatly to my understanding of the history of women’s music and MichFest, acknowledges musical experience to be central at the festival, writing, “What binds us together is twofold: the collective experience of the music and the collective safety of being in woman-loving space.” Despite her meticulous attention to concepts of safe space, collectivity, and pleasure at women’s music festivals elsewhere in her work, Morris neglects to fully connect these central ideas to the musical experience she identifies as so important in the first pages of her book. Instead, she roots the emergence of womyn’s music festivals in a desire for “transmission of a feminist message through concerts and workshops” and focuses her analysis of women’s music on lyrical content alone with no sustained discussion of the aforementioned “collective experience of music.”

---


330 *Eden*, 11.
Like Morris, ethnomusicologist Boden Sandstrom’s history/ethnography of the festival does account for its musical aspects, though a great deal of her analysis centers on the use of folk music as a vehicle for political messaging and coalition building—analytical moves which, as I have noted previously, reduce music to its semiotic function, an identity badge with which people say “This is who we are! This is what we care about!” She writes,

The power of music as an organizing tool became apparent through many of these [1960s and 1970s countercultural] movements. Music, along with performance art, was used on the picket lines and at rallies, in “agitprop” (agitation propaganda) and “guerilla” theater in the coffee houses, clubs, and artistic enclaves of various communities on college campuses. Music was used to galvanize protest. During this period of increased momentum for countercultural organizing, mass music festivals became instrumental in creating new sites for coalition-building and exploration of living the ideals of the counterculture.331 Despite her multiple returns to lyrical analysis and feminist politics, Sandstrom does indicate that music’s capacity to affect people cannot be limited to its linguistic functions—at least in part “because it has the ability to act as both a physical and spiritual force.”332 Through the language of acoustics, she points toward music’s capacity to transgress boundaries, to interact with and even change “the physical structure of objects by resonant frequencies.”333 However, even after this provocative detour, Sandstrom’s

331 57.
332 Ibid.
333 Ibid.
analysis of the “iconography, musical structure, and song texts”\textsuperscript{334} of Michfest rests on familiar, semiotically-oriented paradigms.

Though the above authors acknowledge that women’s music festivals like Michfest are notable for their provision of a gender-exclusive “safe space,” a sense of collectivity and “wholeness,” and intangible, “spiritual” connections alongside tangible, erotic ones, they generally neglect to fully locate musical experience in relation to these characteristics. Instead, their analyses of women’s music at the festivals and beyond—though some of them at times gesture toward musically-enabled connection, intersubjectivity, and intimacy—reflect broader tendencies to reduce musical experience to semiotic signification. The meaning extracted from lyrics, song structure, and performance style is of course considerable and apparent for participants, but it is not the only—nor even the primary—value gleaned from musical experience at the festival. Rather, musical experience works to enable and magnify deep feelings of connection and intersubjectivity among participants—and the festival is staged in very particular ways to initiate and support this.

Morris identifies four elements of women’s music festival experiences that participants most often mention as the reasons they attend and value women’s music festivals like Michfest. The first is the feeling of safety, which she defines as a “reprieve from fear of rape and assault” that allows women to feel unthreatened being nude in public, walking alone at night, and assured that if they are injured, someone will help

\footnote{\textsuperscript{334} 5.}
them. The second is the freedom to publicly articulate homosexual desire and intimacy (explicitly erotic or otherwise), which is evidenced by the prevalence of lesbian sexual culture and activity on the Land. The third is a focus on matriarchal spirituality and healing, and the fourth is the opportunity to experience women’s cooperative energy. References to these themes recur (safety, desire and intimacy, healing and spiritual connection, and collective energy and experience) across women’s music festival scholarship, within the festival itself, and among participants. Music’s role relative to these themes is to “celebrate” them, says Morris. Her claim provokes interesting questions that she, herself, does not answer in the numerous publications she has authored on women’s music festivals. For example, how does music “celebrate” these things? More specifically, what is the relationship between musical experience and feeling safe? How does a festival built around musical experience enable or amplify desire and intimacy? How does musical experience contribute to feelings of wholeness and cooperative energy? In this chapter, I approach these concepts through their relationship to musical experiences at the festival in order to understand how and why music remains the central activity around which festivals like Michfest are organized.

Into the Woods

In order to explore musical experience in the highly engineered space of a women’s music festival, I mined previous women’s music festival scholarship for

---

335 Eden, 313.  
336 Ibid., 313-4. She goes on to mention song lyrics specifically as evidence that these themes are “reinforced” in the realm of the aural.
firsthand accounts of musical experience, qualitatively analyzed interviews I conducted over email, and conducted ethnographic research at the 36th Annual Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival in 2011. As a participant observer, I arrived on Wednesday evening after a seven-hour car ride from my home and camped at the festival through Saturday afternoon. Upon arrival, I was greeted with an enthusiastic wave and a customary, boisterous “Welcome home!” from the women volunteering at the entrance gate. From the moment I rolled onto the Land, it was obvious that significant effort is made to ensure that every attendee is as informed as possible of what is going on and how the festival is structured. In the short distance between the entry gates and the parking area, I encountered six women directing me at every (already well-marked) turn. After unloading my gear from the tiny trunk of my rental car at the shuttle area and parking my car, I attended a brief orientation where I signed up for eight hours of requisite festival work shifts, watched a 10-minute introductory video about the festival for first-timers (or “Festie Virgins,” as they’re called on the Land), and walked back to my awaiting camping equipment. After a brief wait, the shuttle (a large, roofed wagon being pulled by a woman driving a tractor) came to load up another round of recent arrivals and drive us with our things down the hill into the woods. Once dropped off, I carefully loaded my gear onto my person and trekked about a fifth of a mile into the woods along a barely-detectable foot path past a number of smiling, waving (in many cases topless) women and their tents. I found a mostly-flat, fern-covered spot with a somewhat distinctive tree I

337 Because of the nudity, the festival organizers recommend asking permission of any women one does not know before taking a photograph in which they appear, and also advise against posting photos from the festival on social media or other public forums. Additionally, women are allowed to bring boy children up
hoped would serve as a familiar landmark and set up my tent. Once I had settled in, I filled my backpack with a water bottle, a sweatshirt, and a notebook, grabbed my headlamp to aid in the late-night adventure of navigating the uneven foot paths back through the leafy Michigan hardwoods, and made my way to the concert area to await the opening ceremony. I would spend very little of the next three and half days at my tent.

During the festival, I worked two four-hour shifts (as is the requirement for all participants), one helping to direct arriving car and motorcycle traffic, and another washing and cutting hundreds of pounds of vegetables for one evening’s dinner. When I was not busy fulfilling my work obligations, I explored the grounds, attended the opening ceremony, daytime and evening concerts, and participated in music- and sound-oriented workshops. During all of my activities, I took copious field notes that combined reflection on my own experience with observations about the behaviors of those around me that I use to contextualize my and others’ understanding of the festival.

While at Michfest, I made the acquaintance of eight women who agreed to be interviewed for my project. Though I had initially intended to interview participants at the festival, once I arrived my plan felt inappropriately invasive given the reverence for and relief provided by the week in the woods. Once I arrived back home, I emailed a set of open-ended questions to participants whose contact information I had gotten. I also solicited additional participants on the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival bulletin board, a very active online community that is formally hosted by the event’s official website. Of

to age 10, though they are expected to stay in “Brother Sun Camp,” a camping area that is slightly removed from the main area of the festival.
the twelve people to whom I sent emails, eight responded with lengthy reflections about their experiences at the festival. All identified as lesbian, bisexual, or queer white women; one woman revealed that she is deaf. Everyone I interviewed had attended the festival at least four times.

