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Icelandic Nationalism, Difference Feminism, and Björk's Maternal Aesthetic

Shana Goldin-Perschbacher

Since the late 1980s, when her band the Sugarcubes became known internationally, singer-songwriter Björk, the most famous Icelander since Leif Eriksson, has been met with both praise and criticism, almost always directed at her difference from Westerners, pop musicians, adults, and even humans. Biographer Mark Pytlik recalls the press around her 1993 album *Debut*: “Nearly every new story paraded her otherness, lionized her differences, and positioned her as an outsider operating as a slave to her ever-changing emotional state.”¹ This persona was not entirely a figment of non-Icelandic journalists’ imaginations: Björk had circulated select facets of Iceland’s nationalist image/tourist imagery to contextualize her innovative blend of punk, pop, avant-garde, and electronic dance music with its themes of nature, sensuality, emotional intensity, and quirky curiosity. However, journalists turned her creative inspirations into essentialist metaphors, describing her emotions as “volcanic” and her appearance as “elfish” and including “ice” among her “Viking” compositional tools.² Against her intentions, Björk was set up as the ultimate other—nonhuman, childish, hysterical, and “someone even men wanted to mother.”³

Björk is indeed one of the most imaginative and unusual popular musicians of her time, but labeling her as an outsider and her music as fancifully but meaninglessly quirky misses one of her tantalizing projects: Björk musically defamiliarizes Western cultural archetypes from within. She compels listeners

1 Mark Pytlik, *Björk: Wow and Flutter* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2003), 74; Björk, *Debut*, Elektra 9 61468-2, 1993.

2 Nicola Dibben, *Björk* (London: Equinox, 2009), 29–32. Dibben argues that Iceland has never been as isolated or exotic as these articles or Icelandic tourism advertisements suggest. Moreover, Björk had lived in Spain and England, and in 2007 she said she split her time “35 per cent in Iceland, 35 per cent in New York and 30 per cent everywhere else” (Simon Cosyns, “Björk . . . Iceland’s Cool Queen,” *Sun*, May 5, 2007).

3 Pytlik, *Björk*, 74.

to experience the whimsical performativity or infuriating constructedness of roles and situations that we may take for granted. In a famous early song, she plays a (seemingly child, alien, or animal) anthropologist who studies “human behavior,” singing, “If *you* ever get close to a human and human behavior . . . be ready to get confused” (my emphasis).⁴ Journalist Alex Ross explains the irony of the song: “It was a career-defining move: Björk positioned herself as a figure outside convention—as a member of another species, even—while using the second person to implicate the listener in the conspiracy.”⁵ By involving listeners in the critique, she invites her audience to identify with her denaturalizing performances rather than see her artistic persona(e) as “other.” Understanding this aesthetic helps contextualize her gender performances, which resist normative sexualized feminine stereotypes yet also thoughtfully embody select female archetypes, playing on feminist perspectives ranging from equality to difference and occasionally even essentialism.

Femininity and motherhood have proven awkward territory for academic feminism and queer theory, which have focused (for at least the last thirty years) on the social construction and performance of gender and sex, centering on anti-normativity. Contemporary theorists typically critique mainstream depictions of motherhood for essentialism, heteronormativity, and biased assumptions that motherhood and particularly pregnancy are central to all women’s identities. However, as feminist literary scholar Susan Fraiman argues, queer theories that reject femininity and motherhood outright while prizing masculinity and androgyny as “cool” and progressive replicate centuries-old sexism.⁶ Björk’s “alien anthropologist” interpretations of femininity and motherhood provide productive working examples of critically navigating these issues personally, artistically, and politically.

This article addresses the interconnections between Björk’s explorations of both essentialism and identity performance as she conveyed Icelandic nationalism and then later invoked its icons in metaphors of world unity and peace;⁷ simultaneously represented female sensuality and motherly nurturing, thus challenging the Western asexual mother stereotype; and combined these interests in feminist critique of the patriarchal culture of war by examining terrorism *and* the “war on terror” through frames of motherhood.⁸

4 From the song “Human Behavior,” discussed in Pytlik, *Björk*, 63.

5 Alex Ross, “Björk’s Saga,” *New Yorker*, August 30, 2004.

6 Susan Fraiman, “Queer Theory and the Second Sex,” *Cool Men and the Second Sex* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 122–55.

7 Dikken cites Björk’s goal with *Volta* of using her collaborations with musicians from “a wide range of musical cultures . . . [to] enact cultural integration” (*Björk*, 49). I analyze this endeavor in my conclusion.

8 Other scholars have taken an interest in Björk’s challenging of related dichotomies. Charity Marsh and Melissa West argue that Björk shatters the nature and technology dichotomy. See their “The Nature/Technology Binary Opposition Dismantled in the Music of Madonna and Björk,” in *Music and Technoculture*, ed. René T. A. Lysloff and Leslie C. Gay, Jr. (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 182–203. Andrew Robbie responds with a convincing critique of their thesis in “Sampling Haraway, Hunting Björk: Locating a Cyborg Subjectivity,” *repercussions* 10 (2007): 57–95.

Globalization, local identity, and gender difference are crucially connected, as anthropologist Sigríður Dúna Kristmundsdóttir argues. While globalization has brought civil rights to women across the world, this process has also instigated an anxious reinstatement of cultural difference, marked especially by gender essentialism.⁹ Kristmundsdóttir's examples from Iceland and beyond reveal that maintaining cultural difference via "tradition" tends to be marked as women's responsibility and tied to women serving as mothers and housewives.¹⁰ While these cultural differences can be profitable in the global marketplace (and facets of Björk's music may take advantage of this phenomenon), they also present problems regarding essentialist views of womanhood in the Icelandic feminist movement and more broadly in terms of women's rights worldwide.¹¹ In this article I consider Björk's sensually maternal musical aesthetic as it engages with essentialism and gender performance, as well as nationalism and her idea of humans as "one tribe."¹² My argument incorporates analysis of recordings of four songs that address motherhood ("Oceania," "Pleasure Is All Mine," "Mouth's Cradle," and "Hope"); live performance of these songs (via in-person ethnography, as well as televised and amateur video recording); photographs of the artist; discussion with listeners on her official website; and evidence of her inspiration in Icelandic nationalism, Icelandic and American feminism, and Vietnam-era social politics.¹³ Analyzing this material contextualizes Björk's

9 Sigríður Dúna Kristmundsdóttir, "'Father Did Not Answer That Question': Power, Gender and Globalisation in Europe," in *The Anthropology of Power: Empowerment and Disempowerment in Changing Structures*, ed. Angela Cheater (London: Routledge, 1999), 45; and Kristmundsdóttir, "Women's Movements and the Contradictory Forces of Globalisation," in *Crossing Borders: Re-mapping Women's Movements at the Turn of the 21st Century*, ed. Hilda Rømer Christensen, Beatrice Halsaa, and Aino Saarinen (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2004), 332.

10 Kristmundsdóttir, "'Father Did Not Answer,'" 46, 48.

11 For a discussion of gender and globalization, see Kristmundsdóttir, "'Father Did Not Answer,'" 44; for Icelandic feminism, see Inga Dóra Björnsdóttir and Sigríður Dúna Kristmundsdóttir, "Essentialism and Punishment in the Icelandic Women's Movement," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 2 (1995): 171–83.

12 "Björk [sic] says she hopes *Volta* inspires listeners to reexamine their place in the world. 'It's about being exhausted with the self-importance of religion and thinking, "Okay, wait a minute, maybe we are one tribe, and we're actually part of nature"' (Will Hermes, "Spirit of Invention Defines Björk's 'Volta,'" *National Public Radio*, May 8, 2007, <http://www.npr.org>).

13 Björk's official website hosts a listener discussion forum at <http://4um.bjork.com>. Viewing of and participation in the forum are password-protected and moderated. From April to July 2005, I viewed discussion threads, participated in existing conversations, and twice started a thread in order to ask questions about the songs "Pleasure Is All Mine" and "Mouth's Cradle." The listeners who chose to belong to this forum were particularly interested in discussing Björk's music and influence; these fans typically had read Björk's interviews, watched the "making of" documentary about *Medúlla*, and listened to her albums repeatedly. I quote from these threads as one means of examining other experienced listeners' reactions, recognizing that doing so does not constitute an exhaustive study of listener reactions following the release of *Medúlla*. During this time period, ethnographers were experimenting with the opportunities of engaging with people online and contemplating whether methods and ethics of in-person fieldwork were transferable to this new (and often anonymous) medium. To this end, I informed the listeners in the threads I initiated that I was a graduate student writing a conference paper analyzing Björk's songs about motherhood. Unfortunately, these threads disappeared during a major redesign of Björk's website in 2011. While her old website was archived, the forum was not, to my knowledge. These password-protected pages were not preserved in larger internet archival projects

dramatic shift from silence on political matters to overt political statements on and around her albums *Medúlla* (2004) and *Volta* (2007).¹⁴

Mother Figures and the Icelandic Independence and Feminist Movements

Björk is arguably best known for the “swan dress” she wore to the Academy Awards in 2001, having been nominated in the category of best song in the film *Dancer in the Dark*, directed by Lars von Trier (2000) (fig. 1).¹⁵ After having been awarded best actress at the Cannes International Film Festival in 2000 for her starring role in this film as Selma Ježková, a poor blind Czech immigrant who martyrs herself to save her son’s vision, she commissioned a dress for the Oscars that deliberately showcased her outsider status at this important Hollywood function—she considered herself a musician, not an actress, and thus felt awkwardly positioned, having won a major acting award over “real” actresses. (By this time, she had also decided she would never act again, a topic addressed below.) An outcry ensued over her dress: she received a string of magazine nominations for being the “worst dressed”; Ellen DeGeneres, who hosted the Fifty-Third Primetime Emmy Awards (2001), and Kevin James, who hosted the 2002 People’s Choice Awards, wore imitations of the dress; and a 2002 *Saturday Night Live* episode spoofed her award ceremony performance.¹⁶

either. I quote from these conversations despite the difficulty of access in an effort to present a more comprehensive analysis and to contribute to the emerging field of online ethnography. For a study of online ethnography, see Timothy J. Cooley, Katherine Meizel, and Nasir Sayed, “Virtual Fieldwork: Three Case Studies,” in *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, ed. Timothy J. Cooley and Gregory F. Barz, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 90–124.

