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THEORIZING GENDER, CULTURE, AND MUSIC

Queer Relationships with Music and an Experiential Hermeneutics for Musical Meaning

Sarah Hankins

The 1990s saw the emergence of a queer musicology that employed the slippages and transgressions of queer experience—those authentic to our experience, and those ascribed to it in sociohistorical discourse—as tools in the construction of a framework for apprehending the sprawling category of “musical meaning.” There emerged a queer way of experiencing musical works, structures, and performances and a queer way of identifying music’s intersections with social structures of power. Together, these approaches ultimately gave rise to queer forms of relationship with music modeled on relationships between queer people. Musical meanings were found via processes that mirrored the body interactions, affective states, and interpretative practices that shape queer ways of being with other queers and being in the world.¹

More than two decades on, queer musicology’s radical interventions retain immense salience, mapping a path through one of our discipline’s longest-standing and most complex dilemmas: How might we reconcile immediate, embodied musical experience with hermeneutics, criticism, and analysis? From the beginning, musicology has sought to balance feelings with facts, magic with science, responsive passion with analytical precision in the hope that such balance will afford a clear-eyed perspective on musical truth and musical meaning. Guido Adler’s vintage instruction is, after all, directed toward the scholar who is also the “true friend” of music, the scientist who must bring all of his or her

1 The body of work that makes up queer and feminist musicology’s “first generation” is too vast to account for or even summarize here, with multiple scholars and diverse theoretical approaches playing key developmental roles, from gender and postcolonial studies to critical race theory. I include the work of several leaders in the field from the early 1990s through today, but my references are by no means comprehensive. From the vast “early” literature that I do not reference, Philip Brett’s scholarship on Britten and Susan McClary’s writings on gender and the common practice tradition continue to inspire many queer musicologists.

empirical faculties to bear upon the near-holy task of preserving music's beauty and power.²

Adler's charge reads as a poetic communion of experience and interpretation, yet the subsequent unfolding of musicology in theory and practice has been shaped in large measure by a tension between these categories. Thus does contemporary musicology find itself in the position of having to articulate music's sociopolitical functions and significations while frequently running up against the term "ineffable" in attempting to describe music. We intuit that music's power somehow transcends its contexts and defies logic or categorization and that we are fundamentally missing something when we try to pin down musical meaning. At the same time, as Carolyn Abbate writes, a musicology grounded in immediacy "is to be suspected because it can become a pretext for excluding certain political understandings of music."³ As humanists, we desire a responsible, socially engaged discipline: we want music, and musicology, to matter in the world.

Amidst this shaky state of affairs, this seeming unease between the bare vitality of experience and the necessary but limiting excursus of criticism and hermeneutics, a queer relationship with music represents a "both/and" approach in which experience and interpretation are coconstitutive of each other. Queer uses of the body, queer social improvisation, and aroused queer interactions enact and articulate musical meanings that are not souvenirs of, reflections upon, or translations of immediate musical experience. Instead, a queer relationship with music reveals musical meaning as the ever-shifting dynamic interface between multiple social objects on a field of social power.

What does a queer relationship with music look like, feel like, sound like? What are the particulars of queer relationality that facilitate an experiential hermeneutics for musical meaning? How might scholars engage queerly with music as we go about our work; and what are the promises and pitfalls of such engagement? This article aims to address such questions if not answer them in full. I begin by teasing out some of the crosscutting themes of queer musicology, reading them alongside other perspectives on queerness and on music, and, from this material, proposing the systematic fundamentals of a queer relationship with music. Next, I ground these fundamentals in the case study of my own ethnomusicological fieldwork with Boston-area drag and gender performers. A discussion of the queer ethos and performative strategies of my field community illustrates several ways that queer relationality can unfold with and in the presence of music; likewise, it highlights some of the sociomusical meanings that emerge in gender performance spaces.

In the second half of this article, I turn to my activities as an ethnographer and a queer community member, framing my own queer relationship

2 Erica Mugglestone and Guido Adler, "Guido Adler's 'The Scope, Method, and Aim of Musicology' (1885): An English Translation with an Historico-Analytical Commentary," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 13 (1982): 16.

3 Carolyn Abbate, "Music: Drastic or Gnostic?," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 3 (2004): 530.

with music in terms of my engagement with field associates. In the gender performance spaces where I carry out fieldwork, certain forms of body-centered, often sexualized interaction between myself as ethnographer and my associates as performers are an expectation and in fact part of a monetized exchange that occurs during shows. This component of my work may be understood as queer experiential hermeneutics unfolding: embodied participation in a musical performance that also enacts a micropolitics of goal-oriented power exchange. This phenomenon opens up a discussion of the conceptual, methodological, and ethical implications of queer relationships with music and their applicability throughout our disciplines.

What Makes It Queer?

A handful of conceptual flight lines obtain across much of queer musicological scholarship, themes that both draw impetus from and intervene within queer studies more broadly. Foremost among these themes is a *valorization of the body* as flesh, bone, and biochemistry and the body as a social construct, a discourse. The scholarly contribution on the body that most intrigues me is a presentation of bodily arousal, often but not solely sexual arousal, as a state in which we may be uniquely attuned to musical meaning. Here, I find Mary Russo's figuration of the "grotesque" body—"the open, protruding, extended, secreting body [that] is connected to the rest of the world"—to be an apt description of arousal.⁴ In an aroused state, we essentially release our somatic holds on ourselves. Bodily processes of micromotion, expansion, and flow are engaged, and we enter into a kind of limbic alliance with some object: music, another body, any artifact of the "outside world." This aroused state stands in juxtaposition to Russo's "Classical body," the static, closed, and impermeable body. While Russo, after Bakhtin, associates the Classical body with the values of "bourgeois individualism," it may just as easily be identified with ideals of academic objectivity and empiricism.⁵

As a psychosomatic process, arousal can be understood as the ultimate failure of the subject/object boundary, a failure that underpins observations like those of Wayne Koestenbaum, for whom "to hear is to be metaphorically impregnated"; Freya Jarman, for whom "identification" with a sounding voice confuses self/other and subject/object distinctions; and Suzanne Cusick, who experiences music as "the lover . . . that leads one body and soul into an alternate reality, into intimacy."⁶

4 Mary J. Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1995), 63.

5 Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 65.

6 Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (London: Penguin, 1994), 16; Freya Jarman-Ivens, *Queer Voices: Technologies, Vocalities, and the Musical Flaw* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Suzanne G. Cusick, "On a Lesbian Relationship with Music: A Serious Effort Not to Think Straight," in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, ed. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas (New York: Routledge, 1994), 74.

Yet arousal's radical characteristics of openness, receptivity, and merge do not give rise to a utopian space of unfettered possibility. Tomie Hahn writes that "the senses reside in a unique position as the interface between body, self and the world. . . . The senses . . . enable us to construct parameters of existence—that which defines the body, self, social group, or world. Simply, we are situated by sensual orientations."⁷ Hahn acknowledges that sensual orientations, preferences, attractions, and aversions, alongside the agency that sense provides us as social beings, are themselves culturally constructed. If our sensoriums are constructs, and bodily arousal is a complex response to sensory input, then *our arousals are constructed and conditioned* as well. Aroused, we confront, enact, reinscribe, or sometimes challenge our own enmeshment within social power structures.