“Safe Space” and Embodiment on the Land

The Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival is a comprehensively organized musical affair, engineered to maximize women’s immersion in a gendered world of physical and emotional safety, pleasure, and collectivity. In considering effects of this context in relation to the musical experiences had therein, I am influenced by pioneering ethnomusicologist John Blacking’s belief that music has the capacity to affect listener subjectivity most profoundly if the context is one which minimizes the need for “inhibition.” In his famed book *How Musical Is Man?* he writes,

If the possession dance music has the power to ‘send’ a woman on one occasion, why should it not do so on another? Is it the social situation that inhibits the otherwise powerful effects of the music? Or is the musical powerless without the reinforcement of a special set of social circumstances? It is evidence such as this that makes me skeptical of music association tests which have been administered to subjects in artificial and unsocial settings… my own love of music and my conviction that it is more than learned behavior make me hope that it is the social inhibitions which are powerful and not the music which is powerless.  

338 (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), 45.
With Blacking’s conviction in mind, I focus on the “special set of social circumstances”—in this case, a context created by women wherein gendered and embodied social inhibitions (exhibited most obviously by the prevalence of nudity on the Land) are made less immediately relevant—that enable musical intimacy.

Participants make clear that their sense of Michfest as a “safe space” is absolutely central to how they interact and understand their time on the Land. However, as both Sandstrom and Cvetkovich take care to point out, and as is evidenced by the controversies that have emerged during the history of the festival, the parameters of “safety” are the subject of constant negotiation, as the festival organizers and attendees struggle to navigate the tension between all-around inclusivity and customization. Over the years, debates that have sprung up around BDSM sexual practices on the Land, the continued presence of the “Women of Color Tent,” accessibility accommodations for the thousands of women who move into the woods for a week, and the exclusion of transwomen from the festival.

The longest running and most well-known debate about the nature of safe space at the festival centers on the organizer’s decision to formally adopt the “womyn-born-womyn” (WBW) policy in an effort to keep transwomen off the Land. This issue has been taken up by a number of scholars. Cvetkovich and Wahng, Morris, and Browne all recognize the WBW policy of the festival as controversial, but defend it as having some value for its role in contributing to feelings of “safety” for many of the participants. There

---

340 The year I attended, one of the daily workshops was an open conversation about whether the Women of Color Tent was still a necessary part of the festival.
are also several scholars such as Judith Halberstam and Leslie Feinberg who critique it as transphobic and essentialist.\textsuperscript{341} To be honest, my awareness of the policy had soiled my and several friends’ interest in attending the festival long before I decided to undertake research there. Knowing that much had been made of the WBW issue, and having gleaned from the online bulletin board that many participants had grown weary of the entire festival being reduced to this controversy, I made it clear when I was recruiting women to interview that I was interested in the role of musical experience at the festival, rather than in rehashing this particular debate. Most women responded with gratitude that I wanted to focus on something other than whether or not transwomen should be allowed at the festival. However, the issue was very present on the Land and repeatedly (albeit casually) surfaced in several interviews anyway. Most participants found opportunities within my questions to weigh in one way or another, suggesting that policing the boundaries of bodily belonging at the festival is imperative to participants’ sense of safety.\textsuperscript{342}

\textsuperscript{341} E.g. Judith Halberstam, \textit{In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives} (New York: New York University Press, 2005); Leslie Feinberg, \textit{Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to RuPaul} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997); Jay Prosser, \textit{Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). Zeph Fish, writing about the 2011 festival for a lesbian periodical, attempts to put the conflict surrounding the presence of transwomen on the Land in perspective: “The women who built the festival and bought the land did so in a hostile cultural climate, with little resources, and sometimes in fear of physical attack from local men. They’re protective of what they created. I heard many older dykes who’ve put years of love and seat into creating safe space for women express fears that younger folks want to shove them aside and destroy what they’ve made… The trans controversy is just the most long-running of many hard-fought conflicts in the wider feminist world that have played out in the crucible of the festival. In communities where passionate people are trying to put their politics into practice, the fights can be vicious. There was a decade of terrible conflict in the festival around BDSM sex practices” (“Festival Forum,” \textit{Lesbian Connection} 34, no. 4 [January/February 2012], 18).

\textsuperscript{342} I wish to neither belabor nor ignore the debates surrounding the WBW policy, since it is an important part (but only one of many) of the festival, so I will keep my comments on this matter short as a way of underlining the contested—but absolutely central—investment in the festival as a “safe space.”
For example, when I asked Cam what (if anything) would prevent her from coming to Fest in the future, she first mentioned fluctuating financial resources, but then launched into a lengthy statement about the effect trans-inclusion debates have had on the festival, offering that at first she did not see the participation of transwomen as a big deal: “My initial reaction was, ‘Oh, let them come. Why not? We don’t want to tell anyone who or what they are, so if they say they’re women, that’s enough for me. Let’s not get all fundamentalist about this.’” However, after several years of observing transwomen and their advocates engage in “bullying behavior, slander against [Michfest founder] Lisa Vogel and the producers of fest, completely ignoring the wishes of others who have been coming for 30 years…, rabblerousing so that there is a constant argument going,” Cam feels they are threatening to “destroy” the thing of which they want to be a part. Another woman I interviewed, Michelle, found the opportunity to comment on trans-inclusion when I asked her which workshops she typically attended. Though she could not recall any specifics after having attended for many years, she did nevertheless comment: “I’d never attend any pro-trans workshops. Ever.” Later, when I asked her what she’d change about Fest if she could, she obliquely referred again to transwomen: “What would I change? I’d put a magical barrier around the whole Land that prevents anyone male from entering (unless they’re there to pump the Janes, of course).” Tara did the same when she responded, “I would change the folks who would rather be right than see the festival continue.” On top of the tendency of participants to mention it in interviews, the debate around trans-inclusion is still very present on the Land. I overheard one group of women discussing how they had orchestrated a large-scale plan to turn away from the stage any
time one of the festival performers mentioned pro-trans inclinations. Many women spent the week of the festival sporting clothing and insignia proclaiming their stance on the matter (“WBW” or “Transwomyn belong here” were the most common slogans), and there were multiple daytime workshops with the goal of discussing the various sides of the issue.

Despite the controversy of the WBW policy, many participants (regardless of their positions regarding transwomen’s presence at the festival) identify their experience of physical safety as one of the most profound and distinctive characteristics of their week on the Land. The feeling of safety, aided by the isolation and length of Michfest together produce a participant experience that many describe as radically distinct from their everyday lives. The specific location of the festival (beyond the identification of the tiny Michigan hamlet to which it is somewhat near) is not made public. Only by ordering a ticket or by contacting the festival organizers privately can you have mailed to you hard-copy, turn-by-turn details on how to find the Land.