14 Björk, *Medúlla*, Elektra 62985–2, 2004; and *Volta*, Atlantic 135868–2, 2007.

15 The dress was designed by Macedonian-born, London-based designer Marjan Djodjov Pejovski in 2001. Nielsen Media Research’s reports of US viewership for the awards ceremony suggest that 72.2 million people watched some part of the three-hour broadcast, with an average viewership of 42.9 million. However, compared with other Academy Awards ceremonies, 2001 resulted in a 26.2/40 household rating, which was the lowest in Oscar broadcast history since 1953 (David Bauder, “Nielsen’s Rate Oscars as the Worst Ever,” *Associated Press*, March 28, 2001). International viewership numbers are unavailable, as explained to Roger Ebert by Bruce Davis, executive director of the Motion Picture Academy: “Nobody can really say what the world numbers are for a television event, because Nielsen-type ratings services don’t exist in most territories outside the U.S.” (Roger Ebert, “Numbers Game—1 Billion Served a No-Account Count,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, April 8, 2001). As of publication, the swan dress was one of only thirteen (nonwedding) dresses to have its own *Wikipedia* page: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swan_dress_of_Björk. See also http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Individual_dresses.

16 The *Saturday Night Live* episode originally aired on March 16, 2002, spoofing her performance nearly a year earlier, March 25, 2001. This “TV Fun House” cartoon entitled “Oscar’s Greatest Moments” exaggerates audience discomfort about her dress in a parody of her actual musical performance during the awards show: the swan comes to life while Björk is singing and panics at being onstage, trying to get away, peeing onstage, and then laying an egg (which hatches cygnets that Björk, who has calmly continued singing, picks up to use as earrings). In the cartoon, actor and National Rifle Association spokesperson Charlton Heston, who is in the audience, pulls out a gun, threatening to shoot the swan, a group of audience members try to subdue the swan, and an actor from the audience ends up trying to seduce the swan. This fictitious mayhem seems to signal the real discomfort about her dress that led to a barrage of public criticism.

Fig. 1. Singer Björk, wearing a Marjan Pejorski swan gown, arrives at the Seventh-Third Annual Academy Awards, Sunday, March 25, 2001, in Los Angeles. Björk was nominated for best song for "I've Seen It All" from the Film *Dancer in the Dark*. Photograph by Laura Rauch. Copyright © The Associated Press.

Jokes about this outfit continue to circulate, but in 2008 it was also voted the ninth most iconic red carpet dress of all time.¹⁷

The dress looked like a dead swan draped over Björk's seemingly nude body (covered in a body stocking) and offended the red carpet fashion police. To some it looked like a costume in a ceremonial setting where great care is taken in deciding what actresses wear.¹⁸ Björk played up the attention, dropping an egg out of her dress onto the red carpet, thus performing an animal-like sexuality that seemed out of place among the fashion elite. However, this egg laying offered a clue to a possible meaning of her outfit—a reference to female beauty ideals centered around fertility and glamour still active in Hollywood.¹⁹ The swan dress was a performance of what one might call “excessive fertility,” in which she embraced the red carpet as a space to critique the primitive, reproduction-centered ideals of female beauty behind Hollywood glamour.²⁰ Björk cleverly invoked nature (the swan and egg) in order to denaturalize our stereotypes of femininity.

Björk's unusual red-carpet fashion statement was perhaps also a symbolic protest against the film's Danish director, Lars von Trier, whose reportedly aggressive, destructive history in directing female actresses crushed Björk's sense of independence as a singer-songwriter.²¹ The working relationship recalled for her Denmark's colonial rule of Iceland, which ended in 1944:

Throughout the interview she keeps referring, in tones of gloomy regret, to *Dancer in the Dark* . . . Björk accuses Von Trier of off-camera mind games rooted in Danish colonial attitudes towards her country, which Denmark used to rule. . . . “That film burned up everything I had achieved. All my confidence. I had to start all over again. You could say that was a good thing but I personally think it felt a bit early. Ten years later I would have been up for that crash maybe.” The ensuing Vespertine album [which features the swan dress on its cover] she compares to

17 From a poll of three thousand Debenhams (UK) department store shoppers (Urmee Khan, “Liz Hurley ‘Safety Pin’ Dress Voted the Greatest Dress,” *Telegraph*, October 9, 2008).

18 Björk is interested in avant-garde fashion that makes political statements: “I guess I attract people who make clothes the same way that I make music. I’m not that interested in fashion that’s safe, or wants to show off power or status” (Naomi West, “Wearing Her Music on Her Sleeve,” *Telegraph*, February 5, 2005). “She would never wear jeans and a T-shirt, she says, because they are ‘a symbol of white American imperialism, like drinking Coca-Cola’” (Liz Hoggard, “Maybe I’ll Be a Feminist in My Old Age,” *Guardian*, March 13, 2005).

19 These ideals include clear skin, large breasts, red lips, and wide hips.

20 Thanks to Susan Fraiman for the phrase “excessive fertility.”

21 Björk explained, “I think my initial instinct not to act in the movie was right. After filming it, I was at the bottom. Lars has a way of throwing petrol on your soul and burning you. . . . You don’t come out of it like a phoenix. He did the same with Nicole Kidman in *Dogville*. He would take her to a forest and say, ‘I hate you for being beautiful and successful; I just want to ruin you.’ It’s all about him being jealous. . . . He’s a genius, but how many movies can you make about destroying the lead female?” (James McNair, “Björk: Passions in a Cold Climate,” *Independent*, August 13, 2004). Dikken also addresses this point in her “Nature and Nation: National Identity and Environmentalism in Icelandic Popular Music Video and Music Documentary,” *Ethnomusicology Forum* 18, no. 1 (June 2009): see 137–38 and 170.

“little insects rising from the ashes.” The task with the new album [*Medúlla*], she says, was “to gain again my strength.”²²

Iceland, long ruled by Norway and then Denmark, developed a movement for independence in the late eighteenth century inspired by Enlightenment philosopher and pastor Johann Gottfried Herder’s theory that any group of people possessing their own language and culture was due independence as a nation. Herder’s essentialist conception of nationality centered on how a particular environment shapes a people, as opposed to a group’s wealth, state of development, or military strength (none of which Iceland possessed, having existed for eight hundred years as an agricultural and relatively poor colony).²³ Icelanders were proud of their landscape, which they believed greatly impacted their way of life and character as people, including influencing their literature and language, still spoken in its ancient form. The Icelandic movement was fueled by a sense of essential difference from Danes, as was Herder’s theory, which gauged “non-European” peoples’ “progress” via a Eurocentric model.²⁴

Icelanders’ nationalist ideology argued that the physical landscape of their island was “mother” to its people and promoted “her” independence from “King Denmark.” The image of Mother Iceland became iconized in 1864, when Nordic studies professor Eiríkur Magnússon created the concept of “Iceland as a Mountain Woman” and hired German artist J. B. Zwecker to illustrate this vision (fig. 2).

Zwecker’s *Woman of the Mountains* is seated mountain-like as though she is an island, pulling scrolls of the nationally treasured Icelandic sagas from the sea. (Traditionally, Icelandic mothers recited the sagas from memory to their children in the evenings.) As anthropologist Inga Dóra Björnsdóttir explains, the image not only of the mountain but also of the sea was represented as motherly: “The emergence of the ancient Icelandic manuscripts from the water, from the ‘maternal womb,’ further reinforces the notion that the country itself was the source, the *Drottning* or queen of the spiritual power of the writers of the Icelandic Sagas and of Icelandic poetry.”²⁵ Thus a motherly Iceland and its waters birthed Icelandic writers *and* their writing. Björnsdóttir’s essay includes a

22 Robert Sandall, “This Time It’s Intuition Only—No Brain, Please,” *Telegraph*, August 14, 2004; Björk, *Vespertine*, Elektra 62653–2, 2001.

23 Danish colonial rule controlled Icelandic people’s means of survival. For example, because Iceland’s waters are a tributary to Denmark, Icelanders were not allowed to develop a fishing economy—instead, they were forced to promote agriculture, which in their climate often led to poverty and starvation.

24 Björnsdóttir and Kristmundsdóttir, “Essentialism and Punishment,” 172; for discussion of Herder’s theory, see Vanessa Agnew, “Songs from the Edge of the World: Enlightenment Perceptions of Khoikhoi and Bushmen Music,” in *Representing Humanity in the Age of Enlightenment*, ed. Alexander Cook, Ned Curthoys, and Shino Konishi (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2013), 79–93.

25 Inga Dóra Björnsdóttir, “They Had a Different Mother: The Central Configuration of Icelandic Nationalist Discourse,” in *Is There a Nordic Feminism? Nordic Feminist Thought on Culture and Society*, ed. Drude von der Fehr, Bente Rosenbeck, and Anna G. Jónasdóttir (London: University College London Press, Taylor and Francis Group, 1998), 98.

Fig. 2. J. B. Zwecker, *Woman of the Mountains* (1864).

photograph of an Icelandic feminist dressed as the Mountain Woman at a 1990 celebration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the women's movement. Björk echoed the staying power of this image and its link to a sense of "independence" in a 1995 conversation with journalist Jon Savage:

JS: What do you exactly get from the ocean?

B: First of all, a sense of well-being, like I'm home. . . . If I walked down to the sea and sat down by the shore, I was home. That's my mother, the ocean. Nothing can go wrong. . . . I'm obsessed with boats. It's freedom.²⁶

²⁶ Jon Savage, "The Always Uncjorked Björk," *Interview*, June 1995, 86–92.