"Power structure" is an arguably vague term, yet its breadth is appropriate to queer theory's basic premise that human experience is shaped by the constant negotiation of the individual with (and within) something vast, weighty, many-armed, and never quite perceptible in its entirety. For queer theorists, the social power structure is modeled on what Michael Warner calls "the sexual order," what Cusick calls "the gender system," and what Lacan might call the phallogocentric symbolic system of meaning.⁸ These terms retain distinct nuances, and the precise dynamics that each references are not identical, even if they overlap; taken together, however, they address the symbolic, structural, and psychoaffective dimensions of a binate, male-female "gender" topos. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has described, the logic of sexual order is so deeply embedded in standard accounts of the world that our understanding of them is incomplete absent a critical analysis of gender and sexuality.⁹ Thus, what may sound like an oversimplification about queer musicology—that it reads and hears gender and sexuality in music—is in fact an extraordinarily profound approach to apprehending the relationship between musical meaning and social meaning; between music's power and power in society; and between our own positionalities with respect to all of the above.

While queer musicology, insisting that music is a social object, always hears/reads/feels music as entangled with and expressive of power structure, it does not seek to codify any of music's social functions or meanings. One prominent critique of hermeneutics within musicology has centered on its tendency to reify particular significations over and above music's countless possibilities. For this reason, Abbate identifies the hermeneutic process as a "domesticat[ion] of what remains nevertheless wild."¹⁰ What's more, she argues, hermeneutics lays

7 Tomie Hahn, *Sensational Knowledge: Embodying Culture through Japanese Dance* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), 3.

8 Michael Warner, *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Cusick, "On a Lesbian Relationship," 72; Jacques Lacan, "The Signification of the Phallus," in *Ecrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (1966; New York: Norton, 2006), 575-85.

9 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

10 Abbate, "Music," 508.

out conclusions that may just as readily be dangerous (e.g., Wagner's notorious "Judaism and Music") as progressive or liberatory: "The hermeneutic process is the same on both sides. Neither the process nor the global conviction about musical legibility it supports can separate the scurrilous or low quality answer from the acceptable answer."¹¹

Abbate writes that "hermeneutics' fundamental gesture is determining and summoning authority."¹² Queer musicology is uniquely attuned to a certain overlap between hermeneutics and authority, always remembering many attempts by powerful social actors throughout the history of modernity to define queerness or pin down its social meaning. At best these attempts have proved limiting and at worst catastrophic for queer individuals and communities. At the same time, lived queer experience *is itself* a hermeneutic, literally an art of interpretation, an ongoing negotiation of selfhood vis-à-vis an omnipresent social text. However, because this text offers mostly inadequate or hostile representations of queerness, queer experiential hermeneutics is necessarily improvisational. A queer relationship with music, then, is fundamentally disoriented with regard to stable or specific musical meanings. As Sherrie Tucker writes, "queer means taking nothing to be natural or normal"; to this I would add that queer assumes answers are always contingent and significations always malleable.¹³

Here, then, are the fundamentals of a queer relationship with music as I read them articulated in queer musicological discourse. Such a relationship is embodied, aroused, and situated. Arousal dissolves the boundaries between self and music by opening up the somatic apparatus to music's energies, *and* arousal enables the individual to locate herself, and to locate music, within social power structures that are undergirded by a sexual order. Because queer arousal is itself "ineffable"—aporic in terms of the symbolic logic of the male-female binary, engaged indeterminately with social text—a queer relationship with music disrupts and reworks received macroaccounts of meaning and arrives at no clear declaration or terminus.

The above is a dense subject entry in any musicological taxonomy—a hermeneutic mouthful, even—but what does such a relationship look like in practice? Certainly, there is no single model. My initial drive to consider this question, however, came from involvement with a gender performance community in which music's particular aesthetic, discursive, and experiential roles—its "meanings" and its "phenomena"—were not only *inflected by* but actually *constituted by* so-called extramusical elements, from discrete items like costumes, stage props, and choreography to the broad categories of audience attitudes and community norms. In other words, musical content and context were radically interchangeable in a way that I did not feel equipped to comprehensively

¹¹ Abbate, "Music," 530.

¹² Abbate, "Music," 516.

¹³ Sherrie Tucker, "When Did Jazz Go Straight? A Queer Question for Jazz Studies," in *Critical Studies in Improvisation: Études critiques en improvisation* 4, no. 2 (2008), <http://www.criticalimprov.com>.

articulate using even the most qualified ideas of “drastic” and “gnostic.”¹⁴ In fact, even my own through-time experiences of watching drag performances—my embodied encounters with their “strangeness, [their] un-earthly as well as earthy qualities, [their] resemblance to magic shows and circuses”—were absolutely molded by a kind of protoconscious interpretation.¹⁵ For example, a performance of Madonna’s “Like a Virgin” featuring a visibly “pregnant woman” onstage could do what it did to and for me not only because of sonic, visual, and other sensory factors unfolding moment to moment but because of the manner in which the performer was engaging with the substantial associative load borne by the song as a preexisting text, ranging from the explicit semantic meaning of its lyrics to its multiple historical significances for gay male fans. There is, quite simply, no drag performance absent a deep critical hermeneutic; sociohistorical “questions” are not “distracting” or marked by “metaphysical distance” but rather gripping, immediate, and granular.¹⁶

My impetus, then, for framing the relationships between performers (or audience members) and music as “queer” in this context was less the fact that Boston’s drag community is comprised primarily of lesbian, transgender, bisexual, and gay individuals but more so the impossibility of teasing out distinctions between experience and interpretation. Drag performance has been extensively theorized—indeed, “that anyone could have existed during the past decade and avoided [the] topic [of drag] is inconceivable”—and one of its most visible/audible characteristics is the supposed insertion of queer messages into widely familiar songs.¹⁷ Yet I argue that drag and gender performance is not the operation of an external ideology upon an existing musical text. Abbate, invoking Vladimir Jankélévitch, writes that “metaphysical mania encourages us to retreat from real music to the abstraction of the work and, furthermore, always to see, as [Jankélévitch] put it, ‘something else,’ something behind or beyond or next to this mental object.”¹⁸ In the case of gender performance, however, both the “musical work” and the performance of it always already contain the “something else”—the meaning—which is never “behind, beyond, or next to” but exists at/as the interface of text and iteration.

Gender Performance and a Queer Community Ethos

In addition to the queerly simultaneous incorporation of immediacy and interpretation, I have identified a queer relationship with music as evincing the four broad characteristics of socially situated arousal, socially situated music, aporia vis-à-vis the “sexual order” that underpins social power structures, and indeterminacy with regard to exact sociopolitical conclusions. There is, amongst

¹⁴ Abbate, “Music.”