When asked what it was like to be at the festival, both Cam and Linda used language that indicated a consuming sense of remove from the outside world that is enhanced by the completely immersive nature of this festival in the woods, where the boundary between it and the outside world is so far off into the trees that it goes relatively unnoticed by participants. Even cell phone service is hard to come by on the Land. Cam reflects, “The thing about Michigan is it is really its own world—you really do feel like you pass through a veil to this Utopia and I love that.” Or, as Linda rather humorously

343 Morris (1999), Sandstrom, and Browne all likewise discuss the importance of “safety” at the festival.
notes, “I always say it’s like taking a journey to another country (yes, I meant to spell it that way). The isolation and staying there enhances that experience.” When comparing their experience at Michfest to other women’s music festivals, women reference the walled spaces in which other festivals are held, the need for attendees to be clothed, and proximity to the outside world as negatively affecting their experiences outside of the Land.\textsuperscript{344}

The creation of a “safe space” allows women at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival to loosen their inhibitions and to experience intimacy and connection with other women while on the Land. Specific reference to embodiment is a primary way through which participants articulate how their subjective experience within the “safe space” of the festival is distinct from their everyday lives off the Land.\textsuperscript{345} Cvetkovich indicates that describing the festival through language is nearly impossible because it is “a place that you have to experience in a bodily, sensory way” in order to comprehend what it means and does for participants.\textsuperscript{346} In describing the festival, Morris writes of the falling away of shame on the Land in terms of bodily experience,

The first shock for festival virgins is the plethora of breasts. This is women-only space, folks—which means the freedom and safety to go without a shirt in the soft summer air. It means for many a woman the first day of being at home in her

\textsuperscript{344} For example, one of the weaknesses Morris (2005) identifies with the popular and long-running National Womyn’s Music Festival is that each year it is held on a college campus, which forecloses optional nudity (57).

\textsuperscript{345} See also Laurie J. Kendall, \textit{The Michigan Womyn’s Festival: An Amazon Matrix of Meaning} (Baltimore: Spiral Womyn’s Press, 2008), 135ff.

\textsuperscript{346} Cvetkovich, cf. Cvetkovich and Wahng, 149.
body and the first sensation of sun on her bare back since babyhood. There is no need to cover up here; there is no need for shame.\(^{347}\)

As Morris’s take suggests, the lessening of shame and the opportunity to experience one’s body as a site of pleasure and freedom rather than pain and fear is a common theme among participants’ descriptions of being at the festival. The ways in which bodies are experienced as sites of freedom rather than violation is materially indicative of the loosening of “inhibitions” (if we return to Blacking’s term) at the Festival—the musical effect of which is a sense of interconnection and intimacy.

Another woman I interviewed, Dawn, described her first attendance at the festival in 1983 in a way that echoes Morris’s observations. She recalls how she felt at “home” in the “safe space” of the festival, allowing her self-consciousness to quickly slip away despite initial reservations. Before coming to Michfest for the first time, she recalls being “scared”:

I told my girlfriend that under no conditions would I take my clothes off. I thought everyone would be naked and there would be sex everywhere. And it was just like that, but after about ten seconds I felt like I was home. I know that sounds so hokey, but I had the strangest sense that I had been there before—it was the most wonderful feeling of being safe and free to just be myself. I had my shirt off before we got on the shuttle!

A member of dyke punk band Tribe 8 recalls feeling “like there was a way in which I had

\(^{347}\) Morris Eden, 67.
lost my self-consciousness and objectification.”348 Being at the festival makes Michelle feel “Safe. Powerful. Amazing. Blessed. It is a gift from the Universe, to be able to be there every year.” Likewise, Linda explains, “I am much more free to act any way I feel like acting at Michigan. I dance wildly in a way I wouldn’t do in the company of non-Wingers or Festiegoers. I just feel very safe and cherished at Fest (and at Wings) which allows me to drop my protective coverings and let it all hang out (take that any way you wish).”349 In Linda’s statement specifically, it is evident that the sense of safety on the Land shapes the way she interacts with and opens herself up to musical encounters with others at the festival.

Linda’s comment that she feels “cherished” points to at the ways in which the shared sense of care and appreciation for “all kinds of bodies” that emanates from others at the festival enables physically intimate moments. Cam speaks at length about the different ways in which she experiences her body on the Land, and how that is made manifest through physical intimacy:

I am a big curvy woman and on the land I dress much more accentuating my curves, hips, ass, breasts, mostly because we’re safe and we all appreciate each other in a way that is sweet. I also have come to love the shower experience at fest, and before fest communal showering would have horrified me, but again on the land people in general are kind, respectful and appreciative of all different body types, ages, and ways of moving through the world. I love that we can

348 Cf. Meltzer, 66.
349 “Wingers” is a nickname for members of the all-women chorus that Linda directs in New England. “Festiegoers” is a common colloquial term for Michfest attendees.
shower and chat in the sunshine or moonshine and starlight. Feels sisterly to wash someone’s back or offer someone soap. There is a cheerfulness and sisterliness that I don't find everywhere else… Sometimes when we come back I’ll wear something skimpy or revealing and Mya (my granddaughter) will say, “Mama, we aren’t on the Land!”

For Cam and the other women cited above, the belief that they are physically safe on the Land, their resulting experiences of bodily pleasure and freedom, and their sense of connection (physical and otherwise) with other festival attendees are inextricably linked, working together to create a very particular set of circumstances which shape musical experience at the festival. Experiencing one’s body differently is to encounter subjective flexibility which, in the case of Michfest, is materialized particularly through the intimate, “collective” relationships enabled by and encountered through shared musical experience. Together, these elements of the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival are the necessary staging (Blacking’s “special set of circumstances”) in which intimate, intersubjective musical experience—that which participants describe as making them feel whole, connected, and as being “spiritual”—is fostered on the Land.

**Intimate Connections**

For many at the festival, their embodied sense of safety and freedom provides a context in which they feel they can open themselves through musical experience to intimate connection with other participants in the festival, past and present. Among participants, this is referenced through multiple discourses including communion with the
amorphous “whole,” connection with “goddess” figures, physical and psychic healing, and erotic intimacy—each of which, as I detail in the following section, is enabled and magnified in great measure by musical experience.

Sandstrom emphasizes women’s experiences of “connectedness,” “connectivity,” “unity,” and “oneness” as both the goals and most important features of the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival. As shorthand for this, she uses Victor Turner’s idea of “communitas,” defined by ethnomusicologists Marcia Herndon and Norma McLeod as a strong, total communal experience of oneness in which an individual sense, even if momentarily, a merging of awareness with all existence… This experience can engender moments of ‘flow’… ‘Flow’ is the totally controlled feeling of streaming from one moment to another, with the self, the environment, blending past, present, and future [italics in original].

The significance of communitas and flow at the festival—communion with “the whole” as a boundless, inclusive set of endless, eternal interconnections among women—is nowhere more apparent than at the annual opening ceremony of the festival, where the concept takes on temporal and spiritual dimensions. The various elements of the opening ceremony cite connections among women across time and planes of existence. The 2011 festival program frames the opening ceremony as follows:

In this year’s opening celebration, we remember…

We are in the Cycle of Life. We have always been here… we will always be here. You’ve felt it on these paths… past—present—future simultaneously.

