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Singing at Death's Door:

Late Style, Disability, and the Temporality of Illness in Popular Music

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Musicology

by

Tiffany Naiman

2017

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Singing at Death's Door:

Late Style, Disability, and the Temporality of Illness in Popular Music

by

Tiffany Naiman

Doctor of Philosophy in Musicology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2017

Professor Robert W. Fink, Co-Chair

Professor Raymond L. Knapp, Co-Chair

This dissertation investigates musical expressions of temporal alterities in works created by popular music artists, identifying their aesthetic responses as their bodies become ill, disabled, and they become more aware of mortality. I propose a critical, hermeneutic, and theoretical method drawn from Edward Said's appropriation of Adorno's expression "late style" that I have designated *ill style*, a form of creativity within a *temporality of illness*. Late style is discernable in works produced, paradigmatically, at the end of one's career in "old age," but late style may also be understood as an influence on artistic output at *any* stage of life if the subject is experiencing untimeliness and a disruption in access to the communal understanding of futurity and time, a possible consequence of factors other than age. I contend that late style, accelerated by illness, disrupts Western cultural attempts at ignoring precarious and finite nature of existence; the resulting expressions of lateness ask audiences to do the same. I offer a way in which to think more critically about what scholars consider late style, how it functions in popular

music studies and society, and how it intersects with the fields of disability, gender, queer, and critical race studies, and the social sciences.

This work critiques and expands late style as a critical construct, and brings popular music into the lineage of musical traditions where late style has historically been examined. This study focuses on artists for whom late style is contingent upon illness and illness-induced disability, rather than the accepted path of aging and resulting bodily decline. The value of recognizing ill style and the temporality of illness lies in its potential to expand listeners' understanding of illness as a state inherent to the human condition. If a listener can hear these sounds of illness or suffering in musical works, it helps integrate disability and illness into our concept of normative human experience.

This dissertation of Tiffany Naiman is approved.

Judith Peraino

Helen Deutsch

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University of California, Los Angeles

2017

For my love and my adventure partner, Margot Garber;
in loving memory of Stephen Garber, “the father,” and
Lulu, my sweet devoted furry companion.

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This dissertation began in the back of my mother's closet. In the August following my first year of grad school, my mother died. While cleaning out her apartment, I discovered in the corner of her closet a three-foot-tall papier-mâché head of David Bowie that I had made in the 9th grade. I was thrilled that it still existed. It brought back all my teenage memories of riding around in my friends' Volkswagens (they all had VWs), singing as loud as we could to each and every track of *Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*. Just two days after I discovered the mask that currently hangs on my office wall, I was accepted to the first conference of my graduate career: the David Bowie Symposium at the University of Limerick in Ireland. It all came together during this time, David Bowie, illness, disability, and death, both personally and in my work. As I conclude this dissertation and my time in graduate school, I am once again confronted with death and grief. My final year in UCLA's Musicology department began with the loss of a man very dear to me, my father-in-law, Stephen Garber. A relentless cheerleader and an extraordinary mind, his constant encouragement, stimulating conversation, and endless flow of emails with material relevant to my academic interests have been sorely missed. This coupled with the loss of David Bowie at the start of 2016 has added a very poignant ending punctuation to my time as a student. Yet this journey has not been one of only sadness and loss, much more it has been a discovery of love, kindness, and friendship. I am happy to now have this opportunity to thank those who have supported me throughout this endeavor.

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vocation and a field about which I am passionate. His engagement with my work and willingness to demonstrate the process of closely reading and analyzing musical forms has elevated my scholarship. Throughout this process Ray has been a nurturing force; his unwavering faith in my ability to actually pull this off, even when I doubted myself, sustained me. In short, Ray has been an extraordinary mentor.

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INTRODUCTION

“In a sense, sickness is a place, more instructive than a long trip to Europe, and it is always a place where there’s no company, where nobody can follow.”¹ – Flannery O’Connor

More likely than not, our bodies will become ill or disabled in some way prior to our inevitable death. Indeed, the focus of this dissertation is almost certainly the product of my own sharpened awareness of mortality due to pain, illness, and decline, which has caused me to become increasingly aware of the precarious and temporary nature of my existence. How others, especially performing musical artists, relate to the same awareness in themselves is what this dissertation is about; it investigates the aesthetic response and musical expressions of alternative temporalities in works created by popular music artists as their bodies become ill, disabled, and the possibility of death becomes more present. In these pages I put forth a critical, hermeneutic, and theoretical method—drawn from Edward Said’s appropriation of Adorno’s expression “late style”—that I have designated as *ill style*, a form of creativity within a temporality of illness. I contend that late style, spurred on by illness, disrupts Western cultural attempts at ignoring the precarious and finite nature of existence, and the resulting expressions of lateness I consider here call on audiences to do the same.

To be clear, it is not only my own fragile mortality that causes me conflict and anxiety. As Judith Butler notes, “we are not only constituted by our relations but also dispossessed by them as well.”² My existence depends on the network of relationships of which I am a part; the vulnerability of other humans directly affects my life experience and my sense of self. Hence,

¹ Flannery O’Connor, *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O’Connor* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999), 163–64.

² Judith Butler, *Prearious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London; New York: Verso, 2004), 24.

John Donne’s reflection that “any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind” is apt, and when close relationships are dissolved by death, I am extremely diminished. During the period of writing this dissertation, I have had occasion to grieve for too many—my beloved animal companion, a number of friends, my mother, an uncle, and my dear father-in-law.³ As I grieve, a sense of my own impermanence increases. I am again reminded that I am fragile and vulnerable, which thought remains, loosening my grip on illusions of the permanence of the self, even as the initial shock of loss recedes. The cool gothic countercultural curiosities of my teenage years—from graveyards, vampires, and jarred animal specimens that allowed me the luxury of consuming death and decay from a distance, to the dark sounds of Bauhaus, The Sisters of Mercy, Joy Division, and Siouxsie Sioux—are gradually being replaced by a more intimate appraisal of personal extinction and decline (though the soundtrack is still the same). My body, which once thrived on late nights and excess, is now in chronic pain; it aches and drags. I find myself startled by an increasing desire for sedentary pleasures. Do I want seats in the balcony for the show rather than fight for the front row in general admission?

In Western culture, immense amounts of social and cultural energy are spent to obscure and sanitize the hard facts of human mortality, illness, and disability. Still, our daily life is haunted by the certainty of death and the possible tribulations leading up to it. At times this awareness of one’s own death impends more noticeably, during physical and psychological pain, illness, and, of course, as the years accumulate. The prospect of death alters our present experience of time, making us acutely aware that there exists a future in which we will not participate. In these moments of awareness, time takes on a distinctly corporeal aspect. This bodily time is not an abstract framework shared by all; a particular relationship to death, illness, or disability informs

³ John Donne and John Carey, *John Donne: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 344.

each individual body's relationship to time, creating a personal time that is also a form of exile. This individual but universal experience, when undergone by an artist, can contribute to what we have learned to value as *late style*: "late style is in, but oddly apart from, the present."⁴

The Late Style

As a discipline, musicology has focused almost exclusively on late style within the canon of Western art music.⁵ Within the field, the concept of late style has been used to highlight genius, as has, more recently, disability studies, adding a dimension of triumph over adversity—due to age or disability—and transcendence of limitations to achieve new heights of artistry.⁶ These triumphalist narratives have for the most part been employed to reaffirm a traditional lineup of white, male composers, though, oddly, yoking their exceptionality not to youthful vigor but to bodily decline. Musicology has, by and large, taken the ideas of Adorno and Said in a different, more conservative direction than other disciplines. Late style, as initially conceived by Adorno and Said manifested the traces of mortal subjectivity through "fractured landscapes," "anachronism," and "anomaly," which does not infallibly translate to works of genius.

⁴ Edward W Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature against the Grain* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006), xi.

⁵ One exception is Richard Elliott, *The Late Voice: Time, Age and Experience in Popular Music* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015). Elliott presents his concept of "late voice" as an "aesthetic strategy" deployed through "the vocal act" that allows a singer to portray "age, experience, lateness, and loss" at any age.

⁶ Within disability studies this sort of narrative is framed as that of the "supercrip." As Alison Kafer writes in her book *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, (2013). "Supercrips are those disabled figures favored in the media, products of either extremely low expectations (disability by definition means incompetence, so anything a disabled person does, no matter how mundane or banal, merits exaggerated praise) or extremely high expectations (disabled people must accomplish incredibly difficult, and therefore inspiring, tasks to be worthy of nondisabled attention)" (90). She points out, "Supercrip stories rely heavily on the individual/medical model of disability, portraying disability as something to be overcome through hard work and perseverance" (142). Ultimately the supercrip stereotype provides for able-bodied people to be "inspired" by those who are disabled without ever considering how people with disabilities are treated in society, and constructing the disabled person as not just a valued human but rather as superhuman, going beyond the sphere of what even a non-disabled person could achieve.

The strand of musicological examination dedicated exclusively to lateness tends to focus on “great” musicians and composers who made music well into old age. The terms *lateness* and *late style* were first applied to music in Theodore Adorno’s essay fragment, “Spätstil Beethoven’s” (1934, 1966). Musicologists, music theorists, and opera scholars have studied composers such as Gabrielli, Janáček (Kenton 1962), Wagner (Barone 1995), Stravinsky (Straus 2004), Brahms (Notley 2006), Schumann (Tunbridge 2007), Vivaldi (Talbot 2008), Debussy (Wheeldon 2009), Puccini (Davis 2009), Mahler (Edwards 2010), and Britten (Hutcheon and Hutcheon 2014). As Adorno initially conceptualized it, lateness is the awareness that one is positioned beyond what is normative or accepted (specifically a lifespan), coupled with the idea that lateness can’t be eased or transcended; it is a state that can only deepen. Adorno believed works demonstrating late style to be the least allegorical representation of death in art, revealed formally in the relationship between subjectivity and musical conventions, which he describes as simultaneously unified and left isolated by the dwindling subjectivity of the artist. Adorno did not separate lateness from old age; for him, the subjectivity that constitutes and creates late works is personally aware of approaching mortality because of a long (in context) life already past.