The Icelandic invocation of the Mother Nature myth is particularly important to Icelandic feminism, which developed simultaneously with Iceland's move for independence. Early Icelandic feminists, embracing the traditional and symbolic women's roles of Iceland's nationalist movement, argued that their motherly perspectives were necessary to an independent Icelandic government that equally and ethically represented its people. Women's economic and social roles changed dramatically during Iceland's late and sudden industrialization in the twentieth century, which brought the population out of poverty.²⁷ Industrialization shifted many people away from the almost entirely agricultural economy, in which women had a crucial and respected role on family farms, into an urban environment in which women's roles were unclear—men in Iceland made this transition to wage earning more easily. Thus, in 1908 Icelandic suffragists (supported by the International Woman Suffrage Alliance) created a women's "slate" (a platform represented by female candidates) to gain representation in Reykjavík's municipal council, and in 1920 all adult Icelandic women were granted the vote in local and national elections.²⁸

During the mid-twentieth century, a later generation of what Kristmundsdóttir calls "liberationist" feminists argued successfully for women's rights to work the same jobs as men. The liberationists rejected women's traditional roles in Icelandic society for the "right to work" in urban culture as men did.²⁹ Feminism of this era is comparable to American "equality" feminism, which argues that women are no different from men and should have all of the same opportunities. However, unlike American equality feminism, Icelandic liberationists inconveniently had no concept of patriarchy (in fact, men's lives were admired, and liberationists' aim was to become "social men").³⁰ Without a concept of patriarchy to address overarching institutional inequalities, Icelandic feminists directed anger over their limited life opportunities at individual male chauvinists, and each woman felt an overwhelming sense of responsibility to change societal expectations by example, such as by rejecting traditional domestic roles and joining the paid workforce. Björk's liberationist mother refused to enter the kitchen on principle.³¹ Björk, who was born in 1965, and her generation were irritated by such behavior:

I do appreciate that the cage has been opened for my generation and all we've got to do is be active. It's quite easy for us. I don't have to be negative and paranoid—

27 This sudden shift toward industrialization may have inspired Björk's song "The Modern Things," which describes how "all the modern things / like cars and such / have always existed. They've just been waiting / in a mountain / for the right moment. listening to all the / irritating noises / of dinosaurs / and people / dabbling outside." This whimsical vision of industrialization and history removes credit of invention from humans and suggests that the Earth has always contained all of the things that humans might "need."

28 Sigríður Dúna Kristmundsdóttir, *Doing & Becoming: Women's Movements and Women's Personhood in Iceland 1870–1990* (Reykjavík: University of Iceland, Social Science Research Institute, University Press, 1997), 57.

29 Kristmundsdóttir, *Doing & Becoming*, 137 and 145.

30 Kristmundsdóttir, *Doing & Becoming*, 136–37.

31 Pytlik, *Björk*, 80.

"I'm in a cage. People are suppressing me." For my generation to hear women say that, it's like, "Please! Get a life." That's what I used to think about my mum.³²

However, Björk also explains that her mother's feminism benefited her: "My mother had a strong father who was really sexist, who beat her down. Her solution was to give me all the freedom she couldn't have. She let me do whatever I wanted—probably more so because I was a girl."³³ Liberationists like Björk's mother earned women the right to work, but the process lowered wages in general and thus made women's work outside the household into an economic necessity in Iceland. Kristmundsdóttir also argues that the right to work did not change expectations of women to take care of the majority of housework and childrearing, nor did it solve Icelandic women's lingering sense of social isolation from the urban migration. Kristmundsdóttir compares Icelandic working women's sense of alienation to sociologist Georg Simmel's 1908 theory of "The Stranger" and feminist author Marilyn French's depiction of American suburban housewives' experiences of invisibility in the 1950s:

In spite of women's proximity, their presence in society, they are at the same time remote, outside of one of society's spheres of action, that of authority, derived from the politico-jural domain. As Simmel points out, strangers have freedoms others do not have. A potent fictional description of the kind of freedom entailed in not having public authority is French's description of the American suburban housewife of the fifties, who could go to the supermarket with curlers in her hair, mismatched shoes and a loony grin on her face without anybody minding much. That [is the] kind of freedom of someone who does not meet the requirements of full social personhood and therefore does not have to be taken seriously as a person.³⁴

Icelandic feminists of the 1980s responded to women's lack of "full social personhood" with social rebellion and, for the second time in Icelandic history, a round of local and national women's slates. Sensing that the equality ideology had not worked for the previous generation, they argued for women's distinct roles while also staging loud and unconventional protests (such as entering a cow at a local beauty pageant to compare the contest to a meat market). This rebellious period in Iceland inspired the teenage Björk, who shifted from playing the flute in a conservatory to forming anarchist punk bands.³⁵ But while this feminist movement's

³² Pytlik, *Björk*, 80, reprinted in Hoggard, "Maybe I'll Be a Feminist."

³³ Pytlik, *Björk*, 4.

³⁴ Georg Simmel, "The Stranger," in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. and ed. Kurt H. Wolf (1950; New York: Free Press, 1980); Marilyn French, *The Women's Room* (London: Sphere Books, 1977). The text quote is from Kristmundsdóttir, *Doing & Becoming*, 217–18.

³⁵ Pytlik, *Björk*, 4–13: she entered the Icelandic Conservatory of Music at age five (as early as possible); was introduced to avant-garde art music at age six; released her first pop vocal record at age eleven; was drummer, flutist, and vocalist in punk and disco bands at thirteen; left the conservatory (and home) to make music professionally at fourteen; and toured the world with pop band the Sugarcubes at eighteen.

style of protest and challenges to conventional femininity appealed to Björk, she did not publicly claim feminism until she had her first daughter.

In an interview from 2005, the artist suddenly identified with feminism, explaining that raising her then-three-year-old daughter made her aware of the continued negative force of social conditioning around girls' appearance, citing animated fairy tale films that teach girls to look and act a certain way to find a husband, the key to proving a woman's social worth. She also discussed challenges for adult women:

It's incredible how nature sets females up to take care of people, and yet it is tricky for them to take care of themselves. . . . I have been noticing how much harder it is for me and my girlfriends to juggle things than it is for men. In the 1990s, there was a lot of optimism: we thought we'd finally sorted out equal rights for men and women . . . and then suddenly it just crashed. I think this is my first time in all the hundreds of interviews I've done, that I've actually jumped on the feminist bandwagon. In the past I always wanted to change the subject. But I think now it's time to bring up all these issues. I wish it wasn't, but I'll do it, I'm up for doing the dirty work!³⁶

Björk's sense of duty toward feminism marks a critical shift in her politics: at the time of this 2005 interview she had already been in the public eye for thirty years and raised one child (her son, Sindri Eldon Thórsson, who was born in 1986). Her feminist statement could be read as essentialist in that she suggests that *nature* positions women to take care of others before or instead of themselves. But she also asserts that this imbalance of responsibility is a problem, implying that she feels some tension with an essentialist perspective. Her musical and interview statements reveal multiple feminist stances, sometimes in tension, around essentialist, difference, and equality perspectives, all articulating a maternalist position on world politics.

Maternal Imagery for World Unity

Björk drew on "Iceland as a Mountain Woman" in her most widely viewed performance since the Oscars, the 2004 Olympic Opening Ceremony in Greece, which drew 25.3 million US viewers and 38 percent of the total television audience in the United Kingdom, 50 percent in Germany, and 94 percent in South Korea (fig. 3).³⁷ Her commissioned Olympic anthem, "Oceania," also served as a sneak preview of her album *Medúlla*, released later that month.³⁸ "Oceania," written with Icelandic poet Sjón Sigurdsson, with whom she regularly collaborates, describes the world from the proud perspective of an anthropo-

36 Hoggard, "Maybe I'll Be a Feminist."

37 "Historical US TV Ratings Olympics Opening Ceremonies," August 6, 2008, <http://www.nielsen.com>; "Athens 2004 Olympic Broadcast," <http://www.olympic.org>.

38 The word "Oceania" refers to the island nations around Australia. This song does not seem to draw on this meaning or relate to solely this geographical area but rather explores shared human connections via the idea of a maternal ocean.

morphized, ancient, and maternal ocean figure who hosted humans and creatures before some evolved and took to land:

I am incredibly honoured to have been asked to write a song and sing it at the Olympics. The song is written from the point of view of the ocean that surrounds all the land and watches over the humans to see how they are doing after millions of years of evolution. It sees no borders, different races or religion which has always been at the core of these games. . . . Sjón came up with this beautiful last line that touches on how we were all little jellyfish or whatever before we made it onto land. He has The Sea saying, "Your sweat is salty / And I am why."³⁹

As Björk performed, her blue dress, shimmering like waves, unfurled, and its thirty thousand square feet of fabric enveloped all fifteen thousand Olympic athletes, coaches, and officials participating in the parade of nations ceremony.⁴⁰ The scene hyperbolized fairy-tale maternal images such as Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* character Mother Ginger, whose dress hides eight dancing gingerbread children.

The Olympic performance began with a dramatic upward glissando by a choir of high voices while the lights of the stadium simultaneously dimmed. In the ensuing silence and dark blue glow, Björk's voice entered a cappella, introducing herself as Mother Oceania and awakening listeners' awareness of various senses:

One breath away
from Mother Oceania
your nimble feet make prints
in my sand

This mother figure is powerful: she directs the flow of the song through three gritty vocal fermatas, intentionally rich with overtones. But she is also kind and proud, smiling as she sings:

You have done
good for yourselves
since you left my wet embrace
and crawled ashore

In the second verse, she is joined again by the high voices from the beginning glissando, which provide playful countermelodies, perhaps representing the

³⁹ Björk, press release, August 13, 2004. The album version was performed by Björk with the London Choir, with beats by Shlomo, piano played by Nico Muhly, vocal samples by Robert Wyatt, and programming by Björk, Mark Bell, and Valgeir Sigurdsson.

⁴⁰ Björk sang/lip-synched to her recorded track (which is similar but not identical to the album version).

Fig. 3. *Above and facing*, Icelandic singer Björk performs during the opening ceremony of the Athens 2004 Olympic Games, August 13, 2004. Copyright © Reuters/Adrees Latif/Mike Blake JSK/AA.

“little ones, my sons and my daughters,” who sing slightly out of synchronization with one another, experiment with vocables, and seem to sing in reaction to her lead vocal line.

Björk’s invocation of the nurturing and unifying Mother Sea / Iceland as a Mountain Woman at the 2004 Olympic Games was not intended as a statement of Icelandic nationalism. In her earlier music she had sometimes represented herself as Icelandic in order to advocate for its (and perhaps her own)

special qualities and celebrate its independence.⁴¹ But Björk's relationship with nationalism shifted due to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and their aftermath. She meant this worldwide debut of the album *Medúlla* as a feminist message against terrorism, patriotism, racism, xenophobia, and war:

This album was supposed to be a response to 9/11 and all this rubbish and me thinking about a time before religion and patriotism. I wanted to show those gentlemen that there are still insects crawling, people jumping in swimming pools, building houses, having children, making songs and having abstract thought processes or whatever. That's at least 98 percent of what humans are doing out there.⁴²

Björk lists human and animal activities (creative, procreative, and domestic) as what "those gentlemen" are not faithfully representing in politics. She argues that they are distracted by "religion and patriotism" while the rest of the world yearns for connections that link us more deeply than, or "before" the rise of, the (religious, patriotic) nation-state:

I was going to call the album "Ink," because I wanted it to be like that black, 5,000-year-old blood that's inside us all; an ancient spirit that's passionate and dark, a spirit that survives. Something in me wanted to leave out civilisation, to rewind to before it all happened and work out, "Where is the human soul? What if we do without civilisation and religion and patriotism, without the stuff that has gone wrong?" When I first moved to New York there was room for immigrants

⁴¹ See Dibben, *Björk*; and Dibben, "Nature and Nation."