---

Cf. Sandstrom, 220-1.
Our lives are eternal, our community is timeless.\textsuperscript{351}

Within the opening ceremony and throughout the festival, references to ancient goddesses and traditions of varying origins are frequent. Little girls dance and roar in bear costumes according to ancient tradition from the cult of Artemis to celebrate their wildness, topless “Artemis” dancers perform before the shooting of the arrows, wherein three women shoot flaming arrows into targets placed in small clearings in the audience. The lattermost of these events highlights the vulnerability of the women in the audience, while also serving as a material reminder that they will be protected and kept safe. A spoken word poem emphasizing boundlessness and reiterating the relationship of each woman to the whole was performed, imploring:

\begin{quote}
Raindrop, let go. Become the ocean.
Water will not be held captive.
We are messengers carrying songs.
The power of the people is the power of one.
\end{quote}

Jane Siberry and k.d. lang’s 1993 duet “Calling All Angels” was played as women in various states of dress adorned with flowing fabric “angel wings” proceeded from the stage and ran through the audience, stopping to embrace familiar faces, and eventually encircling the women watching, dismantling the boundary between performer and audience in anticipation of the long-standing final element of the opening ceremony: the collective singing of “Amazon Womyn Rise.”\textsuperscript{352} “Amazon Womyn Rise” was written by

\textsuperscript{351} MWMF Program 2011, 14.
\textsuperscript{352} Kendall offers an extended analysis of Amazon mythology at the festival, so I will not repeat her thorough analysis here.
lesbian feminist singer-songwriter Maxine Feldman in 1976, and is sung at the end of each Michfest opening ceremony. According to Sandstrom, as a capstone to the opening ceremony, singing the song together “[engenders] a feeling of one identity among the multiple identities that each woman brings with her to the festival,” preparing women through musical experience for time on the Land by moving them from a matrix of meaning where they are individual and isolated into one where they are connected in multiple ways to each other and to the “whole.” “It is very powerful,” she observes, “when many voices are singing all together.”

Several participants remark on the opening ceremony as being particularly moving among their encounters at Michfest. At the festival I attended, singer Meg Hutchinson announced from stage the next day, “I wasn’t expecting to be as moved as I was. When the arrows went out, I cried my face off. But I guess that’s what happens here.” When I asked Cam what her most memorable experience at Michfest was, she responded that it was the opening ceremony because of its ability to incorporate multiple generations and connect women through time. She finds it touching, “partly because it’s many generations contributing, partly because its people from all over the world, partly because of how the children are always incorporated.” For her, music aids in the connection she experiences because it transcends boundaries, and “runs through us all passively or assertively… allowing us a thought-provoking place to gather.”

Bernice Johnson Reagon, founder of vocal group Sweet Honey in the Rock, and a frequent performer on the Michfest stage uses embodied metaphors to describe the

---

353 183.
354 211.
affective dimension of musical experience, writing, “Songs and sounds” can “echo underneath the skin.” Reagon was the featured performer (along with her daughter Toshi) on Friday night in 2011. In the program notes, she assigns her voice a physical, spatial quality into which others can enter and be enveloped, inviting women to “gather within the sound of [her] voice.” Cam—who is deaf—attributes the capacity of music to enable connections to its engagement of the body: “For me to feel the sound checks coming through the trees, to feel the dances a half mile off, to feel the bass and drums and lower voices via the huge speakers it all is very comforting and edifying and there is something in it that feels like come what may—politics, differing opinions—we share this music.” Erin likewise offers, “Our singular experiences are amplified by the feeling that all of us are sharing in the music collectively. It’s such an energy rush in the most positive of ways.” For these women, the intersubjective connections enabled by music are felt in and through the body, executing the pre-condition of collectivity: obscuring—or at least making porous—the boundaries on which an “I” is predicated, establishing instead an emergent relationship that is accessed through the experience of musical resonance.

When attempting to describe what it feels like to experiencing music with other women at the festival, respondents often struggled to find language that would capture what they felt, relying on ephemeral descriptors such as “religious,” “spiritual,” and “magical.” For example, when I asked Alexis about the most memorable experience she had at the festival, she recalled seeing Ferron perform the first year she attended.

356 MWMF Program 2011, 19.
357 Both Dawn and Tara use the word “magical” to describe shared musical experience at Michfest.
She was performing that night, and there were about 7,000 women there, I think, and, um, I knew the song and I was in the audience. I’m listening to it, and I’m like, ‘This is really cool.’ It was a nice, cool summer night and just tons and tons of people…. Everybody started singing along and it was like a religious experience. I mean, it was like. Seven. Thousand. Voices. Singing ‘Testimony.’

With Ferron. You know, it’s like, wow. It’s amazing.

In an entirely separate conversation, Erin also recalled the same moment: “Ferron in 2007 was the most memorable of all… It truly felt like a spiritual experience, something that Amy [her best friend with whom she regularly attends Michfest as part of their joint “spiritual journey”] and I shared together.”

Agonizing over how to best capture her inarticulable experience, Michelle also recounts a performance from the early years of the festival through discourses of spirituality and magic, relying on intimate physical behaviors as indicators that something profound had occurred through the shared musical experience:

My most amazing Michigan experience by far, though, was the year Alive! closed their set (and the festival) with a percussion jam into the Night Stage Bowl. The whole audience was mesmerized when they finished, and we all stood there for a long time in silence. No one wanted to move; there was an energy there that made you hold your breath. Finally someone shouted "I never want to go home!" and the whole place... I never know how to describe this; it's hard to find the words. It was the most magical evening of my life. Everyone hugged everyone

358 The “Bowl” is the name for the expanse of grass where the audience sits.
else, whether you knew them or not. Women brought their guitars and drums back to the Bowl and sang and drummed all night. Someone started a giant conga line and we all snaked around the Bowl chanting "The Goddess is alive and magic is afoot!" Some of us cried, some talked into the wee hours, all at the Night Stage; we just didn't want to disperse and end the magic. I bet all the devas and dryads and other nature spirits on the Land were very amused! Very few women went to sleep that night; I know I didn't. It was like we'd all done LSD or something! I knew then that women's energy was a powerful thing indeed...

As Michelle struggles to find language to describe her experience, she variously makes her way through calling it magic, spiritual, and hallucinogenic—all of which suggest a significant element of her musical experience on the Land that cannot be captured through semiotic analyses. Her understanding of her shared musical experience escapes language, order, and reason. What she offers instead is a rambling description of musically-enabled intersubjective connections that initiated physical encounters between women—all of which occurred under an ephemeral rubric of “magic” and communion with “the goddess” and “nature spirits.”

Though the concerts are the central showpieces of the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, a number of the daytime “intensive workshops” also center on shared musical experience and provide the sort of communal experience that Michelle describes. While

---

359 Other authors have remarked upon and used spiritually-tinged language such as “rituals” and “sacred space” to describe certain elements of the festival (Cvetkovich and Wahng, Sandstrom), and Cam, in contrasting Michfest to other shared musical experiences she has had, likens her experience at Michigan to being in church: “I saw Heart many times, and the funny thing is even though I always loved their music, there is a concert vibe at Fest I have always been looking for, but they lack. It’s a community rising, joyful appreciation thing. I have been in gospel churches where the choir was so fantastic—that is the ‘feeling’ I get at fest.”

---

177
at the festival, I attended two such events that focused on musical experience and healing: a womyn’s singing circle, a three-hour daily event that ran from 9am to 12pm and culminated in a “healing circle” (with “the community of singers, drummers, and healers who have met throughout this week [and where] all womyn are invited to participate in the ancient celebration of our strength and ceremonial power”\textsuperscript{360}) on the last day of the festival, and “Harmonies of Healing,” a workshop about using the vibrations of one’s own singing voice and various instruments to achieve physical and psychological healing and reconciliation.