Edward Said’s *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain*, first describes Adornian lateness as, “being at the end, fully conscious, full of memory, and also very (even preternaturally) aware of the present.”⁷ Said situates the subject in relationship to death alone, removing old age from the equation. Building upon Adorno’s conception, he defines two types of artistic lateness. The first is a culmination of a lifetime’s work, a distillation of “age and

⁷ Said, *On Late Style*, 14.

wisdom . . . that reflect[s] a special maturity, a new spirit of reconciliation and serenity.”⁸ The other is a late style that, as Said proposes, expresses a sense of being out of place and time; an artistic existence of exile and alienation that causes audiences to have an “experience of late style that involves nonharmonious, nonserene tension, and above all, a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness going *against*.”⁹ From this position, estranged from the rhythms and perspectives of the rest of humanity and incapable of rejoining the whole, the late artist necessarily becomes a contrarian, but often to our—the public’s and, more broadly, society’s—benefit. Said’s critical focus is on this second, contrarian lateness, in which there is no demonstration of a lifetime of knowledge, instead, only an exhibition of “intransigence, difficulty and unresolved contradiction.”¹⁰ When he asks, “Does one grow wiser with age, and are there unique qualities of perception and form that artists acquire as a result of age in the late phase of their career?” the answer is a resounding maybe, and though Said focuses on the manifestation of lateness that is not characterized by reconciliation, there are no value judgments made about which form of lateness is of more worth.¹¹ Not all art created in the late stages of a career is unconditionally in “late style.”

Moreover, I believe that late style can come early in a lifetime, since, as I hope to show in this dissertation, it is almost never age alone that leads to late style. This is why music created in old age does not necessarily display “late style”: chronological age is neither a sufficient nor necessary condition. What does come with aging is accumulated loss, sickness, and debilitating illness, which changes one’s relationship to the social world, to time, and to one’s self. This is,

⁸ Ibid., 6.

⁹ Ibid., 7.

¹⁰ Ibid. 7.

¹¹ Ibid., 6.

for me, the source of Adorno and Said's late style. As we will see, similar issues arise for artists pulled "out of time" by illness when still young; they, too, can be considered to perform a late style.

Late style is a label we should use carefully and with specificity. Some of the challenges endemic to this critical trope are set forth in Gordon McMullen and Sam Smiles editorial introduction to *Late Style and its Discontents*. They question the application of a single set of criteria for the late style across disciplines, ignoring a huge diversity of circumstances, identities, and artistic styles. There can be no one clear definition of what lateness sounds like, because lateness is a manifestation of a personal experience and is therefore determined by the same contingent social elements that form our identity. Each late style is as unique as the artist that creates the work. Universalist claims stumble into reflexive chauvinism, since they are almost always derived from famous "masterworks" created by white, middle-aged (or older) men. Perfection of style, imagined as "a special maturity, a new spirit of reconciliation and serenity... an apotheosis of artistic creativity and power," is often construed as a transhistorical phenomenon marking a transcendent genius.¹² Late style becomes an ennobling label, used by critics to elevate the final works of canonic artists they already deem great.¹³ This canonical

¹² Ibid., 6–7.

¹³ For example, in Egon Kenton's 1962 article, "The Late Style of Giovanni Gabrieli," *Musical Quarterly* *The Musical Quarterly* XLVIII, no. 4 (1962): 427–43, Kenton makes no attempt to define what he means by late style. He starts the article by stating that Gabrieli had long suffered from an unnamed "painful illness" and that "he was frequently unable to perform his duties as organist at San Marco" (427). Yet he never discusses the illness' possible impact on his musical sound, only on his physical ability to play. Instead, he describes innovations and experimentation in Gabrieli's work and speculates about how they could have affected his successor, Monteverdi, but we never get to what defined Gabrieli's late style precisely. The closest we come is the familiar and over-worn elevation of the dead male composer to genius status when he writes, "But it is only natural to assume that a creative artist who inclines to innovation and experimentation, who is never content to settle down with a formula and continue repeating it, must be driven by his genius to go to far away territories to find new ingredients, and to return with some astounding novelty" (435).

notion of a late style inevitably elevates some artists to transcendent status, and removes their work from the messy context in which it was created.

Yet it can be argued that it is *contingency*, not transcendence, that defines late style, and if we ignore that contingency we may well end up denying to aging artists the actual nature of their achievement; perhaps, in fact, we should redefine late style as something which is directly or indirectly the *product* of the adjustments and collaborations necessary for creative artists dealing with the limitations and tribulations of bodily failure, not something that exists *despite* such contingencies.¹⁴ For McMullen and Smiles, the failure to distinguish between late style and old-age style, added to the limited group of artists of one gender to whom late style is ascribed, the tension between transcendence and contingency, and differences in medium and across time and culture, all make it irresponsible to apply a concept of late style uniformly across history, culture, and genre.¹⁵

Just as there is no universal late style, there is no standard trans-historical path through time, since late style and untimeliness (whether through lateness or the temporality of illness) are always contingent. While our bodies and the signals we receive from them inform a general relationship with mortality, the *meaning* of that relationship and of our views on disability and illness are, of course, mediated by one's own culture. Culturally constructed notions of mortality, disability, and illness provide context for the biological signals received from the body.

¹⁴ Sam Smiles and Gordon McMullen, eds., *Late Style and Its Discontents: Essays in Art, Literature, and Music*, 2016, 7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1–14.

The discourse around popular music is hardly immune to chauvinism, narratives of the tortured genius, or assuming the universal relevance of Western culture.¹⁶ But pop music differs from traditional objects of late-style studies in that key popular music genres such as rock, chart pop, and hip-hop have consistently been associated with physical youth and youth culture. One goal of this study is to think more critically about what we consider late style in vernacular culture, about how late style could function within the field of popular music studies and society, and how it might intersect with the fields of disability studies, gender studies, queer studies, critical race studies, and the social sciences. I believe that the current discourse of late style is a place to begin, and still a useful framework, but it cannot be the end of the theoretical discussion. I have no interest in evaluating an artist's genius, or using the analysis of late works to elevate even those I admire; instead, I focus on the intersection of illness and creativity. My interest in late style is as a critical construct, a concept that centers the experience of temporal alterity as it affects artistic output, understanding that an awareness of mortal subjectivity from old age is not the only way to inhabit this personal sense of time. Popular musicians can be discussed using the tropes of late style already defined by those working with Western art music, but with the added lens of specific and important issues raised for these musicians by the experience of illness.

III Style, the Temporality of Illness, and their Relationship to Disability

Adopting a hermeneutic of late style, we thus locate the subject outside of normative time. But “lateness” is not the only way to conceptualize temporal exile. Scholars of disability and queerness have also described temporal exile, coining terms like *queer time* (Freeman 2010, Halberstam 2005) and *disabled time* (Straus 2011, Lerner 2006). Throughout these pages I will

¹⁶ See Cross. *Heavier Than Heaven: A Biography of Kurt Cobain* (2002); Hopkins. *No One Gets Out of Here Alive* (1995); Wall. *When Giants Walked the Earth: A Biography of Led Zeppelin* (2010) as examples of myth-making narratives about white, male, popular artists of the rock era.

be developing the allied concept of *ill time*, the temporality of illness. As with lateness, all of these untimely existences are historically and culturally specific and are embodied and experienced individually.¹⁷

In this study, following Arthur Kleinman, I will use the term illness “to conjure up the innately human experience of symptoms and suffering.”¹⁸ Physical deficits such as the inability to walk up a flight of stairs, to keep focus on work due to back pain or headaches, impotence, or nausea, to name just a few, can lead to feelings of failure, frustration, depression, and anger.¹⁹ Illness can compromise one’s ability to think clearly, or control one’s temper and emotions, changing our perception of ourselves and our relationships. Those who experience illness-related problems

may feel great anger because no one can see [the] pain and therefore objectively determine that [the] disability is real . . . [One] may become demoralized and lose [the] hope of getting better, or [a person] may be depressed by [the] fear of death or of becoming an invalid. [Humans] grieve over lost health, altered body image, and dangerously declining self-esteem . . . All these are illness problems.²⁰

Illness may progress to disability, as daily life becomes affected by such problems.²¹

The core concerns of this dissertation are the ways in which the untimely experience of ill time affects one’s emotional and psychological state; what it means to lead an untimely existence in exile from a shared sense of time and how such circumstances influence an artist’s aesthetics

¹⁷ See Gordon McMullan and Sam Smiles, eds., *Late Style and Its Discontents: Essays in Art, Literature, and Music* (Oxford University Press, 2016), doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198704621.001.0001.

¹⁸ Arthur Kleinman, *The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and the Human Condition* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ While illness can lead to disability, it does not necessarily do so. Similarly, disability is not always the result of an illness.

and reception. Late style is discernable in works produced at the end of a timespan, paradigmatically, at the end of a career, in what we consider “old age.” But late style also may be understood as an aspect of artistic output at *any* stage of life, so long as the artist is experiencing untimeliness. Untimeliness is a loss of access to the futurity and time, an estrangement from communal understanding, which can result factors other than age. As we shall see, though it has not traditionally been used to understand the later works of popular music artists, “late style” as a critical trope can be easily, though perhaps dangerously, applied to a musician like David Bowie, who produced decades of work during his youth and middle age and continued to create as he was growing older and with the knowledge of his terminal illness. Nevertheless, I will argue throughout my dissertation that late style is the result of a personal relationship to time not inherently connected to old age. Chronologically young people may experience the same sense of exile from normative time, thanks to their premonition that they will not be contributing to a future, or simply consequent to challenges faced in disability. As with elderly artists who exhibit late style, these young artists reevaluate their relationship to time as the result of bodily pain and illness. Of course no illness is ever timely, and there is no “right” time for disability to strike. But beyond illness or disability itself lies the fact that these conditions remove artists from normative time, “exiling” them prematurely and subjecting them to the temporality of illness.