¹⁵ Abbate, “Music,” 508.

¹⁶ Abbate, “Music,” 511.

¹⁷ Kathryn Rosenfeld, “Drag King Magic: Performing/Becoming the Other,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 43, nos. 3-4 (2002): 203.

¹⁸ Abbate, “Music,” 505.

Boston's relatively small gender performance community, a necessarily hybrid socioprofessional network along which discourses of sex, gender, music, performance, and politics circulate and recirculate to express a "queer ethos" that incorporates each of these tropes and that informs nearly every aspect of musical performance and reception.¹⁹

At the heart of this ethos lies a formulation of "queer" highly attuned to an identity politics that is by and large constructivist, to use an often questioned but still useful term. Here, the intellectual histories and traditions around constructivism as a theoretical approach might be temporarily set aside in favor of attention to constructivism's fundamentally queer "situatedness," its insistence that "bare" phenomena and received realities are never organic or naturalistic. For instance, some of my associates have framed the categories of "gay" and "lesbian" themselves as oversimplifications, insufficiently attentive to the ways in which gay men and women are as much the product of systemically inequitable social structures as their heterosexual counterparts.²⁰ Constructivism is present on the stage as well, as in performances that employ elements of S/M sex in order to point up the power dynamics that inflect any sexual or gendered relationship, or those that interrogate the figure of the human, with bodies presented as bigendered or nongendered, disfigured, disabled, or otherwise (de)(re)constructed (burlesquer Madge of Honor fully wrapped in dehumanizing black plastic; drag queen Katya Zamolodchikova in a cat suit complete with ears and tail; performer Johnny Blaze literally split down the middle via half-"male," half-"female" costume and choreography). Regarding music (which cannot truly be separated out from the above), drag and gender performance (and queer life in general) has always been constructivist, gleefully—or madly, or in rage—commandeering the most well-known, ostensibly straightforward songs and allowing them to resignify. Thus do my associates hear Madonna as a voice of gay masculinity, or call hip-hop superstar Nicki Minaj by the name "Licky My Vag," or play the national anthem in order to contradict the terms of national membership. Johnny Blaze's much-beloved "dildos are a girl's best friend" is delightful because it claims for the prosthetic phallus all of the diamond's gender and class associations and then subverts them in service of a queer vision of the social world.²¹ Katya Zamolodchikova elicits roars of audience approval for

¹⁹ Boston has a relatively small number of gender performance venues and regular events, three of which have provided the ethnographic basis for this account. Jacques' Cabaret is Boston's only full-time drag bar and a long-standing fixture of South End Boston's gay male community, with drag queen revues seven nights a week. Periodic special events at Jacques' include Perestroika, a monthly night headed up by drag queen Katya Zamolodchikova, who is one of my primary field associates. Zamolodchikova also performs in TraniWreck, a multigender, multigenre cabaret and variety show that ran as a monthly night for seven years in different venues around Boston and Cambridge until 2012. TraniWreck founder Aliza Shapiro / Heywood Wakefield and cast principal Johnny Blaze are also significant field associates.

²⁰ Aliza Shapiro / Heywood Wakefield, interview with the author, Cambridge MA, January 2010; Johnny Blaze, interview with the author, Cambridge MA, October 2011.

²¹ A 2011 performance of Johnny Blaze at TraniWreck singing "A Girl's Real Best Friend" is available at <http://www.youtube.com>.

performances that might include a Russian-language version of “I Will Survive,” disco dancing in front of Eastern Orthodox paintings of the Virgin Mother, a Soviet flag worn as a cape, and pantomimed oral sex, all of which index power structure in diverse and specific manifestations and catalyze multiple forms of psychoaffective engagement on the part of queer audience members.²²

Alongside constructivism, my field community’s ethos also incorporates elements of what José Esteban Muñoz calls “disidentification,” an ideological and performative approach that “resists the interpellating call of ideology [fixing] a subject within the state power apparatus. It is a reformatting of self within the social, a third term that resists the binary of identification and counteridentification.”²³ Where constructivism assumes the artificiality of any social object and the malleability of its significations, disidentification makes use of social objects to gesture toward an unfixed subjectivity. Muñoz frames the “terrorist drag” of performance artist Dr. Vaginal Crème Davis as disidentificatory, citing, among other examples, her stage name’s reference to Angela Davis as an evocation of Black Power that sidesteps the misogyny and homophobia of Black Panther militancy.²⁴ Disidentification, in other words, is an “intersectional strategy” and a purposefully indeterminate one.²⁵ It moves betwixt and between, remapping ostensibly static configurations of social power by deploying signifiers of center *and* periphery, hegemony *and* opposition.

Muñoz draws a clear line between disidentification and counteridentification, or the straightforward “denouncement of dominant discourse.”²⁶ For my field associates, an example of counteridentification is the lesbian separatist movement of the 1970s and 1980s, which retains significance because of its path-breaking, radical energy but which is also seen as replacing one hegemony with another, equally comprehensive superintendency of the individual. Relatedly, my associates distinguish the constructivist strategies and intersectional aesthetics of their own performative play from approaches that aim toward an escape from dominant discourse. When drag king and promoter Aliza Shapiro / Heywood Wakefield tells me, for instance, “we don’t do lesbians dressed like men,” ze does not mean that drag-kinging is absent from hir event stage.²⁷ Rather, ze uses “lesbians dressed like men” as a gloss for drag that eschews self-reflective engagement with the valences of social power in favor of performing simple “difference.”

One means of getting at the implications of constructivism and disidentification where musical meaning, sexual order, and social power are concerned may be a reading of Cusick’s “lesbian relationship with music” in tandem with

22. A representative performance by Katya Zamolodchikova (Jacques’ Cabaret, 2011) is available at <http://www.youtube.com>.

23. José Esteban Muñoz, “‘The White to Be Angry’: Vaginal Davis’s Terrorist Drag,” *Social Text*, no. 52/53 (1997): 83.

24. Esteban Muñoz, “‘The White to Be Angry,’” 83.

25. Esteban Muñoz, “‘The White to Be Angry,’” 84.

26. Esteban Muñoz, “‘The White to Be Angry,’” 83.

27. Aliza Shapiro / Heywood Wakefield, interview with the author, Cambridge MA, January 2010.

my field community's formulation of queerness.²⁸ Cusick describes an understanding of her own arousal in response to music that essentially creates meaning outside the logic of sexual order:

When a lesbian loves a *woman*, does the power structure known as the gender system remain intact? . . . Or is the whole relationship an escape (for all parties) from the power structure known as the gender system, that no one be in the position—worth less, power less—marked “woman,” and no one be in the position—power full, worth full—marked “man”?