When I arrived at the singing circle, located just off a meandering foot path and tucked into the trees at one of the many workshop areas scattered about the land, there were about a dozen other women present. Linda, whom I have quoted above, runs the healing circle with her partner Rissa every year at Michfest, having inherited it and the directing responsibilities for a women’s singing circle in New England from Kay Gardner, a flautist with long-time ties to the women’s music scene and to Michfest.\textsuperscript{361} The circle operates on the belief that singing together brings people together across distance and time, that sound has the capacity to touch and heal bodies and psyches, and that “love” resonates between and through bodies in the sacred, women-only safe space.

Throughout the three hour circle, roughly twenty women came and went, though many stayed for the whole time. In describing the singing circle on the Michfest bulletin board, Dova writes, “We sing all kinds of songs, mainly easy to learn chants. We get

\textsuperscript{360} MWMF Program 2011, 22.
\textsuperscript{361} Women’s choruses are also an important part of the womyn’s music movement. For a brief history of the choruses and a description of what sorts of things they did and still do in order to maximize music’s magnetism among friends, see Catherine Roma, “Women’s Choral Communities: Singing for Our Lives,” \textit{Hot Wire} 8, no. 1 (January 1992): 36.
serious, silly, healing, loving and many more things. You do not have to be able to sing. You can come and go as you like. Teach a chant or just sit and breathe in the love.”  

At the circle in which I participated, a group of women used singing together as a way to connect to each other, to connect with the “whole” and “the goddess,” and to be “healed” and affirmed through collective music-making. In the latter part session I attended, at Linda’s invitation, some women went to the middle of the circle (what Linda referred to as a “cradle”) to receive “love and healing” from the resonant music that surrounded them. At times there were two or three women in the center, at times just one. Some stayed for several minutes, while others remained for only a short part of one song. One bare-breasted woman sat down in the circle for quite some time. As we sang, other participants reached out and touched her, stroking her back as she cried. At the end of the circle, those who were still present hugged (some cried) in a display of vulnerability and musically-enabled intimacy.

The “Healing with Harmony” workshop I attended shares with the singing circle the belief that musical sound has the capacity to connect people with each other and to bring about healing through resonant bodily engagement. Laura Lane Powell, the woman who directed the workshop, promised, “If you can laugh, you can sing; if you can sing, you can heal.” At the workshop, she explained that more overtones you are able to produce with your voice, the more powerful your voice is because vibrations “heal” by producing more energy flow and by connecting your body through resonance to the bodies of that which is around you. If you sing in a resonant way by using your breath

---

362 Dova, comment on Michigan Women’s Music Festival Bulletin Board
and voice to maximum effect, both you and those with whom you communicate (those who are in the presence of your sound) can be healed. Powell also uses quartz “singing bowls,” which she fills with water and makes sound with a rubber wand (similar to how one would make a crystal glass sound with a damp fingertip). As she chants along with the bowl, she invites participants (there were three others the morning I attended) to feel the healing power of the bowl’s resonance with their whole bodies. While I found Powell’s ideas about the healing capacities of vibrating bowls to be a bit wacky, her emphasis on the whole-body experience of musical sound and its ability to create relationships between sounding bodies is consonant with my argument about music’s ability to enable a sense of intersubjectivity. Given the profile of her workshop in the program (it ran three times during the festival, and she also occupied a sales booth in the marketplace where she demonstrated and sold her quartz bowls), it seems that her approach to musical sound resonated with other participants at the festival.

While the singing circle and Powell’s “Harmonies of Healing” workshop are focused, singular events among many workshops with widely divergent themes, they are both predicated on an investment in the various powers of musical sound’s (inter)subjective effects. Specifically, the workshops are structured to create moments of shared musical engagement, and the intersubjective connections they promote through music are consonant with the ways women understand and describe shared musical experience within the context of the festival more generally. Taken together, these various moments of shared musical experience, distinct though they may be, offer something similar to participants—a sense of collectivity that is not easily articulable,
that is granted the power to heal and create intersubjective, intergenerational connection, and that is dependent for its affective power upon the women-only “safe space” where festival attendees experience their subjecthood differently—with less fear and shame. These two workshops are exemplary of the way musical experience is used to capitalize on and materialize the four elements of the festival identified by Morris: a sense of safety, the expression of intimacy among women, the experience of spiritual communion and interpersonal healing, and a general sense of collective energy.

When asked about the role and importance of music at the festival, participants often expressed frustration at how difficult it was to capture their experience in words. While Michelle used the common framework of “music as communication” to explain why she found musical experience particularly moving, her reference to her experience of the materiality of sound (“energy,” “physical,” “guts”) indicates a sense of connection beyond the sending and receiving of semiotic messaging through sound. She offers, “Music is energy given form. Music communicates on emotional, physical, mental, spiritual and etheric levels. But really, the important thing is that all the music is from women’s perspective, women’s hearts, women’s guts, women’s lives. And they do it for me.” Tara shared with me her belief that “music reaches us viscerally and more quickly than other performing mediums.” When I asked her why music was important in her life, her stream-of-consciousness, grammar-defying response was “Support, joy, nurturing, challenging, emotional, visceral.” Cam described music as “life force, music is flow and joy manifest… It's the ultimate in communication coming maybe only second to sex. It is the unifier and it transcends age groups and generations, politics and religion. It can also
celebrate all that. For me, even as deaf person, music is fuel.” Linda similarly responded, “Music brings people together in a way nothing else does. Music unites us energetically, thematically, spiritually, vibrationally, joyfully.” She specifically describes her experience hearing one band at MichFest in 2007 as physically changing her body: “I felt like it rearranged my cells, that’s how powerful it was.” In looking at these quotations together, the women’s sense of the boundary-disturbing aspect of musical experience is plainly obvious, as is music’s ability to create intimate connection through “vibrations” and “energy,” creating an experience—however momentary—of boundlessness, unity, and communion among participants.

For some participants, their experience of musical communion (as Cusick and Echols have implied elsewhere) is eroticized—both in that it feels erotic, and in that it can inspire intimate, sexual engagement between those who share an embodied musical experience. Prompted by a moment of “harmonic convergence” she experienced at Michfest in the late 1980s, Marla Brodsky, a journalist writing for the women’s music journal *Hot Wire*, conducted an informal survey of women regarding their thoughts on the relationship between music and sexuality. Each respondent quoted in her article expresses belief that the two are similar—if not different versions of the same—experiences. Among women at the festival, there is likewise frequent reference to music “feeling” sexual because of its engagement with the body. One woman cited by Morris recalls, “I remember there was one performance group that was on the sound

---

363 “Music and Sexuality,” *Hot Wire* 4, no. 3 (July 1988): 42.
364 One woman offered, “When it comes to music, I do enjoy that. And when it comes to sex, I do enjoy that. Dancing puts something in me; after, I’m ready for love. Music puts something in me, definitely sex. I want to lay in my bed with my woman and finish my dancing mood. Oh, definitely.”
stage. It was an afternoon performance and some of the riffs were so raw. I mean, it actually upset my stomach, I had a physical reaction about rough sex and stuff like that. You know, it was hilarious. I could feel it grinding away.” Similarly, Dappergal, commenting on the bulletin board, recalls her experience as an audience member for queer Led Zeppelin cover band Lez Zeppelin’s set at Michfest, “As Steph wanked out amazing vibes on her guitar, it felt like a publicly sexual experience, without any need for fear of being harmed.” Like Dappergal, singer-songwriter Gretchen Phillips remarks on the erotic physicality of electric guitars, “I knew there needed to be rocking electric guitars in Lezzierville. There needed to be explicit sexuality… in order to push us closer to that real communal orgasm in the bowl [audience] of the night stage. The one that will change the world.” Given the intimate connections encountered through shared musical experience in this space, the festival policy discouraging women from playing any music that includes male voices seems overdetermined—sound enters into and moves through bodies, so all voices must be feminine to be permissible on the land.