Thus, both lateness and ill time are based on a personal sense of untimeliness generated from the individual’s awareness that the body will fail. In the experience of untimeliness, a rift opens between the subject and the larger culture. Though lateness is traditionally used as a lens to analyze the final works of older artists, late style is a subset of a larger a set of conditions to which any artist may be subject at any time; when these conditions are met, characteristics of late style manifest even in the work of comparatively young artists. In this dissertation, I will

examine Ian Curtis (1956-1980), J Dilla (1974-2006), and David Bowie (1947-2016), as illustrations of musical untimeliness, observing the role that these artists' physical and mental illnesses played in generating a chasm between them and those around them, pulling them out of sync and creating the conditions necessary for their music to be marked by the temporality of illness. Illness, as David Napier observes, has a social component: rare or poorly understood chronic conditions, such as those that Curtis (epilepsy) and Dilla (thrombotic thrombocytopenic purpura and lupus) experienced, may have "little or no social construction . . . no model of suffering either to find acceptable or to reject as stigmatizing." Those afflicted with such conditions may find it much more difficult to integrate their illnesses with their perceived notion of themselves and their positions within their communities.²² David Bowie, on the other hand, died of cancer, which has a clear narrative assigned to it; but I argue that Bowie's lateness was a preexisting condition resulting from a temporality of "late" fatherhood at age 53, a lateness that was increasingly colored by his illness once symptoms manifested. I will then turn to the problem of late style as a uniquely masculine trope and reconsider the recent career of Madonna (b. 1958), whose refusal to relinquish her persona and status in the face of her age creates a narrative of resistance and labor simultaneously problematic, inspiring, and exemplifies the added demands that ageing women face as they create music in their later careers.

As with any identity, being ill/disabled does not operate in a vacuum, but as part of the complex web of beliefs, assumptions, and power structures that make up the vague, perhaps unseen and often unacknowledged norms of a culture.²³ The disabled/ill identity is intersectional

²² A. David Napier, *The Age of Immunology: Conceiving a Future in an Alienating World* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 81.

²³ Doctors David L. Khan and Richard H. Steeves's investigation of the phenomenology of suffering in "An Understanding of Suffering Grounded in Clinical Practice and Research" *Suffering* ed. Betty Ferrell (Sudbury, Mass.; London: Jones and Bartlett, 1996), 3–27. usefully provides an understanding of the

and discursive, constructed by ubiquitous modes of power. For most people, illness draws attention to the gap between aspirations and actuality, and between self-identification and the perceptions of others. The gap between perception and self-perception can be exacerbated by the invisibility of certain types of illness. Mental illnesses such as alcoholism, drug addiction, and depression are debilitating and are experienced physically, but are often not visible or identified immediately. Internal illnesses like cancer do not always manifest external symptoms noticeable by the casual observer. Epilepsy makes itself visible to others unexpectedly, intermittently, and violently. The generally unseen nature of these illnesses means that the people who experience them are not necessarily publically identifiable as disabled. Because of this, ill performers do not always display their illness and audiences may be unaware of conditions that affect the music they are hearing. A musician's illness is often exposed after death and we may then here traces of this embodied experience that were always there, but which had previously gone unnoticed.

There is a long literary history in the social sciences of examining the connections between illness and identity. In *The Social System* (1951), Talcott Parson posits that being sick is a constructed social role with a number of expectations. Noting most importantly that the sick are not to blame for their illness and using "disability as the basis of legitimation of this claim"

subjects in my research. Khan and Steeves first and foremost comprehend suffering to be the consequence of an individual's recognition that an event (such as an illness) has threatened and measurably disrupted what Khan and Steeves call "his or her meaning structure of personal identity." They then view suffering as "the gap or abyss that opens when one meaning structure has been challenged or destroyed and a new one has not been formed." Suffering, then, is not "defined as a meaning given to events that threaten personal identity but as meaninglessness caused by that very threat," be it pain or loss or something else. Pain, by contrast, is "a symptom to be managed," according to Jeanne Quint Benoliel in her introduction to *Suffering*. She explains, "Reading the professional literature, one often gets an impression that pain and suffering are used as synonymous terms. . . . Such is not the case. Pain is a response to illness or injury and is not the same as that sense of disruption and fractured identity experienced as suffering." She agrees with Kahn and Steeves that suffering is also a private, lived experience of a person, and is uniquely individualized, "an all-encompassing experience of the person that must be endured or lived through alone."

the sick should be released from social obligations during the time of illness.²⁴ However he also points out that if the sick do not do access medical care in order to heal in a timely fashion, they “may legitimately be regarded as a type of deviant,” using their illness as an excuse to evade social responsibilities.²⁵ Parsons is recognizing the ways in which social perceptions of illness may quickly shift from compassion to skepticism. Social perceptions of illness and the resulting external “reading” of inner experience can affect an ill person’s self-conception.

Erving Goffman’s work *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (1963) pushes against Parson’s view that patients should accept their “sick role” and diligently work to become “healthy” again in order to once again assume their obligations within society.²⁶ For Goffman, illness (mental) is a social construct, a “spoiled” identity that the collusion of others successfully imposes on a victim: “The craziness or ‘sick behavior’ claimed for the mental patient is by and large a product of the claimant’s social distance from the situation that the patient is in, and is not primarily a product of mental illness.”²⁷ Stigmatization forces people with illnesses or disabilities to manage information about their condition in order to mitigate possible negative social perceptions. This risk is amplified for public figures like David Bowie, J Dilla, or Ian Curtis, who had carefully constructed, very particular social identities as celebrities and musical creators. How would illness or disability affect the public personae? This anxiety is inherent in late style as Said conceived it, because it arises where

²⁴ Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (New Orleans, LA: Quid Pro Books, 2012), 193.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 285.

²⁷ Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (New Brunswick, NJ: Aldine Transaction, 2007), 135.

social stigma and the existential notion of the self meet, where a stable creative identity is challenged by the experience of illness, disability, and incipient mortality.

Anthropological and other studies reveal that that the journeys of those suffering from chronic pain or illness evince continual disruption and volatility, which deeply affects their sense of personhood (Kleinman 1988; M. Good, et al. 1992; B. Good 1994; Becker 1997; Jackson 2000; Greenhalgh 2001; Moss and Dyck 2002; Lynch and Danelly 2015). According to Gay Becker, “the course of life is structured by expectations about each phase of life, and meaning is assigned to specific life events and the roles that accompany them. When expectations about the course of life are not met, people experience inner chaos and disruption.”²⁸ As an illness progresses or waxes and wanes, life plans shift and change along with the illness, forcing individuals to make accommodations not just in what they attempt to accomplish on a daily basis but in how these alterations cause them to think about their lives, their future lives, their “selves,” and their social identity.

My work, standing at the intersection of musicology, disability studies, social science, and performance studies, is part of a growing investigation into the creative process, career paths, and reception history of sick and/or disabled performers. Disability Studies is a protean new interdisciplinary field, supporting the study of disability as a pervasive human condition and category of identity subject to social, cultural, and political constructions. There are now substantial studies of disability as it relates to critical theory (Tremain 2005), performance studies (Sandahl and Auslander 2005), literary studies (Deutsch 1996; Quayson 2007; Mintz

²⁸ Gaylene Becker, *Disrupted Lives: How People Create Meaning in a Chaotic World* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1997), 4.

2007), cultural studies (Poore 2007; Snyder and Mitchell 2006; Davidson 2008), and music (Straus 2011; Lubet 2011; McCay 2013; Lerner and Straus 2006; Blake, Howe, et al 2016).²⁹

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson asserts that “disability is inherent in the human condition,” but disease and disability, seen or unseen, can weaken or sever an individual’s sense of belonging to the collective.³⁰ While one cannot disagree with Garland-Thompson that “we will all become disabled if we live long enough,” the individual experience of disabling illness, juxtaposed against former experiences of extraordinary ability, can create strong feelings of marginalization.³¹ Illness “others” an artist, perhaps more than others. This otherness, with its concomitant abjection and antagonism, can be heard musically, for example through attention to form, color, dissonance, and untimely rhythmic structures.

Scholars have investigated the theatrical or musical on-stage performance of disabled artists, while others have taken the term performance in a more global way to mean the performance of disability itself in the lives of disabled people. I expand on the ways in which the cultural understanding of disability informs music scholarship, by listening for and considering illness with particular attention to theories of musical embodiment. This broader definition of performance is derived, at least in part, from the work of Judith Butler regarding the performance of gender.³²

²⁹; See also the articles in the Special Issue on Music and Disability, *Popular Music* 28, no. 3 (2009), and the Special Issue on Scholars with Disabilities in *Music Theory Online* 15, nos. 3–4 (2009), Blake Howe et al., *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies*, 2016.

³⁰ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “The Case for Conserving Disability,” *Bioethical Inquiry Journal of Bioethical Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Forum for Ethical and Legal Debate* 9, no. 3 (2012): 39.

³¹ *Ibid.* 339.

³² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge Classics (New York: Routledge, 2006).

I will use Thomson's concept of cultural disability studies to develop my thesis, which investigates the ways in which illness is represented, performed, and consumed in popular music. Cultural disability studies, as a subdiscipline, "understands and investigates disability as a cultural product, as a way of interpreting bodily variation and a social concept that widely influences our collective thinking and practices."³³ Thomson argues that using disability to analyze forms of cultural production, such as music, art, and literature, is akin to applying frameworks of race, gender, and sexuality; as with these more familiar intersectionalities, disability has contributed to "ideological and social formations that affect all cultural products and material spaces in the social order."³⁴ Within the temporality of illness, there can be creativity and cultural production. When art is the result of this production, the illness becomes aestheticized within the work and thus the illness and the art become inseparable.