For me, the whole relationship is an escape.²⁹

In treating music as another woman, in allowing herself to “be on top” sometimes and music to “be on top” at other times, Cusick enacts a relationship with music that is essentially nondirectional and, in the long run, nonhierarchical.³⁰ This formulation of the “power-pleasure-intimacy triad” that shapes musical experience is one of queer musicology's most lasting interventions, and its profound challenge to a binary logic of meaning is one to which my field associates would readily profess commitment.³¹ At the same time, gender performers do not necessarily conceive that escape from power structure is possible. This is because the raw materials of their queer ethos, and their performative play, are those of power structure itself. Symbolically, these raw materials include the recognition that somebody, somewhere (if not everyone, everywhere) is *always* in the position—worth less, power less—marked woman, and somebody is *always* in the position—power full, worth full—marked man. Organizationally, these raw materials include hierarchy, inequality, asymmetrical distribution of power and resources. Bodily, its raw materials include maleness and femaleness, the Phallus and the Vessel, “topness” and “bottomness.”

Yet while queerness is *made of* power structure, it is not ossified within power structure. “Queerness” itself is a construct, a holdover from imperial Europe's science of sex (a discursive manifestation of power structure if there ever was one), yet actual queer experience and queer relationality are always resisting that age-old codification, unfolding atavistically, with all of the indeterminacy, fluidity, and dynamism that exists before naming.³² While Cusick's

²⁸ Cusick, “On a Lesbian Relationship,” 68.

²⁹ Cusick, “On a Lesbian Relationship,” 72.

³⁰ Cusick, “On a Lesbian Relationship,” 75.

³¹ Cusick, “On a Lesbian Relationship,” 73.

³² Early modern Europe's “science of sexuality” and its attempts to codify deviant sexualities are discussed authoritatively by Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (1976; New York: Vintage/Random House, 1990). Foucault argues that diverse behaviors among children, the mentally ill, criminals, and homosexuals that had previously been regarded and addressed individually were subsumed under the heading of “perversion.” According to Foucault, this shift in public discourse came about in large measure due to increasing awareness amongst imperial administrators of the need to handle “populations” and thus attend to demographic issues of birth rates, marriage, and family planning.

lesbian relationship with music reveals the instability of power structure by slipping out and away from it, a queer relationship with music can be understood as moving in and toward, using the very materials of social power to (de)(re)construct power structure at its symbolic base.

If Cusick's process and that of my field associates are positioned differently with respect to power structure, their shared choreography is "the circulation of pleasure."³³ Sex, sexiness, arousal, and desire are as fundamental to my associates' queer ethos as constructivism and disidentification. In large measure, arousal's centrality is born of necessity: queerness is not only an ideology but a living community, and queers must look primarily to each other, not to the straight world, for sex and love. For this reason, Kathryn Rosenfeld calls queerness a "community of desire"; as an ethnomusicologist, I can think of few other human collectives about whom any discussion is prohibitively muted absent an accounting for sex or erotic desire.³⁴ It is not surprising that, as one of queerness's prominent social institutions, gender performance fulfills the function of providing space and time for sociosexual interaction: flirting, gossip, dancing, pickups, and dates.

Arousal is not simply a by-product of gender performance, however; sex and its attendant affective states are also incorporated into performative strategies. While the history of drag reveals countless modes and styles that are not explicitly "sexy" (the Harlem balls of the 1970s and 1980s, for instance, valorized mimesis of specific social types over and above erotic display),³⁵ the styles with which I am most familiar turn upon sexual acts/actions and aroused responses as key mechanisms by which the aims and agendas of particular performances are inscribed into audiences. How better, for instance, for Johnny Blazes to convey the intersections between communication technologies, popular media, social power, and sexual order than by pantomiming the act of sex with a phone receiver to the sounds of Lady Gaga's "Telephone"? And where better for audience members to grasp this particular musical meaning than in the body, via excitement and titillation?³⁶ Blazes's key choreographic element during this piece—repeatedly and rapidly "slamming" an old-fashioned receiver against his groin and then lifting it up with both hands—is a compound symbolic and material gesture that, because Blazes's physical presentation is multigendered (including, in this case, high heels, a dress, a phallic prosthesis, and a glitter mustache), calls up both the provider and the recipient of sexual penetration. Here, the collapse of "differently gendered" positions into single body acting on / acted upon by an ostensibly nongendered object resonates among queer audience members at visceral and ideo-ethical levels simultaneous-

33 Cusick, "On a Lesbian Relationship," 71.

34 Rosenfeld, "Drag King Magic," 204.

35 Phillip Brian Harper, "'The Subversive Edge': Paris Is Burning, Social Critique, and the Limits of Subjective Agency," *Diacritics* 24, nos. 2-3 (1994): 90-103.

36 Johnny Blazes's 2011 TraniWreck performance of "Telephone" is available at <http://www.youtube.com>.

ly. The result is a kind of “total-system” thrall that, for myself and many other spectators, activates the process of *feeling about*, not thinking about, Blazes’s messages and meanings.

The generation of novel social meaning via the experience of sexual arousal is neatly articulated in Gayatri Gopinath’s analysis of queer desire in South Asian cinema, in particular her examination of sexual dynamics between the characters Johnny and Omar in director Stephen Frear’s 1985 *My Beautiful Launderette*. Here, Gopinath locates arousal and desire as a site of experiential confrontation with power structure, suggesting that “queer desire is precisely what allows [Omar] to remember . . . barely submerged histories of colonialism and racism.” Such histories “erupt into the present at the very moment when queer sexuality is being articulated.”³⁷ Omar’s arousal is infused with anger toward Johnny for his participation in a fascist parade that Johnny witnessed as a boy; equally, his anger is charged with desire. The two cannot be separated. The mingled pressure of both affective states, the coming together of a brown diasporic body and a white English body, effect a reconfiguration of power’s energies: a detumescence of history’s thrust, a displacement (if not erasure) of animosity by amour. At last, the arrangement of “who’s on top” is dictated not only by history but also by the imperatives of mutual pleasure.

Queer Fieldwork, Arousal, and Ethnographic Ethics

If individual and collective relationships with music amongst my field associates are subtended by a queer ethos that valorizes constructivism, sociopolitical disidentification, and sexuality in equal measure, my own relationship with music, like that of many ethnomusicologists, has been shaped in large measure by field experiences and interpersonal interactions. When I do ethnographic fieldwork immersed in multivalent spectacles and sexualized displays, surrounded by performers and audience members who articulate an embodied, constructivist identity politics, I find myself reminded again and again that I cannot escape the logic of sexual order and the social structure it undergirds, no matter how unconventionally gendered my relationship with music might be. I sense that if I seek to escape, to abscond with music to some bright vista outside of power structure, my “self” will be lost, and my relationship will dissolve.