Of course, not everyone experiences every moment of the festival this way, and there are internal debates about how to best enable the sort of deeply intimate, embodied experiences outlined above for everyone—an impossible task. In addition to ongoing negotiations about the boundaries of inclusion at the festival (for example, employing the

---

366 Comment on Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival Bulletin Board.
368 As of 2011, the policy was printed as follows in the festival program:
If you play recorded music that can be heard by others, please make it music with womyn-only vocals. We come here to enjoy a womyn-only environment, part of which is hearing only womyn’s voices. This is not a judgment on men or any particular music but a strong, positive desire to spend these few days surrounded only by the sounds of womyn.
above-mentioned WBW policy), one of the more concentrated struggles occurred in 1994 when queercore band Tribe 8 performed at the festival.³⁶⁹ In the festival program, they billed themselves as “blade-brandishing, gang-castrating, dildo-swingin’ bull-shit-detecting, aurally pornographic, Neanderthal-pervert band of patriarchy-smashing snatchlickers,” using explicitly violent language that resulted in responses ranging from protest to advisory warnings about the potentially “triggering” content of the show for abuse survivors. Though some attendees chose to not attend their concert and put up signs warning others of the violent content of the show, others found Tribe 8’s performance erotic and cathartic. Of the mosh pit that emerged during the performance, Cvetkovich remarks, “it is hard to say whether [it] was a violation of safe space or the preservation of it,” though she concedes that within the bounded space marked off for moshing, “women forged an intricate balance between physical abandon and attention to other bodies” that served as staging “for public and group eroticism.”³⁷⁰

As one might expect in a heightened context of safety, intimacy, and embodiment, there is a great deal of sexual activity on the Land each year. Musician Kay Turner identifies MichFest as “a space where sexuality and eroticism can be freely played out and determined as a community goal, as part of what we come there to do and what is assumed as part of our tradition.”³⁷¹ Accordingly, Cvetkovich writes of her own participation in the mosh pit at the Tribe 8 show, “it offers the physical pleasure of touching lots of different (and at Michigan mostly naked) bodies as well as the psychic

³⁶⁹ Morris (1999) has a chapter on the response to Tribe 8’s performance.
³⁷⁰ Archive, 84.
³⁷¹ Kay Turner, cf. Cvetkovich and Wahng, 139.
pleasure of overcoming resistance to collective and/or anonymous erotic connections.”

Sexual encounters are such a substantial part of the experience of the Festival that one of the camping areas (the “Twilight Zone”) is set aside for all manner of adult activity, including fetish events and even portable BDSM dungeons. Quips one participant, “Sometimes I think I heard more sex noises coming from tents than music from the stage.”

**Conclusion**

When I arrived in rural western Michigan two summers ago, I did not know what to expect of the festival. I went alone, encouraged by friends that many women travel to the Land by themselves and that I would be “fine.” Having read so many firsthand accounts of the festival, I had anticipated experiencing MichFest immediately as somewhat utopic, but, as Morris notes, “differences complicate one’s personal sense of ‘belonging.’ For the non-camper in her first set of thermal underwear, the adjustment to cold outhouses, impertinent insects, innovative vegan meals, and the rowdy nakedness of her neighbor can create physical and psychological discomfort.” None of these particular things bothered me (I am an avid camper, a native of the Great Lakes region, and not particularly modest—though I did not go topless while at the festival), but I did not immediately feel as connected to the women and to the Land as I hoped I might. The first musical event I attended was opening ceremony, and though I found it impressive, I

---

372 Cvetkovich, 85.
373 Meltzer, 66.
374 *Eden*, 11.
did not instantaneously feel a part of the festival. I was distracted by the WBW and trans-inclusion propaganda I saw everywhere, by the weighted ratios of white women to women of color and older women to younger women, by the varieties of gender performance and fetish gear on display in the August sunset, by the prevalence of nudity, by the sheer oddness of being among these thousands of women who had travelled from around the world to gather in the rural Michigan woods, and by my compulsion to take copious field notes in preparation for writing this chapter. While transcribing what I was observing around me, I was, admittedly, disappointed in my lack of response—how could I argue that experiencing music at the festival enabled feelings of intimacy and intersubjectivity among attendees if I did not experience that myself during what was for many the most moving part of the festival?

I thought maybe I would feel differently in the more intimate settings of the singing circle and sound healing workshops, but I did not. I was fascinated by the way the women around me were responding—by the prevalence of tears, the touching of bare body parts between half-nude strangers, by the credit given to musical sound for its ability to connect and heal, but I was growingly frustrated feeling myself at such a distance. In the afternoon after I attended the singing circle, I went to my work shift in kitchen where I unloaded, washed, and chopped hundreds of pounds of kale with other volunteers. Over the four hours of the shift, we talked about our lives and about the festival. At the end of the afternoon, I had gotten to know a handful of other attendees, and I had given over the labor of my body (as well as all that kale) to the women of festival. I finally started to feel that I was there (I suppose this was my moment of
transition from being an outsider to an insider of which so many ethnographers speak) and like the festival was my space—of my making—too.

Later that night, I excitedly made my way to the Night Stage for Bernice Johnson Reagon and her daughter Toshi’s performance. There in the dark, as they sang spirituals and protest songs Reagon had performed with Sweet Honey in the Rock and the Freedom Singers in decades past, I felt it—the tingles up my spine as the sound washed over me, the sense that I was a part of the great “we” that had come to “gather” in the sounds of Reagon’s voice.

The song that made the difference for me was their performance of the spiritual “Low Down the Chariot.” With Toshi and a group of four other black singers sitting in an arc of chairs, Bernice Johnson Reagon opened the song with a robust solo call: “Chariot!” on a syncopated Eb. After a beat and a half rest, her call is met by the response of the rest of the group on stage, as they mimic her rhythm, having built an Eb major chord on the tonic she provided (and provides again as the bass of their harmony). The stop-time effect of this opening line invites the listener in to inhabit/be inhabited by the triplets beating under the 12/8 time signature. The only way to make sense of this initial line is to feel the silence along with the band, and even then the rhythmic precision with which all of the singers execute their subsequent entrances comes as a bit of a surprise. The second phrase of “chariots” is supported by eighth notes in the percussion and bass, with the a guitar emphasizing the off beats as if to confirm, “Yes—that beat four you felt? Here it is. We feel it, too.”
The overall effect of this arrangement is to, upon having gathered together in Reagon’s voice, find your place in a collective rhythm and to open yourself up to the pleasure and surprise of being hit with that major chord harmony. The introduction of the backing band in the subsequent phrase fit easily into the rhythm I already felt, confirming my feeling that we were all in the same groove. As the verses began, the band adopted a cut-time tempo, exchanging the dance of the eighth-note triplets for faster duples. The singers traded solos as everyone else provided background support based on the opening “chariot” riff. At times, the effect was caucophonous. I felt myself being pulled back toward the harmonic backing vocals (and the familiarity of the one-word refrain) while also being drawn to each singer as she tore through her verse, falling in and out of rhythmic and harmonic sync with the backing vocals, scraping and growling at the edges of her tessitura as she moved through and reshaped the melody. Toshi took the last verse, which culminated in her melody line falling into rhythmic sync with the backing refrain of “chariot.” The song ended as all of the singers together suddenly left the “chariot” motif behind and collectively moved through a tonic-dominant-tonic harmonic progression as they sang “Low down chariot, and let me ride.” The last word of the verse (“ride”) started on the dominant chord before all of the voices slid together in harmony to a resolution, the tonic Eb major. The crowd, which had been clapping along on the offbeats, suspended their own rhythm to offer applause.