Femininity, Social Regulation, and Neoliberal Aging

It is important to acknowledge that late style has been applied almost exclusively to men; when a female artist achieves a longevity and stature that might warrant the application of the term late, she is frequently figured as a *diva* (Cher, Dolly Parton, Diana Ross).³⁵ This configuration, while it allows a space for women to exhibit age or infirmity and still perform, denies women the

³³ Rosemarie Garland Thompson in Neil William Lerner and Joseph Nathan Straus, eds., *Sounding off: Theorizing Disability in Music* (New York: Routledge, 2006), xiv.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, xiii.

³⁵ I am using one formation of the meaning of "diva." But, it is important to point out that there are others. Often in popular music "diva" is used to refer to those who are simply "divine" female pop singers and is synonymous with success. This construction lacks the necessity of a long career or a history of triumph over adversity that is fundamental to the way I am using the term.

respect given to “old masters,” and demands that they inhabit victimhood.³⁶ The loss of youth is fundamental to being a diva. Part of the diva’s job description is to have been debased and raised up over the course of a “dramatic” career. The role of diva allows a public role to female artists even as it aligns with sexist narratives of decline. Remaining active as performers of popular music, singers are already expressing new types of aging subjectivity, but it is important to note that neither the ways they challenge ideas of normative aging nor the subjectivities they create are uniform.

While aging is a physiological process that affects the voice and body, it is also a deliberate construction involving both active and passive modifications of behavior over the course of a life.³⁷ As we watch (and listen to) singers age publicly while continuing to create popular music, the presence of the singer’s body and the way that body is used in conjunction with the codes and conventions of the rock and pop idiom—including vocal techniques and technologies, movement, gesture, make-up, and costume—inevitably become the signs from which the audience constructs meanings. Audiences, journalists, and music industry marketers often tacitly classify these performers as either reinforcing the dominant narrative of decline or reimagining and providing alternatives to it. They typically present these options as a black or white personal choice, with pragmatic consequences for how performers and their work are valued. But subject making is a complex process where internalized ideals of conduct grapple with external sanctions, values, and norms—one example being the socially constituted narrative of decline. Careful attention must be paid to the multiple modes of social regulation that come to bear on singers as they age, especially female performers, whose behavior is regulated by the

³⁶ See Mitchell Morris, *The Persistence of Sentiment: Display and Feeling in Popular Music of the 1970s* (University of California Press, 2013), 170.

³⁷ Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Aged by Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

added stricture of gendered expectations.

Pop singers, celebrities in the public eye, routinely present themselves as self-conscious subjects aware of normalizing social pressures to conform, and their responses to these pressures have both economic and aesthetic ramifications. These singers are creating music as a commodity to be sold; therefore, they must be intelligible, desirable, and relatable to the audience and consumer in order to be commercially viable. The process of subject formation and the resulting branding and persona creation is informed by the complex relation between an individual performer and their market. Aging and decline make one vulnerable; for singers, this affects their marketability as they become marginalized. For many female popular performers, whose value is intimately and disproportionately tied to a youthful and sexually desirable body, subject making becomes increasingly difficult. How, then, does a female singer manage the changes in the body that threaten the artistic career through abjection and untimeliness and how are the voices of ageing female singers valued?

The confluence of the biological process of aging, cultural narratives of decline, and economic concerns create fertile ground for a specific type of self-fashioning and subject formation enacted by artists who are growing old. In the West, expectations around aging are part of an individualist tradition of autonomy in which individuals are “free” to make their own decisions about their way of life. A high value is thus placed on self-determination, relegating relationships to a secondary status and severing subjects from both family and community. A lived life is falsely constructed as non-relational, but as we age we become vulnerable to illness and disability; our capacity to be independent is compromised or we may no longer be economically self-sufficient, becoming what is viewed as a “burden” on others. Susan Wendell’s foundational work on disabled female bodies, *The Rejected Body* (1996), argues that feminist

theory has historically been fundamentally ableist, and that people with disabilities need to be integrated into feminist theory and ethics. She notes that able-bodied feminist philosophers have, for the most part, theorized the liberated body as pain free; never sick, weak, or tired; never breaking down.³⁸ This becomes the expectation for women fighting for full agency. Those who remain healthy and economically solvent may attempt to preserve a neoliberal individuality, avoiding becoming a burden by remaining alone and far from family.

As public figures, whose livelihoods are at least partially dependent on critical reception and public opinion, female singers in popular music are positioned to self-regulate in order to preempt criticism and achieve more or continued success. In response, artists manage themselves, doing things like keeping in shape and presenting the self in a savvy way, composing songs that are examples of “resilience discourse,” brand building, or, in the case of singers who have extended careers, by staying true to their brand legacy across their careers while also working to be perceived as current and relevant.³⁹ By not taking care of the body, managing aging or presenting the aging body in a way that retains value and makes that body commercially valuable, one fails to age *appropriately*.⁴⁰ The value structures that put the burden to remain relevant, active, and vital on the individual also require one to manage aging in specific ways. In this way, ageing female popular musicians are a locus at which competing forms of behavior regulation compete to be expressed: what a female popular music performer should be, how an ageing woman should conform to expectations of decline, and how ageing people should take care of themselves.

³⁸ Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 85, 90–93, 169–79.

³⁹ Robin James, *Resilience & Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism* (Alresford, Hants: Zero Books, 2015), 6.

⁴⁰ Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Agewise: Fighting the New Ageism in America*, 2013.

Aging in public poses particular challenges for women in popular music, whose bodies are constantly sexualized and critiqued. Female singers are valued in part based on the ways that they more or less successfully resist or align with cultural stereotypes of aging. One of the ways that ageing female pop subjectivity is expressed is through the performance of not-aging, which, as we will see, is a type of late style. Illustrative of how gendered ageing is regulated and monitored, some female pop stars continue to perform, pushing against biologically deterministic notions of aging, without incorporating the frailty of age or resilience narratives into their personae as do those who present as divas. To present as not-aged, the woman must invest significant resources, both time and money, and can only be temporarily successful. The performers adhere to a set of practices such as extreme fitness maintenance, overtly sexual clothing, marketing based on sexual desire, and (sometimes) plastic surgery. These practices, when successful, mitigate the experience of ageing for the woman, who has a resulting embodied experience that does not align with the typical middle-aged experience. In this way they remove the conditions that would create untimeliness for themselves, but, paradoxically, they are often read as untimely or uncanny by others.

Popular Music Structures and Untimely Existences

This dissertation is my attempt to critique and expand the critical construct of late style, and to bring popular music into the lineage of musical traditions where late style has historically been examined and analyzed. In these pages late style will be contingent on disability/illness, not just the accepted path of aging and the body's natural decline through that process.

Though I will not seek to define a single "late sound" in popular music, I will consider possible musical counterparts to the dark psychological stance underlying the late style as

diagnosed by Adorno and Said. What are the musical implications of “intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction”?⁴¹ Judith Peraino describes lateness as “the prophetic realization—in sound or image—of the catastrophic impossibility of synthesis, the unavoidable dissolution of subject and object back into ‘negative dialectics’—irresolvable contradictions.”⁴² But when this irreconcilable fracturing occurs in the musical output of artists who are sick or disabled, what do these “contradictions” sound like? What makes these artists anachronistic in their own time? Dialectical notions of late style depend on the prior assumption of a *non*-late style, of form well-made, of a wholeness that integrates contradictions. Adorno’s diagnosis of Beethoven’s late style relies on a reading of his earlier, “heroic” style as transmitting synthesis and cohesion. Plenty of popular music that forecloses and achieves a dialectical synthesis, providing art that prophetically realizes and keeps subject and object together resolving contradictions. In such cases—and these include all of the artists I consider—there are musical norms against which late style can be compared. Fragmentation, quotation, vocal timbre, rhythmic displacement, the circumvention of closure, and lyrical and musical retrospection are key to the late styles of popular music artists. Psychological and biographical interpretation is useful and will not be ignored, but I also rely on musical analysis to make the case for late style as a byproduct of the temporality of illness and the sounds that are constituted by it. By analyzing musical and video recordings, I attempt to help identify ways that ill subjectivity is expressed in patterns and form, allusion, and mood.

My opening two chapters examine what I call “late style too soon.” The first, “The Voice of Illness and Suicide in the Music of Joy Division,” analyzes a selection of the final recorded

⁴¹ Said, *On Late Style*, 7.

⁴² Judith Ann Peraino, *Giving Voice to Love: Song and Self-Expression from the Troubadours to Guillaume de Machaut* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 82.

vocal performances of Ian Curtis, the epileptic front man for the seminal post-punk band Joy Division, who committed suicide at age 23. In Chapter Two, “The Rhythm of Chronic Illness: The Fragmentary Late Style of J Dilla,” I examine the various methods J. Dilla structures and expresses time on *Donuts* (2006), released three days before the producer’s death on his 32nd birthday. *Donuts* is a 31-track instrumental journey characterized by fragmentation and manic sampling, created chiefly while the artist was confined to a hospital bed due to complications related to a combination of auto-immune disorders. Curtis and Dilla chart paths through illness and towards finitude that affected their vocality and composition techniques.

Chapter Three, “David Bowie and the Aesthetics of Ending,” comes closest to canonic musicological constructions of late style in that, at the end of Bowie’s artistic lifespan, which, because of his early success, was longer than average, he clearly aimed at functioning as an “old master” within the historical world of masterwork creators, attempting to add to and cement a rich musical legacy. Bowie died of liver cancer, a slow illness that gave him time to write and record *Blackstar* (2016), ensuring he was artistically productive until the last week of his life. *Blackstar* offers an important look into Bowie’s late style; but I contend that the late period of Bowie’s career began far earlier than the final album. His last four albums all bear the marks of altered temporality brought on by fatherhood late in life.