This approach to music is a full-scale internalization of the activities, attitudes, and discourses of the people with whom I have worked. In large measure, I experience my associates’ approach to music, sexual order, and social power as my own because I am doing so-called insider ethnography. I am a member of Boston’s queer community; I have counted field associates as friends or lovers; and the things that benefit them—more money for shows, greater legitimacy for gender performance, greater safety for queer bodies on the streets of Boston—benefit me as a queer person. I am in agreement with Gregory Barz, who writes

³⁷ Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 2.

in his ethnography *Singing for Life* that he “find[s] it tiresome to feign unemotional detachment.”³⁸ Certainly, many ethnomusicologists come to experience a commitment to their field communities that transcends scholarly interest. As Kay Kaufman Shelemay notes, “most of us are well aware that we do not study a disembodied concept called ‘culture’ or a place called the ‘field,’ but rather encounter a stream of individuals to whom we are subsequently linked in new ways.”³⁹ It is difficult to maintain Russo’s “Classical body” when doing ethnography, and this probably goes double for fieldwork among one’s own folk. After all, I had already “gone native” even before my first ethnographic interview. I was already of the field before I was in the field.

Judith [Jack] Halberstam has done much to advance an understanding of the uniquely close relationship between queer academics and “subcultural participants,” pointing out that “for many queers, the boundary between theorist and subcultural producer may be slight or at least permeable.”⁴⁰ Halberstam recognizes Dr. Vaginal Davis; drag king house mother and archivist Juanita Mohammed; and professor/producer Tammy Rae Carland as intersectional actors, three among the many queer individuals whose lives blur “insider/outsider” distinctions with respect to queer community and academia.⁴¹ Crossings of this type result in what Halberstam calls “the death of the expert,” a collapse of the objective posture that stiffens much critical theory and cultural studies.⁴² Halberstam argues that this “new queer cultural studies” avoids the tendency of theory to eventually leave behind its originary subject, to render expressive forms little more than “raw material for a developed theory of cultural resistance or the semiotics of style or some other discourse.”⁴³ Here are striking echoes of Abbate’s warning that the hermeneutic process can manufacture significance or raise up certain meanings at the expense of others.⁴⁴ Here, too, is queer studies’ reparative potential, for a queer theorist is always already a queer subject and cannot range hermeneutically far afield from actual queer experience, at least not without leaving pieces of herself behind.

I find the cultural text of gender performance especially “sticky” in this way. As Martin F. Manalansan writes in his study on gay Filipino men in diaspora, the idioms, strategies, and aesthetics that shape the queer theatric are also the “dramaturgy” of the queer everyday.⁴⁵ Gender performance is “not just

38 Gregory Barz, *Singing for Life: HIV/AIDS and Music in Uganda* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 2.

39 Kay Kaufman Shelemay, “The Ethnomusicologist, Ethnographic Method, and the Transmission of Tradition,” in *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, 2nd ed., ed. Gregory Barz and Timothy J. Cooley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 153.

40 Judith Halberstam, “What’s That Smell? Queer Temporalities and Subcultural Lives,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 6, no. 3 (2003): 320.

41 Halberstam, “What’s That Smell?,” 320.

42 Halberstam, “What’s That Smell?,” 321.

43 Halberstam, “What’s That Smell?,” 322.

44 Abbate, “Music,” 517.

45 Martin F. Manalansan, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

about acting, but rather is about the aesthetics” of queer individuals’ “struggles for survival” in the world.⁴⁶ The difference between staged gender performance and everyday gender performance is, at most, one of degree, not of kind. Even when I am watching a particular stage act for the first time, I am also remembering it, for although I don’t do queer theater, I do gender performance on the street, in the bedroom, and in the classroom, alone and in company. The gestures I make in the world, the things that pique my curiosity, the sounds, images, and bodies that turn me on, are only magnified and intensified on the gender performance stage. This deep affinity ensures that my scholarly approach to gender performance functions in a relationship to gender performance’s actual unfolding.

For me, this psychosomatic kinship is affectively experienced as arousal. That is, I desire confluence with bodies, gestures, sounds, and images ostensibly outside myself; I open somatically toward those objects; and I feel satisfaction when limbic alliance is realized via a compound process involving sensory stimuli, imagination, and queer interpretative practice. Arousal is the second reason I cannot easily separate my field community’s approach to music, sexual order, and social power from my own, since arousal’s pleasure significantly compounds the stickiness inherent in doing ethnography of queer subculture as a queer person. If arousal is, as I have suggested, a response of the constructed sensorium, perhaps queerness has “taught” my senses to awaken inside itself—to dance, as it were, with the one that brings me. As the throat of the trained singer-as-listener may silently and automatically match pitches in the presence of vocal performance, my nerves and muscles resonate with the body displays, responses, and interactions of performers and audience members around me.

So here I am in the field, trying to do musical ethnography of a community I belong to, watching/hearing/feeling performances and interactions that turn me on. If I were “only” a queer person, a member of Boston’s queer community, and a gender performance fan, this arousal would be precisely what gender performers appreciate in their audiences. And yet I am an ethnographer as well, and there’s the rub. If I cannot separate my relationship with music in the field from my position within my queer community, neither can I entirely separate this relationship from my position within the academic institutions and traditions that provide resources and impetus for my work.

Among these traditions is a discourse around ethics that remains particularly salient to ethnomusicologists, who often work closely with communities at the social margins. In ethnomusicology, this discourse centers on the person of the ethnographer herself, without whom ethnography cannot exist but whose subjectivity can infect the interpretation of ethnographic data in multiple ways. In a volume exploring the role of “vulnerability” in ethnography, Ruth Behar cautions that “the exposure of the self who is also a spectator has to take us somewhere we couldn’t otherwise get to. It has to be essential for

46 Manalansan, *Global Divas*, 16.

the argument, not a decorative flourish, not exposure for its own sake.”⁴⁷ The notion of exposure “for its own sake”—for the ethnographer’s gratification, presumably—suggests that there are times when reflexivity in scholarship is less than rigorous. Barz gives a nod to this view when he recognizes potential reader objections to the “self-indulgence” of his choice to “give up on objectivity” in his ethnographic work with AIDS activist-musicians in Uganda.⁴⁸ If Barz’s deeply human response to a catastrophic epidemic can be academically suspect, how much more intemperate is the presence of bodily arousal in musical ethnography? Arousal’s frankness, its urgency and dynamism, seem to overwhelm the unstable, nervous place of the self in much music scholarship, defying a tacit disciplinary preference for reflexivity in moderation.

The discourse around ethnographic ethics warns that our attractions and aversions not only shape our reception of data but also potentially destabilize or even endanger our “subject” communities. We understand the body of the fieldworker to be a vessel of the power that comes with money, resources, and academic membership. “Too much” subjectivity in our relationships with field associates may therefore reactivate historic and extant hierarchies and asymmetries that, in general, our work aims to ameliorate. Here, perhaps, is one explanation for the tenacity of Russo’s Classical body trope in much ethnomusicological thought and practice: ideals of “empiricism” and “objectivity,” well worn and problematic though they may be, at least tend to rein in our bodies, force us to check and double-check our desires, and mediate our interactions in the field.