⁴² Sandall, "This Time."

and eccentrics and whoever, then suddenly it became the most scarily patriotic place on earth.⁴³

In response to 9/11-motivated prejudice and suspicion of foreigners, Björk gathered with friends (perhaps as “immigrants and eccentrics and whoever”) to improvise vocally and wordlessly.⁴⁴ *Medúlla* grew out of these layered voices where sounds were more important than lyrics, a feeling that she said (in the documentary about making the album) reminded her of being seventeen and “the primal energy of singing and the words don’t matter that much.”⁴⁵ On this album, the words came later: she explained that she wanted to “give the lyrics no thought, just let them happen by themselves.” Instead, she slowly integrated a few “keywords” at a time. She was also less committed than usual to immediately interpreting the meanings of the lyrics, feeling that she understood them only after two years of working on the album. As a result, Björk explored her voice more than ever, and her songs were able to grow through the layering of vocalities. In a compositional practice that mimics the (unlikely) scenario of imagining “an individual before entering society,” she first composed alone with her own voice, then included a sound engineer to “push this project as far as possible” before inviting other people to listen and talk about the music and incorporate their voices. She sets the “primitiveness” that she seeks in this vocal contact against male-centered politics.⁴⁶ And as I will explore in analyses of two songs, she creates this embodied protest through her voicing of physical and emotional experiences of motherhood.

In an interview with Björk, *Rolling Stone*’s Jenny Eliscu asked, “*Medulla* is mainly a vocal album. What inspired you to do that?” Björk responded, “I got pregnant. I had been pregnant once before, and it had the same effect on me. I became really physical and really aware of my muscles and bones.”⁴⁷ Björk elaborates this idea in the documentary *The Making of Medúlla*:

Giving birth makes you extremely conscious and you realize that this is the only thing that matters. This primal force . . . I wanted to do a vocal album and I

43 Jack Foley, “Bjork-I was going to call the album Ink, because I wanted it to be like that black, 5,000-year-old blood that’s inside us all” [date unknown], <http://www.indielondon.co.uk>.

44 “More recently she has taken to getting drunk at parties with a group of friends: ‘We would do our favourite dance tracks just ourselves, one person doing the beat, another on the bass line.’ After lengthy experiments in this area she concludes that ‘most death metal and all heavy metal songs are excellent a cappella.’ Disappointingly, she hasn’t found space for any of these on *Medúlla*” (Sandall, “This Time”).

45 Discussed in *The Making of Medúlla: The Inner or Deep Part of an Animal or Plant Structure*, dir. Ragnheidur Gestsdóttir, Elektra 40248-2, 2004. All of the following quotations in this paragraph are from this documentary.

46 *The Making of Medúlla*, dir. Gestsdóttir.

47 Jenny Eliscu, “Q&A: Björk: The Icelandic Diva Explains Why She’s Built an Album Almost Entirely from the Sound of Her Own Voice,” *Rolling Stone*, August 25, 2004. Björk divulged that the idea for an a cappella album was not her initial impulse but rather a discovery made by isolating the vocals while searching for “the songs” amid “the mess” of existing tracks that would eventually become *Medúlla* (Jonathan Wingate, “Björk: ‘Instruments Are So Over,’” 2004, <http://www.totalmusicmagazine.com>; McNair, “Björk: Passions”; and conversation with Drew Daniel, April 2005).

wanted it to have a strong feeling of heart, blood and meat. And at the same time I wanted the lower half of the body to merge into the music. But not some doobie doobie something that you have heard so many times—a kind of muesli jazz. So I wanted to start out by proving that a vocal album didn't have to be a vegetarian meal, that it can indeed be a steak, a rare steak on the table.⁴⁸

The comparison of a vocal album to a piece of visibly bloody, barely cooked flesh eaten as a delicacy is a provocative and, for some vegetarians and vegans, violent concept, reminiscent of the way nonhuman carnivorous animals eat. One might hear this metaphor in *Medúlla*'s intense, sometimes sexual, dark, vulnerable, and animalistic vocalities. What Björk means by the sound of merging the lower half of the body into the music is unclear, but it could refer to sex, dancing, and/or giving birth. She contrasts this sound with “doobie doobie,” seemingly a reference to vocal approaches in other a cappella music, as she explains: “The only other rule,” she says, “was for it not to sound like Manhattan Transfer or Bobby McFerrin. . . . After that, it became a very spontaneous, kind of carefree album to make.”⁴⁹

McFerrin's live performances include spontaneity (for example, he sometimes chooses audience members with whom he orchestrates an improvisational duet), but his music is more conventionally tonally and rhythmically integrated than *Medúlla*; Björk's album includes many traditional harmonies and familiar metrical patterns but also disrupts these with interacting parts that do not align diatonically or metrically. Unlike those of a doo-wop album, *Medúlla*'s vocal sounds are sometimes processed into less-human-sounding beats (versus doo-wop voices, which are recorded to sound live and explicitly human), and the contents of *Medúlla*'s vocal layers are sometimes independent, offering different melodies, harmonizing but slightly rhythmically off from one another, using widely different timbres, expressive variation of intonation, and unusual sounds such as sighing, grunting, and lip smacking to make beats (versus doo-wop's homophonic vocal harmony, a melody with lyrics and backup harmony using vocables or repeated words from the lyrics). Her process of recording is also different from doo-wop in that she laid down her own tracks and then brought in guest vocalists, recording their contributions and picking and choosing what she wanted to include with what she had already created (versus doo-wop's rehearsing and recording, if not also song writing, as a group).⁵⁰ *Medúlla* sounds

48 *The Making of Medúlla*, dir. Gestsdóttir.

49 Wingate, “Björk: ‘Instruments.’”

50 Avant-garde composer and singer Meredith Monk (whom Björk cites as inspiration for *Medúlla*) and her collaborator Theo Bleckmann commented that Björk's compositional approach sounded less interactive than Monk's chamber-music-style method in which singers often improvise pieces together (conversation with the author, March 31, 2005). However, music theorist Mark Butler commented that Björk's process is in keeping with electronic dance music compositional technique (conversation with the author, March 25, 2012). Björk's description of her process in creating *Volta* suggests that she worked more collaboratively, bringing sketches to another musician and developing them through improvisation together.

challenging, improvisational, and less accessible than McFerrin's most famous album, the exceptional, lighthearted, and listenable (and triple platinum) *Simple Pleasures*.⁵¹

Björk's interviews around the release of this album describe pregnancy and raw bodily essences as inspirations. The title is a scientific term from Latin that refers to bone marrow or the innermost deep part of a plant or animal structure, with extended usage referencing "the essential or central matter of a subject": "*Medúlla* is primitive, like before civilisation. It's the soft squidgy thing in the centre. After *Vespertine* I was going to do an album with intuition only, no brain please. I was thinking more visceral, flesh and blood, pregnancy . . . death metal."⁵² Björk's avowed reliance on intuition and inner bodily elements (represented in potentially "violent" ways, such as raw meat and death metal) and her linking of these elements with pregnancy and life "before civilization" suggest a strong current of essentialism running through her inspiration for the album.⁵³ Although contemporary critical theory typically assumes that essentialism is fatally flawed in its cultural biases, the concept did resonate culturally during a historical moment Björk reveals as relevant to the contemporary politics in which she is engaging with this album: "For the first time since the Vietnam War there seems a universal feeling among common people that they don't agree with the people who are ruling the world."⁵⁴ And for the first time in her career Björk included an unusually direct political statement with the line: "i need a shelter to build an altar away / from all osamas and bushes."⁵⁵ *Medúlla* and Björk's discussions of this work articulate peace politics through maternal sensuality, which, while seemingly essentialist, is reminiscent of the New Left critiques of the nuclear family, which contributed to the sexual liberation movement and the American second wave feminist movement's non-violent, mother-based governing philosophy, prowoman healthcare movement via midwives and natural birthing, and connections with and responses to countercultural sexual liberation.

New Left and Second Wave Feminism: Essentialism, Maternal Sensuality, and Peace

During the Cold War the American government and media urged citizens to think of the "self-contained" nuclear family as a metaphor for protection

51 Bobby McFerrin, *Simple Pleasures*, EMI-Manhattan Records CDP-7-48059-2, 1988.

52 See "medulla, n.," *OED Online*, December 2013, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oed.com>; Sandall, "This Time."

53 Death metal is a musical genre developed in the 1980s by male bands that wrote complexly structured songs about morbid, violent, and Satanic topics and performed low guttural vocals, loud distorted guitars, and repeated fast eighth-note drumming. For Björk, pregnancy always brings a desire for death metal: "It also happened when I had a child when I was twenty years old, that during the following two years I was only thinking about muscles, blood, and bones, and I only wanted to listen to some gore music, you know with head banging, but very slow. I only listened to the Swans the last time, for instance" (*The Making of Medúlla*, dir. Gestsdóttir).

54 Hoggard, "Maybe I'll Be a Feminist."

55 Lyrics by Björk, "Mouth's Cradle," *Medúlla*.

against foreign evil.⁵⁶ This “corporate whole family” enforced proscriptive gender roles, supporting a patriarchal protector/breadwinner and a domestic, asexual mother. These roles, the family’s private, suburban, single-family home, and its capitalist consumption were thought to stave off threats from foreign communist countries with a perceived lack of domestic safety and privatism.⁵⁷ As historian Lauri Umansky explains, “With intense dismay, a generation of college-bound youth was beginning to perceive that the ultimate purpose of that functional wholeness was to promote an international arena for hatred and warfare. They saw the body, especially the sexualized body, as a way to decode the functionalist family.”⁵⁸ The counterculture attempted to create a larger, more “authentic” community based on an essential truth about humanity that people could return to through a new vision of liberated sexuality and community.⁵⁹

Countercultural essentialism, the sexual revolution, and feminism inspired women to leave government and doctors out of their relationship with their bodies: “Modern childbirth defied the quest for self-determination. It denied women a sense of their bodies as natural, sexual, and creative, replacing the holistic view with a model of utilitarianism, pathology, and shame. . . . [T]he male obstetrician had disrupted a powerful, organic community of women, bound together historically and personally by the common experience of childbirth.”⁶⁰ Birth and breast-feeding were reconsidered as sensual and relational experiences:

For [hippies], birth promised . . . bonding: between a woman and man, between woman and infant, but most piquantly between woman and her body. Hippies viewed childbirth and breastfeeding as sensual, even erotic experiences. Rena Morning Star, partner of Lou Gottlieb, the founder of one of the most famous hippie communes, Morning Star Ranch in Sonoma County, California, said, “. . . Having Vishnu [her son] at Morning Star—and it’s important that it’s open land, because I believe the policy is ‘open land, open cervix’—made childbirth

⁵⁶ Lauri Umansky, *Motherhood Reconceived: Feminism and the Legacies of the Sixties* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 21.