The final chapter, “Selling Sex From Over The Hill: Madonna Resists Lateness” considers the labor its subject has expended to maintain her level of fitness and voice, through exercise, vocal coaching, and surgeries, in order to preserve her ability to function within her field, and to do her job as a female pop star. Madonna has resisted physical decline quite successfully, thereby separating aging from the condition that can create late style, and allowing

me to raise the possibility that resisting lateness may be understood as a late style in and of itself, one specific to female pop artists.

A central aim in this work is to broaden the field of musical subjects and objects to which “late style” can be applied. Since Adorno’s initial exploration of the idea, late style has mostly been applied to white male composers of Western art music, for the purpose of highlighting and often elevating their last works. To apply a theory of “late style” to popular music and its marginalized identities, including feminized masculinities, non-whites, women, and people who are sick, addicted, or disabled, invites conversation with queer and feminist theory, critical race studies, and disability studies. But notions of authenticity, often tied to personal suffering when applied to popular music, also affect the status of artists during their lateness or illness. What I see as especially important in my work is its consideration of the ways in which these artists either chose to hide their illnesses and any suffering they were experiencing, or to make it public, in either case ultimately affecting the narrative of late style constructed around them.

Even if they are still young, performers deemed precarious in their bodily existence can still be considered to perform or express “lateness.” My work seeks to reflect on musical and cultural responses to illness, disability, and dying while contributing to our understanding of the social significance of popular music in regard to these areas, by framing what it means to be creating music that can be considered late style and expanding understandings of untimely existences. Because there is no universal sound associated with late style, that late style is manifested as the result of individual subjectivities, and so the sound of late style is as different and unique as those subjectivities, or as the subjects that create the music. Ultimately, what defines late style is not its aesthetic symptoms but its *etiology*: it arises from the same condition of altered temporality caused by the physical experience of illness. The value of recognizing ill

style and the temporality of illness lies in its potential to expand listeners' understanding of illness as a state of being inherent to the human condition. Fans do not listen to Joy Division to learn about epilepsy, depression, or addiction; but they are still exposed to a work informed by those experiences. Similarly, fans of Bowie or Dilla are not necessarily seeking insight into cancer or lupus, but these conditions and experiences are revealed in the work. If the listener is able to hear traces of those illnesses and recognize their effect on the artists' lives, artists who are nonetheless not defined, stigmatized, or limited by the illness, this desegregates disability and illness from the realm of so-called "normal" human experience.

CHAPTER ONE

The Voice of Illness and Suicide in the Music of Joy Division

I remember first hearing them on Franklin and Marshall's college radio station in 1985. I sat, ear pressed against my clock radio, waiting to hear the name of the band that had captured my attention and resonated with me, and when it came, it was one I'd never heard of . . . Joy Division⁴³ The following year I befriended a teenage boy at an all-ages dance party held at the roller rink just outside of downtown Lancaster, Pennsylvania, just because he had an amazing, stud-covered leather jacket with a hand painted portrait of Joy Division's lead singer, Ian Curtis, on the back. I knew if he loved Ian enough to paint him on his leather, we must be part of the same tribe. That was, and remains, a testament to the power of Joy Division; the band's sound and Curtis's vocality was so distinct, so specific, that it functions as a shibboleth for an entire subculture.

My experience of finding community through the iconicity of Ian Curtis well after the band had ceased to exist thanks to Curtis's death, is not an uncommon story among Joy Division fans, especially for the large American fan base, since Curtis ended his life on the eve of their first American tour. Yet his voice was ever-present in our lives. I always had a Joy Division cassette in my pocket ready to be played in friends' cars, always prepared to respond to "do you want to listen to something?" with music that was sure to be the correct answer. Because we discovered Joy Division well after Curtis's suicide, after the music magazines that we relied on for our information no longer considered the death newsworthy, and because there was no

⁴³ At the time, I thought "what a oddly happy sounding name for such an unhappy sounding band, nice joke." I had no idea about the dark meaning of the their name being culled from the 1955 novella *House of Dolls* by Ka-tzetnik135633 (Yehiel De-Nur). *Fredenabteilung*, the Joy Division, is the name given the groups of women kept alive for the sexual pleasure of the Nazi soldiers. Simply, a Joy Division was a rape brothel in Nazi labor camps.

internet to give us immediate and full information on the bands we liked, I had no idea that Curtis's voice, which resonated so deeply with me, was the voice of a man with a hidden disability—epilepsy—or even that he had killed himself. Even without this knowledge, there was a quality to his voice and singing style that I thought sounded isolated, distant, and worn. I would much later learn that Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712 - 1778) had put into words what I was not able to do at that age, “The passions have their gestures, but they also have their accents, and these accents, which make us tremble, these accents, from which we cannot shield our organ, penetrate by it to the bottom of the heart, and in spite of us carry to it the movements that wrest them, and make us feel what we hear.”⁴⁴

When I later discovered that Curtis had hung himself, I did not find it abnormal or out of character for those in the business of making rock music. After all, “live fast, die young, and leave a pretty corpse” was a rock and roll mantra; intentionally or not Darby Crash, Brian Jones, Bon Scott, Janis Joplin, and many others had already paved the way for my blasé understanding of this music world narrative. Yet, Curtis's death did seem different; he had hung himself in his kitchen with a clothesline—the level of grim dedication and determination struck me. As my years of listening continued, as I went to see New Order (the band that the remaining members of Joy Division later formed), and as I read the magazine articles and reviews published on the anniversaries of Joy Division albums, Curtis's birthday, and other significant dates, I gained exposure to others' constructions of the larger-than-life myth surrounding Ian Curtis the tortured artist, the lyrical genius, the quintessential voice of suicidal depression. However, in all the years of deep appreciation and obsessive collecting, his epilepsy *itself* barely registered on my ideas about his life or his music. At the time when I had more distinctly dualistic leanings, I

⁴⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John T Scott, *Essay on the Origin of Languages and Writings Related to Music* (Hanover [N.H.: University Press of New England, 1998), 292.

would have interpreted his illness as depression that was more psychic than embodied, and claimed that what we heard in his music was “pure” angst removed from any mundane physical reality. Now I sense Ian Curtis’s lyrics and vocality distinctly marked by a late style directly connected to his epilepsy.

Ian Curtis, born in 1956, grew up in suburban Macclesfield, England, thirty minutes south of Manchester. He had a gift for words and poetry at a young age, and at eleven he won a scholarship to attend The King’s School in Macclesfield. Once he finished his O-levels, he left school and quickly secured a job as a sales assistant at Rare Records in Manchester, where he could feed his desire to enjoy and consume new music.⁴⁵ Curtis was a huge fan of the Velvet Underground, Iggy Pop, and, most of all, David Bowie: “Ian was mad on David Bowie. He had his hair cut the same. Spiked up on top and longer at the side. Nell took him to Vidal Sassoon. He got some awful red satin trousers. I remember thinking ‘Oh my God!’”⁴⁶ Curtis saw Bowie’s Ziggy Stardust tour twice in 1972, one of those times being his first date with his future wife, Deborah. Shortly after working in the record store, Curtis got a job in the Civil Service and became an Assistant Disablement Resettlement Officer. “He worked closely with disabled people to ensure that they claimed the benefits to which they were entitled. He took an extremely personal interest in his clients and did his utmost to find employment for them.”⁴⁷ He was “sent on a course to learn about epilepsy” as part of his training.⁴⁸ This job may have had a

⁴⁵ Mick Middles and Lindsey Read, *The Life Of Ian Curtis: Torn Apart* (Music Sales Limited, 2010).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Deborah Curtis, *Touching from a Distance: Ian Curtis and Joy Division* (London; Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995), 51.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

significant effect on Curtis's relationship to his disease, which I will discuss in more depth later in this chapter. On April 16, 1975, he married Deborah Woodruff, when she was 18 and he was 19. Four years later to the day, April 16, 1979, his daughter Natalie Curtis was born. Just over a year following her birth, on May 2nd, 1980, Curtis successfully committed suicide.

Curtis's very short musical career began in 1977 and was over by 1980. He joined the band that would ultimately be called Joy Division after meeting Bernard Sumner and Peter Hook at a Sex Pistols gig in 1976. For a band that recorded only two full-length studio albums—*Unknown Pleasures* (1979) and *Closer* (1980)—Joy Division has risen to legendary status in the 37 years since lead singer Ian Curtis took his own life. The life span of the musical style that he is most often associated with and helped to define—so-called “post-punk”—falls within the stream⁴⁹ of rock music, lasting only slightly longer than Curtis's career, from 1978 to 1984. The musical style of post-punk exists within a milieu that comprises audiences, designers, critics, and, of course, musicians. The historical connections that form and accrue within this social category allows for musical sounds to signify and complicate the social category of post-punk and those placed into that classification.⁵⁰ Post as a linguistic construction defines the concepts within proximity and in opposition to.

⁴⁹ I am using Jennifer C. Lena's term “stream” here instead of genre to situate the bands classified as post-punk within their broader musical lineage. Bands often cross boundaries of genres used to market them at different historical periods and my focus here is not the genres *per se*, but the stylistic differences within the broad “stream” of popular rock and pop. Although post-punk may be viewed as development of punk or a radical shift from prog rock, it is musically and socially related to both. It is aligned with “rock ‘n’ roll, rockabilly, glitter rock, punk, heavy metal, and emo” which are all within her defined “rock stream” guitar-based styles, most often associated with white males. See Jennifer C Lena, *Banding Together: How Communities Create Genres in Popular Music* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ Press, 2014).