Queer ethnography engages consistently and intensely with the problem of reflexivity. In characteristically queer fashion, it generates no stable answers but poses provocative questions about the nature of boundaries, the value of the ethics discourse, and the negotiation of the ethnographer/“subject” relationship. Fundamentally, queer musicology puts forth an argument that *there are no instances* in which the exposure of the self is a decorative flourish, that even “exposure for its own sake” is ethical. In part, this stance has emerged in response to the historic salience and pervasiveness of a command to “keep it to yourself,” “don’t ask, don’t tell,” and so on. The development of queer theory has been a constant pushing back against this command, a retort that the self *must* be told not only in order to advance toleration or equal status but in order to challenge the very macroaccounts of sexual order and social power that by nature perpetuate inequality.⁴⁹

In ethnography of queer subculture, the exposure of the ethnographer’s self—both in the sense of opening the body through arousal and in the sense of narrating the body in scholarship—can be understood as a necessary prerequisite

47 Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 10.

48 Barz, *Singing for Life*, 2.

49 Warner, *Fear of a Queer Planet*.

to adequate representation of the “subject” under discussion. Thus does William Leap suggest that his anthropological understanding of the social functions of gay anonymous public sex is informed by his own sexual experiences and those of his associates.⁵⁰ If Leap’s degree of reliance on “the personal, the emotional, the sensual” seems extreme, it is merely an intensification of the dynamics at work in, for instance, Don Kulick’s analysis of the gender of Brazilian transgender prostitutes or Sherrie Tucker’s attempts to discuss the topic of lesbianism with former members of World War II era “girl bands.”⁵¹ Kulick gives no indication that he has sex with *travestis*, yet his verbal intercourse with his field associates includes teasing and flirtation, and it is inflected by Kulick’s identity as a gay man. Remove either the erotic banter or Kulick’s queer subjectivity, and his powerful insights about sexual order in Brazilian society are no longer available. Tucker’s wish to “find her lesbian subject at last,” meanwhile, drives her ethnographic approach, at least initially, and shapes her writing choices.⁵² What emerges is a desire for ethnographic data that is not entirely distinct from the desire to learn secrets, witness a form of sexual vulnerability, and experience intimacy.

In these examples and across queer ethnography, reflexivity is not a by-product, not material for an introductory chapter or conclusion, but the very pulse of ethnographic unfolding. Yet it is an erratic pulse, for reflexivity’s revelatory potential is proximate to its very real dangers. Leap acknowledges that writing or talking about the semiotic codes of anonymous gay sex may enable state authorities to identify and regulate the activity.⁵³ Tucker learns that some of her associates feel “pick[ed] on” or disrespected as musicians when she asks questions about sexuality.⁵⁴ When the queer body enters the queer field, reflexivity is ethnography’s engine and its ethic, its power and pitfall, its pleasure and its danger.

As an ethnomusicologist who is aroused in the presence of gender performance, I assume queer ethnography’s lively and uneasy reflexive posture. Arousal keeps me close and tight with my field community; it is fundamental to my understanding of music, sexual order, and social power; yet it also transgresses a fundamental subject/object boundary that retains musicological salience in spite of interrogations and reconsiderations. Perhaps unsurprisingly, arousal not only shapes my relationship with music in the field but is also the point at which this relationship hits a snag and gets wrapped around the axle of my two selves: queer person and ethnographer. This stumbling block became

50 William L. Leap, introduction to *Public Sex/Gay Space*, ed. William L. Leap (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 4.

51 Leap, introduction, 4; Don Kulick, “The Gender of Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes,” *American Anthropologist* 99, no. 3 (1997): 574–55; Sherrie Tucker, “When Subjects Don’t Come Out,” in *Queer Episodes in Music and Modern Identity*, ed. Sophie Fuller and Lloyd Whitesell (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 293–310.

52 Tucker, “When Subjects Don’t Come Out,” 299.

53 William Leap, “Closing Remarks,” 4th Annual Public Anthropology Conference, American University, Washington DC, October 2007.

54 Tucker, “When Subjects Don’t Come Out,” 307.

most real when I had to choose my level of engagement with what is known in my field community as “tipping,” an activity in which audience members give cash to performers during shows in exchange for special attention, bodily contact, and sometimes explicitly sexual interaction.⁵⁵

Tipping is not a universal phenomenon; it does not necessarily occur, for example, in the drag venues of Tel Aviv, Israel, where I have carried out periodic fieldwork. In the United States, too, some gender performance has developed without the tip exchange, as in Harlem’s drag balls, where contestants are rewarded with judges’ high scores, not audience members’ cash.⁵⁶ Yet much American drag has tended to incorporate tipping, and it is a central practice within my field community. The tip exchange is highly practical—it is how many performers earn a good portion of their nightly take—and also highly symbolic, a multisensory convergence of music, power, bodies, sex, and money. The mechanics and logistics of tipping are varied and extensive, and a full discussion of how this exchange can play out in gender performance venues is beyond the scope of this essay; I want to emphasize, however, that tipping often (if not always) involves extreme physical closeness between performers and audience members, ranging from close dancing to lap sitting, kissing, licking, groping, and other sexual or protosexual touch.⁵⁷

Because particular musical sounds mold the body choices that performers make while engaging with audiences during the tip exchange, sound and movement can be experienced as synesthetic of one another. Audience members may “see” a heavy bass drop as a pop-and-lock as a performer descends from the stage into the crowd, or “feel” a sinuous synth line as a performer’s teasing caress while easing a dollar bill from one’s fingers. Katya Zamolodchikova’s trademark oral sex pantomime, for instance, is usually performed on an audience member according to the tempo, meter, and beat divisions of the musical track being played. For me, participating in the tip exchange provides extraordinarily direct contact with music in the field. It is something like a literalization of the way Cusick describes music: as a lover that “does it” to her and her

55 Audience members sometimes give tips as gestures of appreciation, expecting no special attention from the performer in exchange. Also, some audience members may receive erotic attention after tipping but may not be sexually “turned on” by it, as, perhaps, in the cases of heterosexual bachelorette parties or tourists. However, I read erotic valences even in these instances of tipping. As I have indicated, gender performance’s “sex-saturated” stage shows and community discourses create an erotically charged atmosphere. In this context, it is a thin line between sexual arousal and other kinds of somatic activation like amusement, shock, or even repulsion.

56 Harper, “The Subversive Edge,” 91. It is important to note that Harper’s piece, although it describes some key features of the drag ball, is not an ethnographic or historical account. This critical essay examines the problems of representation, discursive and juridical, precipitated by the success of Jennie Livingston’s 1990 documentary film *Paris Is Burning*.

57 Elsewhere I frame this monetized erotic interaction as a central fixture of gender performance’s “queer sociosexual economy,” which imbricates and transfigures mass-cultural commodifications of sex and gender in part via the overwhelming presence of musical sound during tipping. See Hankins, “‘I’m a Cross between a Clown, a Stripper, and a Streetwalker’: Drag Tipping, Sex Work, and a Queer Socio-Sexual Economy,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, forthcoming.

students, an active agent that “tops” her.⁵⁸ During the tip exchange, I feel music as unquestionably on top—sitting on my lap, making lewd gestures, grabbing my body parts, taking my money. Whereas Cusick finds the body of another woman legible in her lesbian relationship with music, I find music legible in the body of another woman . . . or man, or a body that is both, or neither.