⁵⁷ This concept recalled President Roosevelt’s “likening” motherhood to military service, each contributing to the vigor of the nation.” See Linda Giles, *Fresh Milk: Ideologies of Breastfeeding and Motherhood in the Contemporary United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 22–23, citing Gwendolyn Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood: Inequality in the Welfare State, 1917–1942* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 27–28.

⁵⁸ Umansky, *Motherhood Reconceived*, 23–24.

⁵⁹ Umansky, *Motherhood Reconceived*, 23–24. However, Umansky points out that their revolution against the nuclear family linked domesticity with asexuality (which has contributed to the asexual housewife stereotype). And despite their liberating rhetoric, commune life often maintained traditional gender roles, and “free love” meant that women were regularly pregnant by different men, some of whom felt the responsibilities of fatherhood suffocating and left for a “freer” commune. (Male) hippies’ sense of “freedom” thus created tension with (hippy) feminists’ ideas of liberation.

⁶⁰ Umansky, *Motherhood Reconceived*, 66.

much easier. We started out with a good fuck during labor. I highly recommend it! A good fuck sets the stage for a beautiful sexual orgasm. And that's what his birth was."⁶¹

Ina May Gaskin, wife of the founder of the influential Tennessee commune the Farm, where she was its original and self-taught midwife and author of the best-selling *Spiritual Midwifery*, suggested a similarly sensual perspective on birthing, encouraging "smooching" during labor to speed birth.⁶² Umansky concludes: "Feminists began to claim that natural childbirth and breast-feeding could rekindle the sexual, in both an immediate and an ongoing sense. Arguably, the hedonistic relish with which many women's liberationists discussed the sexual and sensual benefits of birth and nursing resembles countercultural discourse more distinctly than any other aspect of the early feminist revalorization of motherhood."⁶³

But despite these cultural shifts, sexuality and nurturing are often still considered dichotomous in contemporary normative Western conceptions of motherhood. As Fiona Giles investigated in her anthology on the still-underexplored area of sexuality, motherhood, and breast-feeding, many people assume that mothers have fulfilled their roles as sexual beings:

Many women find that becoming a mother does not always sit easily with the sexual identity they formed before becoming pregnant. We are instructed to wait for six weeks after delivery to have sex, but it often takes much longer to rework the fantasies and rebuild a picture of ourselves as sexual individuals. . . . For many new mothers, allowing their body to vanish from their erotic imagination seems the easiest solution, not only while breastfeeding, but for some time afterward.⁶⁴

Philosopher Iris Marion Young writes, "Breasts are a scandal for patriarchy because they disrupt the border between motherhood and sexuality."⁶⁵ Sociologist Linda Blum points out how difficult it has been in post-World War II Western culture for our society to come to terms with both the sexual and maternal roles of breasts: "Maternal nursing . . . seemed to violate husbands' ownership of their wives' breasts. In advice literature breastfeeding is often likened to the marriage bond, and implicit then is the notion that it is something like adultery, especially if enjoyed by mother and baby."⁶⁶ Western anxiety regularly

61 Umansky, *Motherhood Reconceived*, 58.

62 Ina May Gaskin, *Spiritual Midwifery*, 4th ed. (1975; Summertown TN: Book Publishing Company, 2002), 60, 72, 91–92, 112, 120, 139, and 341–42.

63 Umansky, *Motherhood Reconceived*, 71.

64 Fiona Giles, *Fresh Milk: The Secret Life of Breasts* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003), 122.

65 Iris Marion Young, "Breasted Experience: The Look and the Feeling," in *The Politics of Women's Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, and Behaviour*, ed. Rose Weitz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 189–209, quoted in Giles, *Fresh Milk*, 153.

66 Blum, *At the Breast*, 39.

erupts over whether nursing might “sexualize” presumed “presexual” beings. This fear arises from a Victorian conception of children as asexual as well as from the late twentieth-century rediscovery of and panic over sexual abuse of children. In the early twentieth century, pro-breast-feeding white middle-class American mothers, labeled by historians as “maternalists,” campaigned using their experiences of motherhood to encourage social reform in working-class and ethnic minority families. Maternalists urged nursing mothers to “avoid ‘excessive’ cuddling” and, according to historian Molly Ladd-Taylor, expressed “misgivings about the sensuousness of their mother-child bond as well as about their diet.”⁶⁷ While the maternalists’ efforts did secure some health services to these populations, their indifference to diverse cultural practices perhaps due to prejudice contributed to already existing cultural stereotypes about women, sexuality, and breast-feeding.

This anxiety continues. In some contemporary cases, mothers who continue breast-feeding toddlers have been publicly criticized, prosecuted, and/or separated from their children. Blum notes, “Breastmilk itself seems to have become sexualized, ‘dirty,’ and comparable to excretory fluids. . . . Mothers, for example, who breastfeed in public spaces are commonly relegated to bathrooms to nurse.”⁶⁸ In what other context would a person be asked to consume a meal in a bathroom? As author Carolyn Latteier reminds us, “Men get to control the visibility of women’s breasts.”⁶⁹

Breasts are fetishized sexual objects within our culture to the point that many women undergo plastic surgery to artificially create the shape of engorged lactating breasts. However, actual lactating breasts and women’s experiences of them are practically unspeakable. For some women, breast-feeding is painful or irritating. Others find that it can elicit an enjoyable and even sensual feeling, although this topic is practically taboo—in 1991 one mother who called a tip line to ask about feelings of arousal during breast-feeding “was taken into custody and separated from her daughter for a year.”⁷⁰

In the twenty-first century, breast-feeding still prompts policing of women’s bodies. Barbara Walters, a host on the popular daytime talk show *The View* in 2005, complained about a woman breast-feeding next to her on the plane. Two hundred “lactivists,” as journalist Amy Harmon dubbed them, immediately took to the streets outside ABC headquarters in New York for a “nurse-in.”⁷¹

67 Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work: Women, Child Welfare, and the State, 1890–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 88.

68 Blum, *At the Breast*, 41.

69 Carolyn Latteier, *Breasts: The Women’s Perspective on an American Obsession* (Philadelphia: Haworth Press, 1998), 163.

70 Lauri Umansky, “Breastfeeding in the 1990s: The Karen Carter Case and the Politics of Maternal Sexuality,” in *Bad Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America*, ed. Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 299–309, quoted in Giles, *Fresh Milk*, 126.

71 Amy Harmon, “‘Lactivists’ Taking Their Cause, and Their Babies, to the Streets,” *New York Times*, June 7, 2005.

Fig. 4. August 2006 cover of *Babytalk*® magazine. Reproduced by permission of Meredith Corp.

While in 2005 many Americans were still disturbed by public breast-feeding, as evidenced by the largest number of negative responses the free magazine *Baby Talk* has ever received for a cover picturing a breast-feeding infant that year, by then thirty-one US states had approved legislation that allowed women to breast-feed in public wherever and whenever they chose.⁷² Trade press books on breasts and breast-feeding such as Fiona Giles's anthology *Fresh Milk: The Secret Lives of Breasts* signaled a contemporaneous interest with Björk's *Medúlla* in continuing the countercultural feminist conversation by addressing the sensory and emotional experiences of breast-feeding and parenting and their intersections with sexuality and peace politics.⁷³

72. Associated Press, "Eyeful of Breast-Feeding Mom Sparks Outrage: Magazine Cover Blasted by Public Squeamish over Sight of Nursing Breast," July 27, 2006, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com>; Adrienne Mand Lewin, "Breast-Feeding Moms Take Action: 'Lactivists' and Lawmakers Push to Allow Public Nursing," *ABC News*, December 20, 2005, <http://abcnews.go.com>. *Baby Talk* reached 5.5 million readers, and the August 2006 issue prompted over eight thousand letters from readers, as well as a series of news articles.

73. Giles's book includes discussion of breast-feeding as foreplay between adult partners, accounts of adoptive female and cisgender male parents who claim that they managed to will their bodies to produce milk, and a recipe for breast milk ice cream.

Medúlla's Sensual Songs about Motherhood and Peace

"Pleasure Is All Mine," the first song on *Medúlla*, introduces the almost entirely a cappella album by presenting starkly raw, wordless vocal layers one at a time.⁷⁴ It begins with a simple statement sung by Björk consisting of a short melodic phrase eventually harmonized by a second track of her voice singing the same pattern a third below. This repeats several times with small pitch and/or note-value variations (as well as imperfections in intonation). While much contemporaneous popular music is built with repeated and layered melodic segments, most uses digital sampling and pitch correction. The repetitions on "Pleasure Is All Mine" are live, and Björk's voice is studio produced to sound close, natural, and fallible. Her exposed a cappella voice trembles with a loose vibrato, and her harmony part enters slightly late. At the end of Björk's first statement of thirds, fast, baby-like breaths creep subtly into the mix and move into the sonic foreground, contributing a layer of almost regular, metrical panting. The human panting creating a(n unstable) beat makes for a somewhat unsettling listening experience. A layer of throat-clearing sighs and gasps enters, sounding like panting or suffocating, a sound that comes from Nunavut Canadian throat singer Tanya "Tagaq" Gillis. Tagaq (pronounced "Tahk-wah") developed a style of solo improvisational vocal performance inspired by a women's game from Greenland of directing imitations of animal calls and other guttural sounds into a partner's mouth for resonance and to see who will laugh first (presumably at the gestural intimacy and mimicked sounds). Björk's vocal track was recorded first and layered with Tagaq's contributions.⁷⁵

One almost forgets this strange wordless beginning when the cool middle section follows with a smooth low beat made by beatboxer Rahzel (of the Roots) and a mixed-voice chorus singing wordlessly and with Björk's voice singing lyrics about caring for another:

the pleasure is all mine
to get to be the generous one
is the strongest stance
the pleasure is all mine
to finally let go
and defend me
we float

who gives most
who gives most
who gives most

⁷⁴ "Pleasure Is All Mine" was written by Björk, performed by Björk, Tagaq, Mike Patton with the Icelandic Choir, beats by Rahzel, bass line by Björk, programming by Valgeir Sigurdsson, Mark Bell, and Björk, and gong by Peter Van Hooke.