As a non-religious white woman, the deeply affective experience I had of this song—the tingles down my spine, my feeling of being taken up into and made part of the rhythm and harmonic movement, could not have had anything at all to do with the lyrics.
or even really the historical import of this song. I was moved by the musical sounds—by
the musicalness of the sounds: the way the solos and backing vocals alternately pulled at
each other and fused back into one gorgeously tuned, overtone-rich chord; the rhythmic
invitation, reassurance, and surprise that prompted me to move parts of my body along
with thousands of other women who—it seemed—were feeling the same thing I was, the
harmonic tension that caused my breath to catch before the resolution. I do not recall the
other songs that followed this one, but I know that the spine-tingling and hand-clapping
continued to the end of their set. After it was all over, I felt connected to the women that
stood around me—a sort of, “Yeah… we all felt that, didn’t we?”

Even after writing about musical intimacy for all these pages, I find myself
struggling to articulate it any better than the women and girls I interviewed. But I know it
by its effects, as do they. The struggle I am still facing to capture my own musical
experience even as I conclude this last chapter is, I think, indicative of how important it is
that we consider musical experience beyond its semiotic relevance. On the way back to
my tent through the uneven footpaths after the performance by Bernice Johnson Reagon,
I felt re-energized—like I suddenly understood what other women meant when they
talked of coming to the festival to get their “batteries recharged.” When I got back to my
tent, I was satisfied that this project still felt right to me—that it had a degree of “truth” to
it regarding the specificity of musical experience.

Inevitably, many moments of shared musical experience will be, as in my first
days on the Land, underwhelming. But, when the context constructed is one in which
women feel safe to engage with those around them, to loosen their “inhibitions,” and to
be taken over by musical sound, intimate connections—experienced as erotic, spiritual, personal, physical—are forged among participants. To reduce the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival to its identity politics or to reduce the music on the land to its semiotic significance to queer women’s efforts at consciousness-raising is to give the false impression that women come to the Land only to participate in activism. Analyses such as these preclude discussion of the very things women identify as being most the most significant elements of their experience at the festival. There’s no room for a consideration of what, by many accounts, was a “religious experience” when Ferron played in 2007, or of my own sense of opening-up during “Low Down the Chariot.” To approach music from the perspective of its subjective effects is to account for the embodied experience of physical safety on the Land, the prevalence of nudity and sexual activity, and profound musical experiences of time- and space-spanning, boundary-crossing connection that so many women cite as the most potent and gratifying element of the festival. As Dawn remarks of the opening ceremonies, “When you're singing ‘Amazon Womyn Rise’ with 5,000 other women, you're connected to them… You get it—we're a continuum.”
Conclusion: Precarity, Listening, and Resonance

I was a music major in college. Specifically, a vocal performance major. Though I tolerated my obligation to sit alone in a practice room hammering away at arias and art songs, I found the process of music-making by myself to be lonely—especially when compared to the daily 4pm choir rehearsals I attended with 65 other singers. When I stood alone in the practice rooms—even when I was playing around with music to which I felt more connected than the chansons and lieder assigned to me by my voice teacher—I never had the intense feeling of being swept up into and enveloped by musical sound, nor did I feel chills course across my skin as I regularly did during choir rehearsal.

For three years, I sang first soprano in the Luther College Nordic Choir, a very well-regarded and skilled collegiate chorale ensemble. And there were many, many days (both in rehearsals and performances) when, by all accounts, my peers and I were completely overcome by our sound. At the same time, I found myself regularly excited for weekly vocal rehearsals with my accompanist, and the practice sessions where I accompanied friends. Even though the content and structure of those shared rehearsals were the same as (or similar to) what I practiced alone, the degree of enjoyment I experienced when I made music with others was entirely at odds with the more empty experience of making music alone. I never got chills or was moved to tears in a practice room by myself, but those overwhelming responses were de rigueur when musical
experience was shared. The relationships that developed in those contexts were intense, and I know from many conversations with my peers over the years that my experience was not and is not unique.

When I think back to my years in Nordic Choir specifically, I have very clear aural and tactile memories of certain moments, such as when a friend of mine, Mandi, and I were asked to demonstrate a certain stylistic approach to some small bit of song for the rest of the choir, and the sound made by our two voices seemed to fuse and then bounce all around us. The sound was in part coming from me and from Mandi, but it also seemed to escape both of us, to become something on its own that came back at us. After we finished, we sat down, looked at each other, and said, “Whoa.” The musical sound in that stole my sense of self and subsumed it into something else that also contained Mandi.

In a way, this entire project has been motivated by my curiosity as to what made shared musical experience so much more rewarding than singing by myself, and how it affected not just my relationship with Mandi (with whom I felt a closeness after the spooky moment outlined above), but with everyone in the choir to whom I felt particularly close. When I started thinking about the relationship between musical experience, vulnerability, and intimacy, it was easy for me to come up with several other examples from my own life wherein shared musical experience had (unlike other communal activities, such as talking, watching movies or cooking or playing sports) intensified my sense of intersubjectivity and intimacy with other people. There are, of course, romantic relationships of which I could speak. What couple does not at one point or another deem a tune “our song”? But there are also intense non-erotic, loving relationships cemented
over rearrangements of Tori Amos songs on a shared piano bench, three-part harmonies added Top 40 songs from the torn front seats of a late ‘80s Oldsmobile, and the electric organ duet my grandmother and I regularly made of the 1962 song “Alley Cat” when I was just 10 years old.

As I sought to better understand what it was about music that seemed to have such a profound effect on my relationships, I first turned to music theory which I found too structured, too focused on music’s internal properties, and too removed from people (listeners, music makers) to provide satisfactory insight. I suspected I might have a better shot at recentering musical experience if I approached my questions through (ethno)musicology, but ultimately was frustrated that the capacity of music to serve social purposes and communicate social values was taken for granted, without any thorough consideration of the mechanisms through which this happened. Approaching music solely a vehicle for expressing or articulating social meanings made less sense to me than approaching social context as an important element in making possible certain intimate musical moments. So, this project has ultimately been an exercise in starting with the musical to see how the social serves it, rather than the other way around.

There are three primary reasons I think music works differently than other cultural production. First, it both does and does not work like language. That is, it has the capacity to signify semiotically either through connotations of particular sounds or combinations of sounds, or more directly through the use of lyrics. However, music is not reducible to a linguistic phenomenon—as Theodore Gracyk reminds us, many of our most pleasurable musical experiences have nothing at all to do with our willingness to subscribe to or even
understand what a piece of music is ostensibly communicating. By being not quite like language, but in some ways similar to it, musical sound simultaneously evokes and destabilizes signification.

Second, music—because it is temporal and resonant—is an emergent phenomenon. As it proceeds through time, it echoes in and through subjects, engaging them, sounding them, and being reformed as it undulates. The gloss of sameness, boundedness, and fixity that we ascribe to objects and identities is undermined in the face of musical resonance. Third, and relatedly, to be inclined toward musical listening—to listen musically—is to be open to this emergence, this perpetual (un)making of meanings, relationships, and boundaries, to suspend for a moment a desire for mastery, clarity, and containment in the face of resonance. It is to open oneself up to rupture and possibility.