⁵⁰ To label something as post means defining it against the other it is attached to (post-punk's attachment to punk) but inherently in relation to the other. As Wendy Brown writes, “[P]ost’ signifies a formation that is temporally after but not over that to which it is affixed. ‘Post’ indicates a very particular condition of afterness in which what is past is not left behind, but, on the contrary, relentlessly conditions, even dominates a present that nevertheless also breaks in some way with this past. In other words, we use the

Generic categories often “indicate a tacit and contingent collective agreement about the ‘proper’ place for different types of music and the social groups most associated with them.”⁵¹ It is not just the form or the sound of music that places it within a certain genre, but also the identities of artists and fans. To be clear, post-punk, like all popular music styles, is an open-ended term, both temporally and as a signifier of genre. Post-punk holds onto all the standard rock and punk rock musical forms; it is still mostly guitar-driven music, typically in a 4/4 time signature, using verse-chorus song structures (AAA or AABA) with four-bar phrases—but with an atmospheric change. Some of the aesthetic traits that contributed to this change can serve as structural markers of post-punk: 1) an emphasis on the sound of the electric bass; 2) intricate, terse, and fast drumming, often with digital effects; 3) the use of delay and echo effects to place choppy and angular guitars into a large sonic space, rather than the warm bluesy groove found in rock or the flat, in your face sound box of punk; 4) electronic synthesizer effects, which are not always in key and are commonly used for atmosphere; 5) voices that are not always in tune with the instrumental sounds. Arguably, the most noticeable shift between punk and post-punk is variety in vocal style. The shout-singing that so often characterized punk rock morphed and splintered in post-punk, which accommodated a broader range of vocal display.

Ian Curtis’s career started in 1977, while the first wave of British punk was still in full swing. In fact, Joy Division started out as just another British punk band with the name Warsaw. As Warsaw, the group opened for seminal bands such as the Buzzcocks, Johnny Thunders and the Heartbreakers, Generation X, and Penetration. Early recordings of Warsaw reveal a vocal delivery much more aligned with punk traditions than with dark, cold, doomy vocal affect for

term ‘post’ only for a present whose past continues to capture and structure it.” Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, 2014.

⁵¹ David Brackett, “Questions of Genre in Black Popular Music,” *Black Music Research Journal* 25, no. 1/2 (2005): 73–92, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30039286>.

which Curtis would later become known. A dramatic shift, both in band name and in sound, was executed in close proximity to Curtis's diagnosis as an epileptic on January 23, 1979. Though Curtis's "new voice" would help define the vocal style of the post-punk era, expressed a subjectivity that was a consequence of his epilepsy and attendant treatments for the disease, depression, and addiction. Even though Curtis was not yet thirty, Joy Division's was an untimely "sick" style, and thus a "late" one as well. This "late" sound anchored in Curtis's wounded vocal style, is still one of the definitive sounds of post-punk. His embodied experience of illness became an aesthetic that was emulated by many subsequent musicians.⁵² However, before we dive into a discussion of Curtis's vocal style, let's first consider epilepsy, the neurological condition that marked it—and him.

Epilepsy and The State of Being Vulnerable

Cultural awareness of epilepsy can be traced back to 2000 B.C.E., with the first mention appearing on a Babylonian tablet in the collection of the British Museum,⁵³ and references to epilepsy are found in texts of all civilizations and eras since. Hippocrates wrote skeptically about "the Sacred Disease," pronouncing that epilepsy "appears to me to be nowise more divine nor more sacred than other diseases, but has a natural cause from which it originates like other affections."⁵⁴ However, his summation is not the one that stuck: epilepsy was for centuries a disease approached with superstitious awe linked mainly to religious mysticism, its symptoms

⁵² Listen to Interpol, *She Wants Revenge*, *Cold Cave*, *A Place to Bury Strangers*, to name but a few.

⁵³ J M S Pearce, "Early Accounts of Epilepsy: A Synopsis," *Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery & Psychiatry* 64, no. 5 (May 1, 1998): 679–679, doi:10.1136/jnnp.64.5.679.

⁵⁴ "The Internet Classics Archive | On the Sacred Disease by Hippocrates," accessed January 28, 2017, <http://classics.mit.edu/Hippocrates/sacred.html>.

often understood as either a divine punishment or possession by a demonic entity.⁵⁵ Hildegard of Bingen, the Benedictine abbess, composer, mystic, and philosopher, claimed that epilepsy could be brought on in two ways: a person might have low morals, or their blood could be stirred by their own vengeful wrath.⁵⁶ It was not until the Enlightenment that epilepsy was determined to be a medical disease of the brain.⁵⁷ Moreover, until 1983 the Catholic Church discriminated openly against epileptics; the Canon Law “forbade to be ordained or to exercise orders already received to ‘those who are or were epileptics either not quite in their right mind or possessed by the Evil One.’”⁵⁸ By the 1960s pharmacology had advanced sufficiently with enough attention to epilepsy that thirteen drugs were on the market to address the disease, but nothing evolved from there for almost another 30 years.⁵⁹ Of course, the drugs that were created had deleterious side effects (more detail when we discuss the drugs Curtis was on). Despite increased understanding of the neurological causes and effective treatment of epilepsy, the condition was still deeply stigmatized until the 1990s. Although epileptics were no longer considered to be possessed in the late 20th century, they still, like many sufferers from neurological syndromes, faced real prejudice and discrimination. Epileptics were at times sterilized; laws were passed to prevent them from having children, and companies would often refuse to hire them (Nevens 2009; Jacoby, Snape, and Baker 2005; Wehmeyer 2003; Jacoby 2002, North Carolina Eugenics Board

⁵⁵ Mervyn J. Eadie and Peter F. Bladin, *A Disease Once Sacred: A History of the Medical Understanding of Epilepsy*, 1st edition (Eastleigh: John Libbey Eurotext, 2001).

⁵⁶ Margret Berger and Hildegard, *Hildegard of Bingen: On Natural Philosophy and Medicine : Selections from Cause et Cure* (Cambridge; Rochester, N.Y.: D.S. Brewer, 1999).

⁵⁷ K. Sidiropoulou, A. Diamantis, and E. Magiorkinis, “Hallmarks in 18th- and 19th-Century Epilepsy Research,” *Epilepsy & Behavior* 18, no. 3 (July 2010): 151–61, doi:10.1016/j.yebeh.2010.04.004.

⁵⁸ M. Bonduelle, “[Epilepsy and Canon Law],” *Revue Neurologique* 143, no. 5 (1987): 468–70.

⁵⁹ Simon D. Shorvon, “Drug Treatment of Epilepsy in the Century of the ILAE: The Second 50 Years, 1959-2009,” *Epilepsia* 50 (March 2009): 93–130, doi:10.1111/j.1528-1167.2009.02042.x.

1948). It was only the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 that protected epileptics from discrimination.⁶⁰ Yet, stigmatization of and misunderstandings about epilepsy still persist; although I am using the term disease within these pages in my own description of epilepsy, it has been classified as a disease in the medical field only since 2014. Before then it was considered a neurological disorder, which refers only to abnormality in a physical condition, rather than a disease, which is something that has an identifiable cause and can be treated .

Thus when Ian Curtis was diagnosed with epilepsy in 1979 he had to include in his self-concept an identity that was deeply stigmatized.⁶¹ A newly diagnosed epileptic had to contend with limited civil liberties and potential problems in personal relationships, in addition to the sheer vulnerability to bodily harm and other safety issues resulting from seizures. A terrible example of this is that Curtis was afraid to hold his own newborn child, as he feared hurting or dropping her during a seizure. Ultimately, those who suffer from epilepsy are at increased risk from all causes of death and are four times as likely to commit suicide as the average person.⁶²

Epilepsy constitutes and contributes an extreme version of the precarity we all face as embodied beings.⁶³ To have a body is to be vulnerable, but the layers of an intersectional identity can mitigate or exacerbate the experience of vulnerability according to social location

⁶⁰ My knowledge of the modern state of the world for epileptics is drawn from my conversations with my friend, former Congressman Tony Coelho. Tony is an epileptic and was the primary sponsor of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

⁶¹ See Kate Kellaway, “How I Faced up to Epilepsy,” *The Guardian*, March 9, 2014, sec. Society, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/mar/09/how-i-faced-up-epilepsy-helen-stephens>. for a personal account of the continued struggles one faces in having this disease both personally and in the U.K.

⁶² Shea Cheney, “Premature Mortality in Epilepsy and the Role of Psychiatric Comorbidity: A Total Population Study: Fazel S, Wolf A, Långström N, et Al. *Lancet* 2013;382:1646–54.” *JEM Journal of Emergency Medicine* 46, no. 5 (2014): 1646.

⁶³ Butler, *Precarious Life*.

and identities (Black, female, queer, Muslim, disabled). Each element of a person's identity that is perceived as being outside the normative or ideal as understood by the subject's culture changes how the other elements affect a lived experience. This is not to say that all othered identities have equal impact. Being ill or disabled is an identity, but not necessarily a *visible* one. Curtis's non-normative, working-class body, presenting with a disease that was only periodically visible, aligned him with the history of denigrated bodies; though male, white, straight, and young, his illness put him far outside the social grouping of his band mates. The special vulnerability of epilepsy was one around which he constructed shame. Although he lived in a time when Bowie had queered popular music in bold and new ways, just being "musical," as Philip Brett pointed out from a not dissimilar social and intersectional position, is often to be part of a group of others:

The charge that musicians or devotees of music are "effeminate" goes back as far as recorded documentation about music, and music's association with the body (in dance or for sensuous pleasure) and with subjectivity has led to its being relegated in many historical periods to what was understood as a "feminine realm."⁶⁴

Thus Curtis had an identity that made him more vulnerable on a number of levels.