⁷⁵ Information about the *Medúlla* collaboration and Tagaq's performance style is available in *The Making of Medúlla* and www.tanyatagaq.com.

the pleasure is all mine
women like us
we strengthen most
host-like
when in doubt give

when in doubt give
when in doubt give⁷⁶

The title phrase is a colloquial statement in US culture that relieves its hearers of obligation for the speaker's generosity. While it is sometimes uttered out of politeness rather than sincerity, the phrase seems to be used in earnest by this song's narrator. The documentary footage features Björk grinning broadly as she sings the word "pleasure." A lush and wordless choral harmony supports these lyrics, coaxing the listener to let go, as the lyrics describe.

The lines "women like us / we strengthen most / host-like" seem to refer to pregnant women as "host" to their fetuses, "strengthen[ing]" them with nutrients from the host's body.⁷⁷ This experience of "host[ing]" another body with(in) one's own can create strain regarding conceptions of bodily independence, as Björk explained, "Then came the birth and a few months of breast-feeding. It was gorgeous, of course, but as any mother will tell you, there's this feeling that you don't own your own body when you're pregnant. So when you start to feel that you're getting your own blood and bones back, it feels fantastic."⁷⁸ Breast-feeding creates some tension around the desire to nourish her child yet reclaim her body after pregnancy. As she explains, the process of writing "Pleasure Is All Mine" reflects how motherhood changed her relationship with her body, sensuality, and music making:

When I made this track, it was the first time I left my little baby girl. I had gone to La Gomera, which is a small island part of the Canary Islands—one of the islands no tourists go to—and I'd found on the web this English guy who had a studio there, and I think I was the first client or something. So I turned up there with an engineer and my little girl, and then we planned it that—she was like 14 months old—and they were gonna leave four days before me, so I could for the first time jump off a cliff—obviously not literally. Like when you're writing a song and you get possessed and you can't sleep for 40 hours 'til it's ready, and you don't have to

⁷⁶ This version of the lyrics is published on her official website: <http://bjork.com/#/past/discography/medulla/track1/lyrics1>. The lyrics printed in the album's liner notes differ slightly.

⁷⁷ In addition to being confirmed by Björk's statements about her work as addressed here, this reading was also strengthened when I heard her live performance of this song at the Apollo Theater in New York City, May 8, 2007. With the line "women like us" she pointed to her chest and during this song regularly caressed her abdomen as if she were pregnant, a gesture not repeated during the rest of the concert.

⁷⁸ McNair, "Björk: Passions."

worry about putting her to sleep and just be totally self-indulgent. So this song, for me, is really about the sensuality of just jumping in that pool again, of just you and the music, nobody else, and walking on the cliffs in La Gomera and just indulging in it, and then you can go in and you're singing and singing and singing and be obsessed with music.⁷⁹

Björk's first freedom from motherhood was a music-making experience brimming with sensuality. In a 1995 interview she used the phrase "jump off a cliff" in relation to having sex:

JON SAVAGE: Sex does take courage sometimes.

BJÖRK: I think so, because if it lacks that sensation of jumping off a cliff, it would just miss so much. Then again, it has to be pleasurable and enjoyable and lush and all of that.⁸⁰

While Björk enjoyed the feeling of bodily independence and (musical) sexuality while creating this song, she intentionally chose to sing about being the nurturer of her baby. Thus her sensual reembodiment was not an escape from motherhood but a reflection about it.

The soaring middle part of the song illustrates vocally the sensuality of "jumping off a cliff" and finding bodily and musical freedom, with several layers of Björk's voice delving into freeing long wordless vocal lines soaring above the female choir. At the climax of this section, male choral voices come out more prominently in the mix, supporting Björk's registral peak for the song as she repeats the line "when in doubt give" three times joined by her soaring wordless counterpoint. But weariness seems to overcome this mother's voice when she asks repeatedly "who gives most(?)" and Tagaq answers "mamamaa" and makes baby-like sighs of satisfaction. Grunting feeding sounds become closest in the mix as Björk's weary voice fades out.

At the end of the song, Björk's beginning wordless theme is recapitulated, but she moans wretchedly, going out of tune as though overcome, and is overpowered in the mix by Tagaq's sexual-sounding grunting and sighing. The song concludes with contented baby-like sighs and the beautiful female choir harmony. There are sounds of different kinds of physical exertion, sonically illustrating many feelings of motherhood—a baby feeding, a weary mother moaning, a woman making love. The sexual overtones of this song remain, as if to say that giving offers sensual joy. Some mothers I have spoken to hear breast-feeding in this song in the grunting sounds of nursing and the mother having enormous pleasure from feeding her infant.

79 "XFM Commentary, 2004 *Medúlla*," August 25, 2004, <http://blog.bjork.com>.

80 Savage, "The Always Uncjorked Björk." Dibben notes Björk's broader uses of this phrase in discussion of taking artistic risks and musically exploring "intense emotion," "extreme acts of sensation seeking," and "retaining a sense of wonder at the world around her" (*Björk*, 143).

The breast-feeding and motherhood influence on “Pleasure” was not discussed in the official fan forum on Björk’s website after the album’s release, despite her mention of motherhood and breast-feeding as inspiring the song both in the “making of” documentary and in interviews.⁸¹ When I brought up her interview statements and asked whether these influences seemed audible in “Pleasure” and “Mouth’s Cradle,” several listeners replied that they understood “Pleasure” as an exceptionally sensual song. One wrote to me, “‘Pleasure’ was the first song from Medulla I heard and I wrote in another forum at the time that it was ‘the sexiest thing I had ever heard.’”⁸² Most heard a relationship between two adults. Even the sensuality of the song was awkward for some. One seventeen-year-old female Norwegian fan wrote: “The first time I heard Pleasure is All Mine I did feel a bit uncomfortable. The heavy breathing seemed too blatantly sexual for me to feel comfortable listening.”⁸³ She continued, though, that she grew to deeply appreciate Tagaq’s throat singing. A forty-year-old man from “rural NY” replied, “We associate certain sounds with certain behaviors and I think it gets in the way of enjoying the song. I had to think of the voices as instruments and not as people doing things.”⁸⁴ Some knew of Björk’s statements about motherhood but replied that breast-feeding was far from their everyday experience: “i think Bjork has said Mouth’s Cradle is about breastfeeding though there are many more facets to that song (male female relationships, politics, etc.) i have no reason to connect to breastfeeding, therefore i tend to appreciate the song on the more relationship/political level.”⁸⁵

Björk seems to want her listeners to hear both sensuality and mothering on this album, explaining in an interview that she imagined celebrating the feeling of nursing by doing a tap-dance routine:

“When you are breast-feeding,” she says, “that feeling that you are nourishing your child is the ultimate natural high. So with ‘Mouth’s Cradle,’ I was imagining some kind of musical where you had this huge mouth, and the teeth would be like a ladder, and you would do a Fred Astaire dance using the teeth as steps up to the mouth. It’s also about looking at a little baby and thinking, ‘Didn’t they get the design absolutely right?’”⁸⁶

81 Björk’s online forum is <http://4um.bjork.com/>.

82 “Schonheitsgluck,” age thirty-five, location unknown, responding to my thread “Breastfeeding, sensuality, and intimacy in Medulla.”

83 “Sagapo19,” responding to my thread “Breastfeeding, sensuality, and intimacy in Medulla.”

84 “Versicolor,” posting in my thread “Breastfeeding, sensuality, and intimacy in Medulla.”

85 “Sagapo19,” age seventeen, location unknown, responding to my thread “Breastfeeding, sensuality, and intimacy in Medulla.”

86 McNair, “Björk: Passions.” Victoria Malawey has transcribed and analyzed “Mouth’s Cradle” in terms of musical emergence. See her “Musical Emergence in Björk’s *Medulla*,” *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 136, no. 1 (2011): 141–80, esp. 147–51. “Mouth’s Cradle” was written by Björk, performed by Björk and Tagaq with the Icelandic Choir, beats by Rahzel, bass synth by Mark Bell, and programming by Björk, Valgeir Sigurdsson, and Mark Bell.

In the version of “Mouth’s Cradle” recorded for *Medúlla*, Björk’s lyrics are characteristically vague, making no reference to a female baby but rather to a male character of indeterminate age (this variance is in keeping with her typical compositional practice of obscuring a song’s inspiration by changing the pronoun).⁸⁷ When performing “Mouth’s Cradle” in concert, Björk sometimes uses a female pronoun. Regardless of the pronoun, at least two possible readings might follow, one about caring for a baby and the other about a lover. Knowing her inspiration, one can find references to a (presumably second) child (“there is yet another one / that follows me / where ever i go”). The child needs her help to survive (“the simplicity of the ghost-like beast / the purity of what it wants and where it goes”) and loves her unconditionally (“always loves you”). She might even be describing the feeling of breast-feeding a child with teeth (“this tooth is warmth-like”). But again, most listeners I spoke to did not consider caring for a baby or breast-feeding in their interpretation. They were more likely to picture a male lover who “supports” her, loves her, and “always has a hope” for her and whose teeth she follows into his mouth (“and these teeth are a ladder up to his mouth”).⁸⁸ One listener imagined Jacob’s ladder.

Whether listeners think the song is about an adult sexual relationship, nursing an infant, or another scenario, many of Björk’s fans are accustomed to having intimate, embodied listening experiences due to the song topics and the crafting of sounds on her albums.⁸⁹ As the lyrics change slightly in each verse, one can follow either “teeth” or “these notes I’m singing”—either one goes “tooth by tooth” to “the mouth’s cradle.” One can aurally follow her teeth and all sorts of facial sounds that engineers usually painstakingly remove from popular music recordings but that are amplified on this record, offering an aural intimacy in which a listener might imagine crawling inside someone’s mouth. Baby-like breathing, grunting, and lip smacking provide beats as Björk sings joyful, comforting lyrics about the warm and safe “mouth’s cradle.”