Tipping is a musical activity that, for many of my associates, is also highly cathected with sociohistorical associations of sex work. As Katya Zamolodchikova explains her participation in the activity, “I’m a cross between a clown, a stripper, and a streetwalker. . . . I’m literally out there pedaling my pussy for dollar bills.”⁵⁹ In this vein, Anne McClintock’s description of sex worker–client interaction outlines a complex circulation of power and pleasure that is readily legible in gender performance’s tip exchange:

The client touches the prostitute’s hand in a fleeting moment of physical intimacy in the exchange of cash, a ritual exchange that confirms and guarantees each time the man’s apparent economic mastery over the women’s sexuality, work and time. At the same time, however, the moment of paying confirms the opposite: the man’s dependence on the woman’s sexual power and skill.⁶⁰

In the context of gender performance, tipping is a neat metonym. Proffering money in exchange for proximity to performers’ bodies literalizes arousal’s basic “unfreedom,” its contingent nature, its enmeshment within social power structures undergirded by the male-female gender topos. Yet tipping also enables a reconfiguration of sex work’s presumed power dynamics. In gender performance, money, dependence, and mastery do not move between stable male and female poles but circulate amongst multigendered queer individuals. What’s more, tipping’s synesthetic effect, that sensory confusion between the aural, visual, and haptic fields, extends equally to the gesture of the tip itself. In other words, the social meanings of money in exchange for sex are remembered and experientially renarrated *intertextually* with the music that plays during the tip exchange and with the body actions of performers and audience members.⁶¹ A tip, therefore—perhaps a tip proffered during a sexy couple dance to the sounds of the Dresden Dolls’ “Coin Operated Boy”—constitutes payment not “just” for sexualized displays or erotic attention but also for this track’s son-

58 Cusick, “On a Lesbian Relationship,” 74–75.

59 Zamolodchikova, interview with the author, Cambridge MA, May 2011.

60 Anne McClintock, “Screwing the System: Sexwork, Race, and the Law,” *boundary 2* 19, no. 2 (1992): 72.

61 Tipping’s associations of sex work are readily apparent, yet the gesture can also be delinked from sexuality, potentially as a class-related practice or a race marker. Keith E. McNeal suggests that tipping at drag shows by queer and heterosexual audience members may even represent “‘guilt money’ exchanged with the professionally stigmatized,” the drag queen as *Ur*-representative of effeminate male homosexuality. See McNeal, “Behind the Make-up: Gender Ambivalence and the Double Bind of Gay Selfhood in Drag Performance,” *Ethos* 27, no. 3 (1999): 370–111. Any of tipping’s many significations may potentially be evoked and reconfigured in the context of gender performance.

ics, complex meanings, and performative resignifications thereof. During the tip exchange, “dependence” and “mastery” are unmoored from their positions within the symbolic logic and sociopolitical manifestations of sexual order, their energies given over to the generation of queer social meanings and the strengthening of queer affective ties.

When observed in the light of ethnographic tradition, gender performance’s tip exchange may also reconfigure the presumed organization of power that undergirds the researcher/”subject” relationship and drives the discourse around ethnographic ethics. When I started tipping performers, I told myself I was simply engaging in the fairly common field practice of paying associates for services like translation assistance, interviews, and musical instruction. I soon realized, however, that this formulation drastically elided one intention (ethnographic reciprocity) with another (buying access to other queer bodies). My actual, aroused experience of tipping put the lie to a hermeneutic compromise aimed toward frictionless reconciliation of my queer community membership and my position within academia. After tipping heavily during several performances, I became concerned that my ethnography was getting clouded by my frank desire for bodily proximity to performers, which I could facilitate by holding up dollar bills. I became concerned that I might in fact be engaging in an asymmetric exchange with my associates. I sensed that my role of ethnographer did come with certain types of material and conceptual power that performers or other audience members who tipped did not necessarily possess. Essentially, I was afraid of being an ethnographic “john,” enacting mastery over my associates’ bodies, work, and time through the money exchange.

It was a confusing place in which I found myself. First of all, didn’t I *wish* to destabilize subject/object boundaries in the field, to interrogate received figurations of the ethnographer/associate relationship? Over the course of my academic training, I had consistently read queer theory and queer ethnography alongside more traditional discourses of ethnographic ethics. Why, then, was I suddenly craving the presumed safety of a “Classical” body for myself? Second, why had I assumed in the first place that “standard” ethnographic reciprocity via payment was inherently transparent, ungendered, or desexualized? Third, if I withheld my tips, was I then engaging in nonreciprocal ethnography, another ethical problem? After all, as drag king, promoter, and emcee Aliza Shapiro / Heywood Wakefield would frequently remind audiences during shows, these performers work in large part for tips. Finally, and most significantly, if I chose to reciprocate in other ostensibly “nonaroused” ways, such as buying drinks at the bar and DJing at shows for free, was I somehow vacating my queer body and thus abdicating my social position as a member of this “community of desire”? That possibility was genuinely painful to contemplate, a loss I was unwilling to absorb for the sake of dubious moral comfort.

I worked out some of my confusion over the course of several subsequent interviews, during which my associates reminded me that absent sexual arousal

on the part of audience members, gender performance does not fully achieve the aim of inscribing into audience bodies and psyches its representations and reconfigurations of sexual order and social power. From this vantage point, my attempt to distance myself from the implications of my own arousal by declining to tip was uncomfortably close to disavowing the aims of gender performance itself; this seemed like a problem for a queer community member and an ethnographer alike. In addition, my associates made it clear that if I declined to tip, I would not be fully trusted to represent their thoughts, feelings, strategies, and aspirations in academic discourse. I had withheld tips in a half-articulated attempt to keep asymmetrical power of my field relationships; instead, my associates were reading the withholding itself as the move toward mastery.

Was there a way to bring both of my selves together during the tip exchange? Intuitively, this seemed possible, for tipping, as I have aimed to convey, is a site of collapse and convergence. My own subjectivities—queer community member, ethnographer—were no less subject to tipping’s synesthetic effects and its restructuring potential than any other of its constituent parts. If I could *give my selves over* to the tip, rather than trying to retain them as stable and identifiable, their seeming incompatibility might be productively resolved.

In truth, my selves were always already given over, because this is the dual effect of sensory saturation and bodily arousal. Arousal opens, extends, and receives; it dissolves boundaries not only between our bodies and objects in the outside world but also between different and even contradictory parts of our selves. For me, the productive resolution of an ethical dilemma did not emerge from a shaky compromise between the discourse around ethnographic ethics and the implications of full membership within my queer community. It emerged, simply, from a “both/and” experience in the field. I now understand my participation in gender performance’s tip exchange as *disidentificatory* with respect to ethnography’s practice of reciprocation via payment. That is, I do not counteridentify against academic traditions and discourses by trying to hide the fact that I am an ethnographer when I go to gender performances. I acknowledge that tipping is a way of paying my associates for field data, a practice firmly embedded within a complex ethnographer/“subject” power structure. At the same time, I do not deny my experience as a queer person who desires closeness with other queer bodies, to the extent that I am willing to pay for it.