Early in her book *Violence and the Philosophical Imaginary*, Ann Murphy uses Judith Butler's work on precarity to observe that an individual's response to an experience of vulnerability is ambiguous—it can engender many different responses.⁶⁵ Just as the many

⁶⁴ Philip Brett, "Musicality, Essentialism, and the Closet," in Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C Thomas, *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* (New York: Routledge, 1994). Brett was also a sensitive working-class young man from the north of England, neurotypical, but, as the above quote implies, always inhabiting his desire to be a musician as part of a queer identity.

⁶⁵ Ann V Murphy, *Violence and the Philosophical Imaginary* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 26.

expressions of late style or disability style are not universal, the reaction to an existence outside of normative time or to an illness will never be universal. We should avoid viewing disability through a hagiographic lens, its hardship offering something to transcend through redemptive artistic output.⁶⁶ But we should equally avoid discounting vulnerability that ends with suicide because it does not “fit” into a body narrative of triumph over disability. Embodied vulnerability can be held up as a factor in creative production without using art to assign positive value to the disability—which requires no justification—and thus ensure that we do not demand that vulnerable people act to advance specific, politically expedient narratives.

Illness and disability, however, do inform artists’ experiences and consequently become inscribed on their art. As Helen Deutsch ably explains in her book *Resemblance & Disgrace: Alexander Pope and the Deformation of Culture*, “Pope marked culturally current material with his deformity’s singular contradictions.”⁶⁷ Just as deformity appears as a poetics jointly constructed by the author and his audience in *Resemblance and Disgrace*, sickness that brings about an exiled, nihilistic bodily existence became the cohesive poetic trait of Joy Division. The difference being of course that Pope’s deformity was an always visible deviation of the body from a structural norm, and not a “hidden” sickness that attacks the mind from within, leading each man to different artistic places.

It is more than likely that Curtis suffered from epilepsy for some time prior to being diagnosed. In her book, *Touching from a Distance* (1995), his wife Deborah explained that

Sometimes Ian would say he suffered ‘flashbacks’. He described situations where he would have a sensation of floating, as if he had taken drugs when in fact he had

⁶⁶ Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

⁶⁷ Helen Deutsch, *Resemblance & Disgrace: Alexander Pope and the Deformation of Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 2.

not. This was always assumed to be a side effect of whatever [recreational drugs] he had taken the previous week. No one thought they might have been early epileptic fits.⁶⁸

In fact, it is fairly common for epileptic seizures that do not involve physical seizing, called petit mal or absence seizures, to go undetected with the effects mistaken for mood swings; or for “absence” seizures (small seizures lasting about ten seconds) to be misunderstood as simple distraction or loss of mental focus. Epilepsy is often diagnosed only when the disease has more obvious and taxing tonic and clonic symptoms, at which point the individual is contending with clear physical impacts, having to renegotiate a changed sense of identity and place.

“Live Transmission”: Curtis’s Vocality Before His Illness

In defining late style or sick style for a musical artist, it is critical to understand what that style is being compared to, specifically the artist’s earlier works created before illness set in. A recording of Warsaw, Joy Division’s predecessor, exists from September 14th, 1977, a little over a year prior to Curtis’s first public seizure and diagnosis of epilepsy. The live recording is almost shocking to hear, as Ian Curtis sounds much more like a heavy metal growler, with an immediacy and strain audible in his voice, than the sad crooner of his later works. It is almost an inexplicable juxtaposition, until one considers the timing of the onset of his epilepsy.

The performance at Rock Garden in Middlesbrough in 1977 came prior to Curtis being diagnosed and medicated for the condition. In this recording of a live performance a forceful vocality, is heard—full and vigorous. At times he is even shouting; it has a stereotypical straightforward punk rock sound that was prevalent in the bands Curtis saw in his local clubs such as The Adverts, Sex Pistols, and Buzzcocks. A snarling, energetic young man is at the

⁶⁸ Curtis, *Touching from a Distance*, 12.

microphone, sounding the urgency and vigor of youth, singing in an aggressive, furious staccato style with a speedy clip. There is nothing even to hint that in two years he'd be crooning like a despondent Frank Sinatra (who had his own share of nervous breakdowns) on songs like "Love Will Tear Us Apart" and "Twenty Four Hours."

Once Ian Curtis was diagnosed and put on medication, a massive shift took place in his vocality, ultimately traceable to a shift in bodily experience and knowledge. The recorded evidence of Joy Division's two studio recordings offers remarkable documentation of just how much Curtis's voice and vocal performance style had changed in a very short time. Crooning relies on a microphone's ability to pick up and amplify less forcefully projected voices; a croon, then, both creates a sense of intimacy and requires less physical energy. Intentional or not Curtis went from being a punk shouter to a crooner. This may have been in part due to the lack of energy caused by depression or it could have been a shift in his mastering of microphone technology or both. No matter what the cause, the intimacy created by the new vocal presence that could be heard such as breath, softer phrasing, and groans shape the listener's perception and help to evoke thoughts of late style. The ways in which Curtis would hit notes and then shift either up or down, didn't sound natural or easy (like a Bing Crosby) but rather Curtis's crooning sounds as if it is coming at a bodily cost.

Examining these recorded texts, I will be analyzing both *voice*, "the locus of articulation of an individual's body to language and society" and *vocality*, "the performative dimension of vocal expression, that is on the dynamic, contingent quality of both vocalization and audition."⁶⁹ Thanks to the changes in Curtis's singing, the band became darker, more brooding and

⁶⁹ Leslie Dunn and Nancy A. Jones, eds., *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1994). See Paul Zumthor *La Lettre et la voix: de la "litterature"* 1987 (p 20-31.)

foreboding. Arguably, some of that quality was due to Martin Hannett's understated yet virtuosic production work, but its basis is in Curtis's own despondence and depression around his illness, exacerbated by the prescription medications he was taking, which included carbamazepine, valproate, phenytoin and phenobarbitone; the two latter are intensely potent barbiturates that most evenings were combined with significant alcohol intake.⁷⁰ The carbamazepine "reduces the likelihood of convulsions caused by abnormal nerve signals in the brain."⁷¹ It is possible that the concoction of drugs attributed to his lyrical outlook. Curtis, whose "moods would fluctuate between ultra-politeness and blind rage" prior to being medicated, grew increasingly more emotionally unpredictable.⁷²

Voice, Illness, and the Construction of Late Style

Curtis's path towards finitude in relationship to his illness affected his vocality. I am drawing here on the work of Suzanne Cusick and Judith Peraino in my exploration of how a vocal performance can represent an identity.⁷³ When a singer's body is physically present; the way in which that body is used inevitably becomes one of the performative signs from which the audience constructs meanings. Illness and disability bring a particular sharpness to issues that arise out of the relationship between the body and the art. In light of this, Curtis's voice can be

⁷⁰ Curtis, *Touching from a Distance*, 76.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 72.

⁷³ Suzanne 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, 2006), 67–85.; Judith Ann Peraino, *Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Hedwig* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

placed in a genealogy of late voices emanating from sick, though young bodies, such as those of Karen Carpenter, Freddie Mercury, Kurt Cobain, Vic Chesnutt, and Frank Tovey.

Joy Division's vocalist, Ian Curtis, suffered from severe depression. This affective state is significant in thinking about the voice as physical and mental states together have sonic markers. "Reduced frequency range in vowel production is a well documented speech characteristic of individuals with psychological and neurological disorders. Affective disorders such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are known to influence motor control and in particular speech production."⁷⁴ Studies have shown that those with epilepsy are more likely to have psychological problems, especially depression and anxiety, as a result of the emotional strain of sickness itself. Anti-epileptic medications can also have depressive effects, including a possible tropism to suicidal behavior. A population-based case-control study concluded in 2007 that the risk of suicide is 32 times higher in those with epilepsy and depression than in the general population, as opposed to 2.4 times higher in those with epilepsy alone.⁷⁵

For Curtis, the risk of suicide that came with his illness was certainly increased further by his drinking and the intense pressure of his job as the lead singer of Joy Division. His epilepsy made performing live a precarious and terrifying task, as it could bring on seizures due to the stress of performing, the lights, or the sound and volume of the music.⁷⁶ It has been noted that

⁷⁴ S. Scherer et al., "Self-Reported Symptoms of Depression and PTSD Are Associated with Reduced Vowel Space in Screening Interviews," *IEEE Transactions on Affective Computing* 7, no. 1 (January 2016): 59, doi:10.1109/TAFFC.2015.2440264.

⁷⁵ J Christensen et al., "Epilepsy and Risk of Suicide: A Population-Based Case-Control Study," *LANCET NEUROLOGY* 6, no. 8 (2007): 693–98.

⁷⁶ See Melissa Jane Maguire, "Music and Epilepsy: A Critical Review," *Epilepsia* 53, no. 6 (June 1, 2012): 947–61, doi:10.1111/j.1528-1167.2012.03523.x. for an in depth medical discussion of the

Curtis sometimes performed his epilepsy, doing what has been called his “mad fly dance,” but at other times, as Joy Division guitarist Bernard Sumner points out, often “it ended up with Ian having [true epileptic] fits onstage” and the audience did not know the difference. In the biography of her late husband, *Touching From a Distance* (1995), Deborah Curtis attested to the reality behind Curtis’s performances stating, “People admired him for the things that were destroying him.”⁷⁷ There are stigmas associated with diseases such as epilepsy, as well as mental illnesses such as depression, which were if anything more strongly felt during Curtis’s career than they are today. When Curtis would have fits, he would be embarrassed and there were times when “he just broke down in tears; he was so ashamed.”⁷⁸ As part of a poignant summary of her father’s illness, Natalie Curtis stated in an interview with the *Guardian*:

People constantly ask, "Why did he kill himself?" To me it seems obvious – because he was really depressed. Bernard told me that my father used to drink before performing, which may explain his on-stage fits, because alcohol is a seizure trigger. Seizures can also be triggered by flashing lights, lack of sleep and stress. Ian's lifestyle and the tension caused by the disintegration of his marriage would not have helped. He did the best he could; he was just very ill.⁷⁹

Annik Honoré, a woman Curtis had fallen in love with, explains Curtis’s epilepsy in a way that links his illness to a sense of exile and alienation, in that he was in some sense transported elsewhere.

possibility of seizures due to listening and performing music and the impact of stress on the epileptic brain.