Vocal sounds take specific places in the carefully planned three-dimensional aspects of the songs’ production. As the sounds shift between stereo channels and swell in a pulsating, repeated rhythm, we are made aware of the spatial layout in which these sounds surround and enter our bodies. Fans posting to the “4um” on Björk’s official website mentioned that they enjoy this feeling of being inside the mix (something she also cultivated on her preceding

87 Dibben, correspondence with the author, 2013.

88 This level of intimacy about physical interaction would not be unusual for Björk (whose songs and videos, especially since her 2001 album *Vespertine*, have included intimate details about her body and sexual encounters). And this lyric also fits with the original context for the song, which she began to write with Matmos, using their samples from a relative’s dental office before deciding that she wanted the album to be a cappella (conversation with Drew Daniel, April 2005).

89 See Lori A. Burns, Marc Lafrance, and Laura Hawley, “Embodied Subjectivities in the Lyrical and Musical Expression of PJ Harvey and Björk,” *Music Theory Online* 14, no. 4 (November 2008), <http://www.mtosmt.org> for a discussion of the musical production of embodied intimacy in a song from Björk’s album *Vespertine*.

album, *Vespertine*). One teenage female Norwegian fan wrote to me: “I think Medulla is like anatomy!!! It’s like the body, and when you listen to it, music embraces you, you don’t just listen to the music, you are the music!! That’s what makes Medulla so rare!!!” A twenty-one-year-old fan from central New York corroborates the importance of feeling inside this embodied-sounding song: “I love it because it has a voice of it’s [*sic*] own, a sound with tactile sensibilities, almost like a map of the human soul told and shown through the context of the human body as if the song itself were a tour bus and Björk the conductor is taking you for a ride.”⁹⁰

But the politics of this ride (expressed in the last lines of the song, seeking “shelter . . . from osamas and bushes”) did not go over well for all fans. A twenty-two-year-old avid contributor to the forum (who makes reference to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* by saying she’s from “Transsexual/Transylvania”) responded to my question about why the song was voted the fan favorite from the album by saying that she did *not* like the explicit politics because she felt that Björk had avoided being political until this point in her career. An eighteen-year-old fan from San Diego responded:

do you even *get* the song? in the making of medulla dvd bjork mentions that the song is about *breastfeeding*; nourishment, comfort for babies, these little beings that aren’t fully conscious. it’s a song about your “god,” yourself. it’s about being able to create a shelter within yrself from crazy, tyrannical beings like osama and bush. and incase you hadn’t noticed.. medulla IS a political album—not of the “VOTE 2008” variety, but of self-politics. it is brilliant.⁹¹

This fan aligns the politics of Björk’s album with the famous countercultural feminist assertion “the personal is political,” finding in *Medulla* an expression of caring for self and others as a reaction against individuals’ lack of power in the modern culture of war. This fan’s frustration with the other listener’s reaction conveys her strong preference for the maternalist, antityranny politics as the *only* possible reading of this song.

Modern anxiety around essentialism can limit exploration of the multiplicity of lived, embodied politics. Contemporary theorists might do well to recall philosopher Sara Ruddick’s argument that women’s learned cultural experiences as mothers offer them valuable insight into the workings of community, which, if utilized, could aid governments and lead to a more peaceful world.⁹² Ruddick’s *Maternal Thinking* builds from the countercultural premise that considered women closer to both the earth and other humans and thus lacking the depersonalization necessary to commit violence. But unlike counterculturalists,

90 “ImmaculateDeception,” in response to my post “Why do you love ‘Mouth’s Cradle?’”

91 “Couth,” “Why do you love ‘Mouth’s Cradle?’,” in response to user “pagan” poetry.”

92 Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

Ruddick believes that women's experiences are cultural, not inherent. We might use Ruddick's work to frame Björk's musical exploration of motherhood and war. In her artistic quest to dig within her cultural and embodied experiences as a musician, mother, lover, feminist, activist, Icelander, and New Yorker, she was able, for a brief but well-televised moment, to boldly step over "those gentlemen" into a powerful contemporary invocation of an Icelandic mother figure who peacefully envelops an international community while rescuing her sensuality from oppressive stereotypes. While most nationalism-inspired projects and politics look inward (such as Iceland's population genome or the "God Bless America" response to 9/11), Björk's use of nationalist images for the Olympics embraced an idea of a nurturing worldwide community.⁹³

Coda: "Nature Has Fixed No Limits on Our Hopes"

Björk has more recently and controversially explored motherhood, war, and terror. Her next album, *Volta* (2007), which she called her first "protest album," consists of her most politically explicit songs to date, including "Declare Independence" (a song that advocates for Greenland and the Faeroe Islands' independence from Denmark and that, much to the consternation of Chinese authorities, she used during a 2008 Shanghai performance to address Tibet's status) and "Hope" (a song about an attempted suicide bombing by a pregnant Palestinian woman that takes as its premise an unbiased examination of her motivations).⁹⁴ Existing analyses of Björk's performances of nationalism, peace politics, and motherhood have not addressed the complex politics of "Hope."⁹⁵

Like Björk's previous work as a solo artist, *Volta* features collaborations with musicians from several countries. But unlike previous marketing of her music as influenced by her Icelandic roots, she framed this album for its musi-

93 Bob Simpson asks whether the Icelandic Genome Project, begun in 1996 to create a medical database of the population, allows or even encourages citizens to prize racial purity, in "Imagined Genetic Communities: Ethnicity and Essentialism in the Twenty-First Century," *Anthropology Today* 16, no. 3 (June 2000): 3–6.

94 "Looking back at her career, Björk acknowledges that the clearest pattern is her stubborn refusal to repeat herself. She offers by way of explanation the fact that she adores a challenge, which often manifests itself in her choosing to take on genres she ordinarily dislikes. She wasn't sure about a cappella music, she says, so she made *Medúlla*. She wasn't excited by protest music, so she made *Volta*" (Kevin E. G. Perry, "Interview—Björk Talks Piracy, Punk, Lady Gaga, and *Biophilia*," *Drowned in Sound*, October 9, 2011, <http://drownedinsound.com>).

95 Dibben, *Björk*; Dibben, "Nature and Nation"; and Malawey, "Musical Emergence." "Hope" is not the only song about motherhood on the album ("I See Who You Are" and "My Juvenile" address her relationship to her children), but it is the only song about motherhood that is also explicitly linked with politics around war and terrorism, and thus I limit my discussion here to "Hope." "Hope" was written by Björk and T. Mosley (Timbaland), produced by Björk, and features Björk on vocals, clavichord, sine bass, programming, and editing, Toumani Diabate on kora, Yves Werner as engineer for Diabate's sessions, Timbaland for triggering a prerecorded percussion loop, Nate Dangerhands on bass drums, Jimmy Douglas as engineer for Timbaland sessions, and Damian Taylor programming, editing, and engineering.

cal representations of humans as “one tribe.”⁹⁶ She also adapted her compositional practices in an attempt to musically explore this idea. Unlike previous collaborations in which, for the most part, she first worked as much as possible alone and then with a producer before inviting other musicians to join her in the studio, for *Volta* she brought unfinished sketches of songs to meetings with collaborators in order to make space for more interactive improvisation than usual. Also, her setting for working with other musicians changed: while the two previous albums were mainly recorded at home while she was nursing and raising Isadora, *Volta* is, in her words, more “extroverted” in that she created it over multiple trips.⁹⁷ She traveled to Jamaica, Malta, Tunisia, San Francisco, Belgium (to meet Congolese ensemble Konono N°1 because the ongoing war in the Democratic Republic of Congo made it too dangerous to record there), and Bamako, Mali, to work in person with kora virtuoso Toumani Diabate. She explained about her collaboration with Diabate, “I wanted to sing it with him at the same moment, because it’s always different when you do that.”⁹⁸ Diabate felt he had a surprising amount of creative freedom with this project:

“She wanted everything to work naturally,” Mr. Diabate said backstage after a recent concert with his Symmetric Orchestra at Zankel Hall. In Mali, he played and she sang, trying lyrics she had brought until the syllables fit and they had a few songs. She chose “Hope” and handed another one to him. “She said, ‘Take this and use it any way you like,’” Mr. Diabate said. “I couldn’t imagine a superstar doing that.” “Hope” ended up using a Timbaland beat and multiple, overlapping, tangled tracks of kora, traditionally a solo instrument. Mr. Diabate tweaked the results until he was satisfied. “She opened a new door for the kora,” he said.⁹⁹

Diabate lauds Björk’s process of collaboration because he was allowed to work on the tracks after the initial recording session until he was happy with the outcome. But while Björk’s interactions with musicians from “non-Western” countries were perhaps even more respectful than usual, she traded in orientalist stereotypes in the promotion of this album, which she called “techno voodoo,” “pagan,” and “tribal.”¹⁰⁰ While her choice of words is alarming, the musical execution of the most risky subject on the album provides some context for her overall political intentions.

96 She describes humans as “one tribe” in Will Hermes, “Spirit of Invention Defines Björk’s ‘Volta,’” *National Public Radio*, May 8, 2007, <http://www.npr.org>; and Mike Powell, “Interview: Björk,” *Stylus*, April 26, 2007, <http://www.stylusmagazine.com>. While Björk has always included “immigrant musicians” from across the world in her albums (Dibben, *Björk*, 16), *Volta* features collaborators from countries she has not worked with before—Mali, Congo, and China (although Min Xiao Fen, the experimentalist Chinese pipa player, appealed to Björk as a “fellow immigrant” and “New Yorker,” as she revealed in her introduction of Fen at her concert at the Apollo Theater, New York, May 8, 2007).