As I was grappling with the intellectual fits and starts on my disciplinary academic journey outlined above, I began to consider how theories of subjectivity could perhaps help me better make sense of musical experience. In particular, I was drawn to thinking about the relationship between the subject and the other. As theorists of subjectivity have noted, the relationship between “I” and “not I” is not one of clear division, but one of shifting and emerging mutual constitution and vulnerability. Judith Butler names this essential subjective condition of interdependence precariousness. She writes, “Precariousness implies living socially, that is, the fact that one’s life is always in some sense in the hands of the other… Reciprocally, it implies being impinged upon by the exposure and dependency of others, most of whom remain anonymous.”


\(^{375}\) However,
Butler goes on to explain, this does not imply an intentional or even “conscious” subscription to a communal identity under which some bounded sense of “we” (with an attendant “not we”) might emerge. The intersubjective relationships which beget sociality and precarity are “not necessarily relations of love or even of care, but constitute obligations toward others, most of whom we cannot name and do not know, and who may or may not bear traits of familiarity to an established sense of who ‘we’ are”\(^\text{376}\)—they are foundational to subjectivity itself.

To move toward an understanding of subjectivity and human experience that is conceptually founded on relationship, rather than bounded individuation, Butler recommends a perceptual shift from “recognition,” a making-sense-of within one’s own frame for understanding to “apprehension,” which “is less precise, since it can imply marking, registering, acknowledging without full cognition.”\(^\text{377}\) If apprehension “is a form of knowing, it is bound up with sensing and perceiving, but in ways that are not always—or not yet—conceptual forms of knowledge.”\(^\text{378}\) For philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, listening—or, more precisely, experiencing music (after all, listening is a part of playing, singing, dancing, etc.)—is a paradigmatic perceptual enactment of the “apprehension” Butler describes: “to be listening is to be inclined toward the opening of meaning.”\(^\text{379}\)

Prior to a sound being taken up, made sense of, contained, and subjugated to the demands of semiotic significance, there exists a moment of openness in which listeners

\(^{376}\) Ibid., 14.
\(^{377}\) Frames, 5.
\(^{378}\) Ibid.
\(^{379}\) Ibid.
are engaged by sound resonating in, around, and through them, circulating between themselves and others, creating an emergent, resonant “sounding one” of an ostensible many. Less abstractly, shared experience of music is characterized by the circulation of sound between bodies, producing between them an emerging relationship in which the only constant is the perpetual undulation of circulating musical sound. Listening subjects are engaged in a mutual becoming as they are perpetually (re)positing themselves in amplified relations of difference and identification with those things, those subjects which are also resonating. What results is intersubjectivity, a sounded precarity between subjects who share the sorts of deep and open musical experiences of which Nancy writes.

Embodiment is a useful heuristic for thinking through the relationship between precarity, listening, and resonance. Though the body is commonly deployed as material evidence of a bounded, autonomous subject, it is not impermeable. Rather, as Butler notes, it is “exposed to others, vulnerable by definition… It is not, […] a mere surface upon which social meanings are inscribed, but that which suffers, enjoys, and responds to the exteriority of the world, an exteriority that defines its disposition, its passivity and activity.”380 Survival, in fact, necessitates the forgoing of boundaries, a recognition of our intersubjectivity:

[I]t is not as insolated and bounded being that I survive, but as one whose boundary exposes me to others in ways that are voluntary and involuntary (sometimes at once), an exposure that is the condition of sociality and survival

380 Ibid., 33-4.
The body, so often taken as the material manifestation of the individual, is both constituted and experienced as/in relation to others. Acknowledging the vulnerability of the body and the precarity of the subject exposes the failure of neoliberal ontology to finally secure the autonomous subject. Recognizing that the body is, perhaps, fundamentally vulnerable and unbound despite our efforts at identifying and securing its boundaries may radically shift conceptions of the human. And music? Music sounds precarity. Resonance requires and enacts it; listening invites an awareness of it.

This is clear in the way music is figured by the subjects in each of the preceding chapters. Advocates of censorship have zeroed in on music as particularly threatening to personal integrity, and as particularly apt to take advantage of any sort of psychophysical vulnerability. Given the cultural perception that girls are physically weaker and more prone to emotionality than boys, they are the subject of most of the hand-wringing and efforts toward protection. The efforts of music censorship advocates like the PMRC and their well-meaning contemporaries are motivated by an implicit recognition, I believe, of the precariousness of all subjects; their response is to do what they can to reinforce boundaries and construct modes of defense. The women and girls who are the foci of the latter chapters have responded differently—they have deployed music in ways that capitalize on its ability to sound precarity. They have created (and debated over the contours of) gendered safe spaces where musical experience can defy the demands

---

381 Ibid., 54.
individualism, isolation, and self-protection, where it can resound among subjects to take advantage of and further materialize vulnerability and interdependence.

Musical experience highlights the sociality of subjectivity, making it particularly apt for, among other things, enabling intimacy (which has been my primary interest). Of course, this also helps to illuminate why music so often is used to build coalitions, to strengthen community, to enhance worship, to temper feelings of alienation. While I was researching this project, I was also singing in my city’s symphony orchestra chorus. At one rehearsal, our director pointed us toward a short feature from an episode of the newsmagazine CBS Sunday Morning.\(^{382}\) The clip reported findings from a study done by the choral advocacy group Chorus America about the effects of choral participation on children and adults. Among other things, Chorus America’s research indicated that people who are active in choral groups are more than 50% more likely than the average American to volunteer their time to community causes, and are two and a half times more likely to make charitable donations.\(^{383}\) Says Knight Kiplinger, lifelong chorus member who was interviewed for the CBS Sunday Morning piece, “There’s something about the sociability of being in an artistic ensemble like a chorus. It brings out the best in people. It makes them better citizens.” Though their research project used very different methods than mine and had different questions and goals than mine, I think it is telling that their findings on the effects of shared musical experience are consonant with my ideas about vulnerability, interdependence, musical experience, and intersubjectivity.

\(^{382}\) The clip can be found here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6SCgVTMx0qg

As I reflect while wrapping up this iteration of my project, I am now seeing that it was really about an ontology of resonance, a way of thinking through musical experience that can help us to better understand what it means to be in a relationship with something or someone, and how that shapes our understanding of emergence, of subjectivity, and of what it means to be a social subject. I feel as though I have just begun to explore what kind of work an idea like this could possibly precipitate. Regardless, my hope is that those of us who derive so much pleasure from thinking about what music can mean and do for people push these ideas further to see if they hold up to a wider variety of shared musical experiences than what I have explored here. And, as stated at the outset, my first hope remains that my approach to musical intimacy resonates with more than just my own experiences and the voices that made their way into this project.

References


203


Giffort, Danielle M. “Show or Tell?: Feminist Dilemmas and Implicit Feminism at Girls’ Rock Camp.” *Gender and Society* 25, no. 5 (October 2011). 569-588.


“Making Noise Not Just for Boys; Girls' Fantasy Camp Provides Taste of Rock Stardom.” Chicago Sun Times. 1 August 2008. 29.


Malkin, Nina. “It’s a Grrrl Thing: Punk rock, explosive politics and no boys allowed--will riot grrrl refocus feminism or fry in its own fury?” *Seventeen Magazine*. May 1993. 80-82.