Whether or not potentially harmful power differentials are present in our interactions with field associates depends, I suggest, on which type of body we bring to these interactions. Undertaken by Russo’s Classical body, static, closed, and guarded, a tip exchange may indeed reinscribe configurations that locate “researcher” as distinct from “subject,” as safe from and more powerful than subject. But undertaken by the open, aroused body, that which exists in dynamic contact with the outside world, the tip exchange may represent a productive challenge to the boundaries that separate researcher from “subject.” What’s more, aroused exchanges like tipping may challenge presumed

boundaries between immediate musical experience and music's socio-sociopolitical significances, boundaries that so frustrate our search for an experiential hermeneutics for musical meaning.

Queer Experiential Hermeneutics and Musicology

In describing the queer ethos, performative strategies, and behaviors of my field community, I have sought to depict their collective queer relationship with music and the types of meaning that such a relationship can enact and articulate. Gender performance illustrates, rather spectacularly, how to relate queerly with music. Significantly, it reveals that a queer relationship with music is not dyadic. In gender performance, queer body and music come together polyamorously, so to speak, relating intimately as two social objects intimate with countless others as well, all of which implicate one another, signify and resignify on each other, and move in response to each other.

As a queer ethnographer studying a community of which I am a part, a theorist who is also a subject, I have internalized my field community's relationship with music not by reflecting upon or analyzing this relationship but by, in the first instance, participating in it. My arousal renders moot any aspirations toward objective detachment. And because my field interactions are always saturated with sounding music, I cannot extricate my experience and understanding of what I *do* from my experience and understanding of what I *hear*. Additionally, because these interactions involve people, they enact social micropolitics: the use of different types of power (sexual, material, symbolic) to achieve different types of goals (performative, economic, erotic, academic). As it turns out, these various goals are not mutually exclusive but can be jointly achieved through the compound processes of gender performance's tip exchange, which is at once sexual and professional, a rather hot experience that also provides juicy ethnographic data. Here, then, is my immediate, embodied musical experience interpreting itself with respect to social significations; as experience occurs, sense making happens simultaneously and organically.

Queer relationships with music are not the sole province of scholars who are sexually queer, those who study performance, or those who deal specifically with gender and sexuality. Indeed, some approaches in musicology employ elements of queer relationality outside of queer or explicitly performative contexts. Work on "sonic warfare," for example, interrogates subject/object boundaries and investigates different forms of somatic activation alongside the uses of music as an instrument of power. When Jonathan Sterne, Suzanne Cusick, Steve Goodman, and others imagine themselves in (or actually put themselves in) the posture of the muzak-bombarded mallgoer, the sonic torture victim, or the lockstep soldier, they are engaging simultaneously and equally with the body's responses to musical sound and music's sociopolitical semantics.⁶²

62 Jonathan Sterne, "Sounds like the Mall of America: Programmed Music and the Architectonics of Commercial Space," *Ethnomusicology* 41, no. 1 (1997): 22-50; Suzanne G. Cusick, "Music as

Where is a queer experiential hermeneutics available in musicology? Anywhere, I suggest, that musicologists find themselves in material or conceptual proximity to music. Consider biography, whose provocative implications may be overlooked in historical musicology's move away from canons and composers. Historians who "come to know" the personas they study or understand their own work as a reanimation of figures long gone seem to intuit that a body need not be physically present in order for us to have intimacy with it and/or power over it. To my mind, this means biographical research has the potential to redefine notions of what relationships between bodies really consist of. When flesh and bone are lost, a person is *only* her social meaning—she is the points at which she made contact with the social world of the past, and she is how we read her in the present. She is a text, then, but one that nonetheless takes up the position of "person" in a psychoaffectively intimate relationship with the working scholar, who may ask her questions and imagine her replies, whose pulse may quicken in communion with her, who may even miss her. Fewer phenomena demonstrate more radically the nature of self as always already both "real" and constructed.

Regarding phenomenology, a hermeneutic category that is largely concerned with through-time musical experiences and body responses, I suggest that this category may be further queered by attending to the ways in which our responsiveness is shaped by our social location. How do factors like gender, ethnicity, geography, wealth or poverty, bodily ability or disability haunt the space around music and musicker (performer, listener, composer)? There is much in Western musical tradition, and the academic musicology it birthed, that urges us to avert our eyes and ears from this *space around*. The body disciplines of classical concertgoing, for example, induce keen attention directed straight ahead and facilitate an impression of the hall as empty space, a vacuum in which not even a cough ought to sound. Similarly, phenomenological accounts of music and musical meaning can sometimes adopt a "world falls away" approach, narrating a kind of pas de deux between music and musicker that is unquestionably sensual, material, and embodied yet engages with the social power structure no more than dancers with a painted backdrop.

As I hope I have made clear, the world never falls away for queer bodies, queer selves, queer relationships. Our lives are improvisations on social text using the raw materials of social power itself. Our relationships do not abdicate the logic of sexual order but reconfigure it. For these reasons, queer ears are always picking out music's ever present sociopolitical resonances. Even when music saturates our senses, heats our blood, and moves our bodies, we are also hearing the space around; for us, music has never sounded anywhere else.

As a queer person and a queer ethnomusicologist, I read "ineffability" as

Torture/Music as Weapon," in *Trans: Revista transcultural de música* (2006), <http://www.redalyc.org>; Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2010).

a code word for the affective overwhelm of confrontation with a social power structure that embeds and is embedded in any musical sound or form. For me, queerness does what Susan McClary has so wonderfully termed “effing the ineffable”: embodied queer subjectivity “translates” musical experience in such a way that what embeds and is embedded in music becomes phaneric rather than cryptic.⁶³ Yet queer relationships with music require no *supplementary* hermeneutics, criticism, or analysis to effect this translation, to bridge the assumed gap between musical immediacy and musical meaning. They themselves are the gap and the bridge, the gnostic and the drastic, the object and the “humble, unadulterated taste of the subjective.”⁶⁴ Perhaps we as historians, theorists, and ethnographers can all have queer relationships with our musics by paying a queer kind of attention to ourselves in contact with music and with the space around. This queer attention may reveal something about our bodies that we don’t always notice. Because a body can be aroused, because it is conditioned by and situated within social contexts, body itself may prove to be the singularity; the order of knowledge that rejects neither actuality nor abstraction; the place of genuine intimacy with music’s intersectionality, its social enmeshment, its multivalent energies of power.

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63 Susan McClary, *Desire and Pleasure in Seventeenth-Century Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 252.

64 Abbate, “Music,” 536.