97 Jon Pareles, “Visiting Björk’s Restless, Impulsive, Multicultural Universe,” *New York Times*, May 1, 2007.

98 Pareles, “Visiting Björk’s Restless.”

99 Pareles, “Visiting Björk’s Restless.”

100 Pareles, “Visiting Björk’s Restless.”

“Hope” was inspired by Björk’s sense of injustice in Western media reports of an attempted suicide bombing by a Palestinian woman at an Israeli hospital. At first journalists thought the bomber had disguised herself as pregnant in order to both gain access to the hospital and hide explosives for her attack. But later, presumably after a medical examination of her remains, authorities announced that she had truly been pregnant. Björk explained the scenario and her sense of the journalistic bias to an interviewer:

I guess with a song like *Hope*, the lyric was a speculation that I wrote in my diary, that had to do with a news item about a Palestinian woman. It was a response to a little article that said she had pretended to be pregnant, but had a bomb strapped to her stomach. She had gotten into a hospital and [it] had exploded but not killed anyone. You could read at the end of the article the journalist trying to be neutral, but saying how dare she play with something as sacred as pregnancy and pull that into terrorism. I thought that was a very strange thing. Two days later they found out that she actually was pregnant and then somehow she was forgiven, which I thought was very curious. “Wait a minute,” I thought, “if she felt strongly enough about her cause and she was ready to sacrifice her foetus, that is beyond her just playing on people’s emotions and pretending to be pregnant.” So this lyric is sort of about the media and their role in the whole terrorism thing.¹⁰¹

Björk exposes what she sees as a double standard in which the English-speaking journalists, thinking the bomber had disguised herself as if she were pregnant, considered this deception a further attack on Western values than a simple suicide bombing (because she was “daring to play with something so sacred as pregnancy”). This notion of a pregnant woman defined solely as a mother-in-waiting, entirely focused on nurturing her fetus, is a wealthy, patriarchal, Western ideology and a nearly impossible luxury for a woman living in a heavily disputed, militarized, and impoverished territory. The press dramatically changed their tone, perhaps realizing the gravity of Palestinian existence, when they found out that the woman had actually been pregnant.¹⁰²

“Hope” poses the question “What’s the lesser of two evils?” about a series of interpretations of the event (which Björk’s formerly sympathetic biographer, Mark Pytlik, calls an “atrocious lyric”):¹⁰³

101 Lloyd Gedy, “Full-Blooded Up-Tempo: Icelandic Pop Princess and Noise Terrorist Björk Is Dancing to a Tribal Beat,” *Mail & Guardian*, July 13, 2007, <http://mg.co.za>. It is not clear which suicide bombing nor which newspaper article(s) Björk is reacting to.

102 Perhaps Claudia Brunner would agree that compared to most Western journalism or scholarship that tries to imagine the perspective of a female suicide bomber (and ends up either making her a stock character, “the female suicide bomber,” or dismissing her actions as personal, brain-washed, and crazy but never the calculated warfare of a person from a group that has been humiliated and made desperate by vast structural inequality staged by foreign powers), this exploration in which the press rethink their first impression and are struck by the gravity of the woman’s decision is a preferable reaction. See Claudia Brunner, “Occidentalism Meets the Female Suicide Bomber: A Critical Reflection on Recent Terrorism Debates; a Review Essay,” *Signs* 32, no. 4 (2007): 957–71.

103 Mark Pytlik, “Björk: Volta,” *Pitchfork*, May 8, 2007, <http://pitchfork.com>.

- (1) “if a suicide bomber / made to look pregnant / manages to kill her target / or not?”
- (2) “if she kills them / or dies in vain?”
- (3) “if her bump was fake / or if it was real?”

In these questions Björk imagines the differing priorities of the bomber and the Western journalists. Björk was not alone during this period in attempting to examine multiple perspectives on female suicide bombers. Political scientist Claudia Brunner reviews several publications that discuss this phenomenon. Brunner shows that despite good intentions, scholarship and journalism exploring female suicide bombers tend to replicate bias: she reveals the troubling ways in which occidental politics serve in “the discursive production of female suicide bombers as the irrational other of the rational, enlightened Western self.”¹⁰⁴ She shows that rather than exploring the situation via an unbiased examination of the larger context, these texts problematically focus on the individual woman, her appearance, her sanity; assume that she is not a strong leader but has been brainwashed or deceived; create a stock character (sometimes one who is turned into a Muslim/Arab stereotype regardless of her religion or intentions); imagine that a woman chooses bombing because she enviously dreams of gender equality for her “backward” patriarchal Arab/Muslim culture; and

shift from neutral explanation to recommendations for counterterrorist measures that implicitly assume the perspective of the United States and its allies in the so-called war on terror, and a pronounced tendency to invoke the global dimensions of terrorism when it comes to combatting it while eliding the global factors that contribute to structural violence that lays the ground for political resistance and terrorist agency.¹⁰⁵

“Hope” manages to avoid several of the problems Brunner outlines. The song is not from the point of view of the bomber. The lyrics do not unquestioningly ally with the war on terror and in fact consider whether it is evil for the bomber to die in vain. The song does not presume anything about the bomber’s intentions. The lyrics seem to argue that the reporting implicitly (or explicitly) sets some evils as graver than others (deception around pregnancy as more evil than sacrificing one’s fetus).¹⁰⁶

But the song is not without its problems. Björk’s choice of musical collab-

¹⁰⁴ Brunner, “Occidentalism,” 958.

¹⁰⁵ Brunner, “Occidentalism,” 958.

¹⁰⁶ The song frames suicide bombing in a particularly unbiased way, considering that Björk herself was the intended target of Ricardo Lopez’s (failed) murder/suicide in 1996, an incident that she found profoundly troubling for some time after. However, I do not want to draw a strong comparison between these two incidents, for assuming they are equal makes the same occidental assumptions (that suicide bombers are crazy or brainwashed) that Brunner critiques. Lopez was a psychiatrically impaired fan. There is no evidence to suggest that the Palestinian woman who attempted the bombing was mentally unstable.

orator on this song shows some naïveté in failing to consider, until she was in a Malian recording studio with Diabate (who had just rolled out his prayer rug), whether he might be a practicing Muslim and whether playing on this song would offend him. She did, however, take him aside, explaining the premise of the song and asking whether he still wanted to work on it. (He responded that discussions of politically motivated suicide bombings should not be censored.) She also admitted her oversight in an interview.¹⁰⁷

The album recording of “Hope” sounds delicate and careful both in orchestration and in timbre, as well as in terms of her vocal performance of the lyrics (compared to the anthemic punk shouting of instructions on “Declare Independence,” which, symbolically perhaps, follows “Hope” on the album). Björk mentioned in several interviews that her chosen genre of the ballad is a strange but fitting setting for this topic, which she says Timbaland expected to be addressed with “a brutal techno track.” Björk felt that the ballad allowed her to present a less biased perspective.¹⁰⁸

In concert, however, when Diabate joined the *Volta* tour, “Hope” could tend more toward becoming an upbeat jam session (in which Björk’s lyrics become less comprehensible) than an evenhanded musical exploration of the complex politics of Palestinian suicide bombing.¹⁰⁹ To be fair, Björk was caught in a hard place—any generous star wants to give a respected but less well-known musician appearing as a guest in concert for just one song a chance to make an impression on an audience perhaps unfamiliar with him. This meant that an extended solo was included in the song and that while he was playing, she danced next to him. Some videos filmed from the audience at her three Hammersmith Apollo London shows in April 2008 show the cheerful mood and audience interest in both her dancing and Diabate’s solos, yet also an audience member singing along with the lyrics “what’s the lesser [of two evils]?”¹¹⁰

107 “I had wanted to work with Toumani Diabate and I decided to go to Mali. I went into the studio and was just doing a run through and putting up all the microphones for the kora when Toumani Diabate pulled out a mat and rolled it out on the ground. Then I realised he’s a Muslim. And he started praying. I wondered how he was going to feel about me singing, us doing a duet and singing about a pregnant suicide bomber.

I took him aside and we talked about it and, of course, he was very open and educated, saying that this is something that everyone should be talking about. It should not be such a taboo—this is not something we necessarily have to feel against or for, it is just something that is happening in the world. We should definitely be writing pop songs about it, especially ballads” (Gedye, “Full-Blooded Up-Tempo”).

108 Hermes, “Spirit of Invention.”

109 Interestingly, she did not include this song on set lists for the American dates on the 2007 tour: <http://www.setlist.fm>.

110 “Kyliemooregilbert” posted a video focused on “Bjork dancing (Hope)” on April 17, 2008, from one of the three London concerts on this tour: <http://youtube>. On the other hand, in the video “bowier1953” posted, “bjork hammersmith apollo 20 april toumani diabate” one can hear at 0:58 an audience member (perhaps the one recording) singing along, “Oh, what’s the lesser,” suggesting a focus on the lyrics despite the excitement of the guest performer and Björk’s eccentric, enjoyable-to-watch dancing: <http://youtube>. Likewise, in the video “Matthew Temple” shared, “Bjork plus Toumani Diabate” on April 15, 2008, from the Hammersmith Apollo, London, on April 14, 2008, the camera focuses on both Björk and Diabate: <http://youtube>.

In “Hope,” Björk is attempting to work through the politics of motherhood in a time of war and terror from perspectives other than her own. In considering the biased ways that Western reporters reacted to that female suicide bomber, Björk seems to be acknowledging problems with difference feminism (despite her earlier maternal disgust with “those gentlemen”)—that women do not share all motives and need to work just as anyone would to understand one another’s motivations in this troubled, unfair world.

Although Herder’s conception of identity proved useful to Icelanders for developing both independence and women’s rights movements, and he has been regarded as “a beacon of Enlightenment relativism,” German literature and music scholar Vanessa Agnew argues that his anthropological interest in exotic music was in fact a “foil” used to prove “European superiority.”¹¹¹ In “Hope,” Björk quotes a different sort of Enlightenment philosopher, French revolutionist, feminist, and abolitionist Marquis de Condorcet: “Nature has fixed no limits on our hopes.” Writing his *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Human Mind* in 1794 while hiding from the French revolutionists who had turned on him and deemed him a “traitor,” Condorcet challenged the Eurocentric Enlightenment ideal of culture and civilization that others (like Herder) had used to measure the “natives” in their country’s colonies and beyond.¹¹² While continuing to espouse a concept of “progress,” Condorcet challenges an ideology of a people’s culture, music, ideas, and characteristics as anchored to essential traits of “nature” or people. No revolutionary song or overseas collaboration of famous musicians can bring about the end of sexism or terror nor avoid complicating the best of intentions. Björk acknowledges this in her noncommittal lyrics at the end of “Hope,” which refuse to take a side in the question of comparing evils, instead claiming space for sympathetic, serious intention and an invitation for debate:

well, i don’t care
love is all
i dare to drown
to be proven wrong

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¹¹¹ Agnew, “Songs.”

¹¹² Marie-Jean-Antoine-Nicholas de Caritat, marquis de Condorcet, *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, trans. June Barraclough, intro. Stuart Hampshire (1795; New York: Noonday Press, 1955).

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