⁷⁷ Bernard Sumner *Heart and Soul*, compact disc (Los Angeles, CA: Rhino/Warner Archives, 2001).; Curtis, *Touching from a Distance*, 118..

⁷⁸ Bernard Sumner, Liner Notes, *Heart and Soul*..

⁷⁹ Natalie Curtis, “Suddenly the Reality Hit Me,” *The Guardian*, accessed May 5, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2007/sep/22/periodandhistorical>.

The fact that Ian had been epileptic since his teens made him particularly fragile. When he had a fit, it made him surreal, terribly frightening: ... But it's almost something magical like a connection between the conscious and the unconscious. Suddenly, he goes into a world with no relation to reality.⁸⁰

All these evocative statements and images of Curtis point to his exile not just from the larger society, but also from his family, his newfound loving relationship, and his band. I am detailing here the circumstances of his illness and depression as important background for understanding how to hear the shift in his voice.

Curtis was out of step, unable to attain a kind of normative recognition, becoming outside and other, with an illness that no one around him understood—that even he didn't totally understand. This is complicated by the paradox that outsidership and alienation is a “norm” of youthful cultural aesthetics, yet, I would contend teenage alienation is not typically embodied state outside of chosen fashion statements such as tattooing or piercing. Curtis's bodily and psychological state, a ticking bomb on a timer with an unknown zero, and the voice that emanated from it, were the sites of an abject performance of lateness, of being outside normative time. For Curtis, the time he had left became a personal form of isolation and alienation. He was a man who had attempted suicide twice before succeeding—he knew his own end was near when others did not.

Edward Said writes that late style is “a devotion to the truth of un-reconciled relations.”⁸¹ Ian Curtis was acutely aware of and conflicted by his own personal relationships with his band, his wife, his newborn daughter, his recent love for a woman to whom he was not married, and his own ill self. His affairs were not going to be in order before his passing—he knew this—and

⁸⁰ Middles and Read, *The Life Of Ian Curtis*, 202.

⁸¹ Said, *On Late Style*, 13.

we can hear it in the final songs he penned and performed. As Said says, “lateness elucidates and dramatizes”⁸² and that’s just what Joy Division’s songs did for Curtis’s illness.

* * * *

Joy Division’s second and final album, *Closer*, was recorded in March of 1980, just a month before Curtis attempted suicide for the first time. It is well documented that Curtis was quite debilitated by his epilepsy during the recording of *Closer*, and listening to *Closer* with this knowledge is often a heart wrenching experience. “*Closer* is an album that seems to seethe with distress and foreboding. It certainly sounds like the work of a man who would take his own life a few weeks after its recording was complete.”⁸³ With only two weeks to record and mix the record, there was immense pressure on the band to get it done right and fast. As Peter Hook informs us, Ian “was having a lot of blackouts” while recording *Closer* and even “had a fit and split his head open on the sink.”⁸⁴ On top of it all, Curtis’s bandmates have admitted to adding to his struggles by “taking the piss all the time”; Hook continues, “Ian’s illness was getting worse and we didn’t help him.”⁸⁵

Tortured by his illness, medications, his home life, and the fear, shame, and remorse brought on by his increasingly frequent seizures, his body became the location of a battle, and his voice its principal instrument. The lack of reconciliation in his life, along with the catastrophic

⁸² Edward W Said, *Musical Elaborations* (London: Vintage, 1992), 21.

⁸³ Barry Nicolson, “Most Important Albums Of NME’s Lifetime - Joy Division, ‘Closer,’” *NME*, August 2, 2012, accessed Nov. 4, 2015. <http://www.nme.com/blogs/nme-blogs/most-important-albums-of-nmes-lifetime-joy-division-closer-766499>.

⁸⁴ Peter Hook, “Joy Division’s Ian Curtis Commits Suicide,” *The Guardian*, June 13, 2011, sec. Music, accessed November 12, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/jun/14/joy-division-ian-curtis-suicide>.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

isolation caused by illness, medication, drink, and depression, seeped into Curtis's works. Given that it is a relationship with mortality constituted by signals interpreted from the body that constructs lateness. "Moving from the interior to the exterior, carrying traces of the body into evanescent speech, the voice is, and has always been, haunted by its multiple identifications."⁸⁶ Meaning that his body is discernable in the songs; that is, it is possible to tease out the corporeal traces that linger in Curtis's vocal output, as captured in the recorded works from this year. However, it is also important to identify the choices made in the studio contributed to aesthetic representation. The melancholy that is in the music is exacerbated by the physical exhaustion we hear in Curtis's voice. At the age of 23 Curtis was a world-weary singer. An examination of the isolated vocals compared with the final recording found on the 7" record "Love Will Tear Us Apart," *Closer's*, "Decades," and "In a Lonely Place" from the final rehearsal session of the band, reveals the way that an affected and artificial lateness was created in the studio, producing a highly aestheticized version of the experienced and embodied lateness in the work of Ian Curtis. It is in the combination of Curtis's vocalization and the aesthetic choices made during production that create the distinct, Joy Division sound, a process that can be examined by comparing the album version of "Love Will Tear Us Apart" against the recording of Curtis's isolated vocals used in the track.

A collaboration between Joy Division and producer Martin Hannett, who also produced *Unknown Pleasures* and would later produce *Closer*, "Love Will Tear Us Apart" was originally recorded with composed lyrics at the Pennine Sound Studios in Oldham on January 8, 1980.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Frances Dyson, *Sounding New Media: Immersion and Embodiment in the Arts and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 7.

⁸⁷ Martin Hannett was a heroin addict, deep in the throes of addiction and drug use during the production of *Closer* and "Love Will Tear Us Apart." In addition to the heroin use, Hook described his constant marijuana smoking while in studio. It can be safely claimed that Hannett was experiencing an altered

However, while Stephen Morris and Peter Hook were satisfied with the recording, Ian Curtis and Martin Hannett were not, and the version that would become the band's biggest hit was the result of a second recording session at Strawberry Studios in March of that year. Peter Hook described the special, collaborative relationship between Curtis and Hannett, "he was Martin's favorite. As far back as *Unknown Pleasures*, Ian had developed a special relationship with Martin—the two of them seemed to feed off each other creatively."⁸⁸ Hook ascribes much of the sound that was created to this relationship and the vision that stemmed from it. Hook and guitarist Bernard Sumner did not like the atmosphere that had developed on *Unknown Pleasures*, instead envisioning a "harder, harsher, more metallic sound."⁸⁹ This desire by the rest of the band was in conflict with Curtis and Hannett, who guided the band in an artier direction.⁹⁰ The collaborative bond between Curtis and Hannett strengthened during the *Closer* sessions, which took place at Britannia Row Studios in London's Islington neighborhood between the 18th and 30th of March, 1980. It was during these sessions that Hannett finalized "Love Will Tear Us Apart," primarily working on mixing Curtis's vocals.

Listening to the isolated vocal recording of Curtis singing "Love Will Tear Us Apart" can be a jarring experience for fans accustomed to the album version.⁹¹ The voice on it sounds bare

sense of time while producing these tracks; and Joy Division band recorded a live version of "Love Will Tear Us Apart" as part of their second John Peel session at the BBC Studios, Maida Vale, London on November 26, 1979. However, it was recorded for the Peel session, rather than for inclusion on a release by their label.

⁸⁸ Peter Hook, *Unknown Pleasures: Inside Joy Division* (New York: It Books, 2013), 213.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 308

⁹⁰ Hook describes the frustration the band felt with "finding his arty feet." Hook, *Unknown Pleasures*, 309.

⁹¹ *Joy Division - Love Will Tear Us Apart Isolated Vocals, Vocals Only*, accessed April 3, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R8xiccDgKA4>.

and vulnerable, not only because it is deprived of the instrumentation that usually bolsters and contextualizes it. The isolated vocal recording is characterized by the sounds of a body that Curtis attempts, but ultimately fails, to control. The control over articulation sounds as though it is coming mostly from a tensed jaw, rather than muscular control over the cheeks especially, which sound loose. The sound of the gritted jaw, manifesting Curtis's attempt to control the sound he is producing through force of tension, constricts the larynx and makes the words sound tight and terse. This effect can especially be heard in the vowels, which require an open vocal tract. The restricted vowels can be heard the opening lines when Curtis sings, "When the routine bites hard/And ambitions are low," with the "a" in the "are" sounding especially compressed. This also emphasizes the guttural sound to the pronunciation of are. However, I will not be addressing the noticeably guttural elements of Curtis's elocution, nor the often vocalized "s" noise, as they are elements of the Mancunian accent that he most certainly has.⁹² I have attempted to only analyze those elements that seem particular to him, rather than to the region he comes from.

Despite Curtis's attempts to take command of his body, the words are slightly slurred, with lax breath control. This is evident in the lack of clean, hard "g"s such as the one in "taking" from the line "Taking different roads" and is especially noticeable in the delivery of the word "different" from that same line, which sounds more like diff-er-innn. There are also places where he sounds as though he nearly runs out of breath, despite the relatively short duration of the lines he sings between taking breaths. The most noticeable example is his lack of breath behind the final word of "And the resentment rides high," where the word and vowel is bent in the middle

⁹² For a diverting and useful repository of recordings of speakers thought to best exemplify regional U.K. dialects in the middle of the 20th century, please see the British Library's Survey of English Dialects, accessible at: <http://sounds.bl.uk/Accents-and-dialects/Survey-of-English-dialects>.

by a push to use the air that is left. The slurring and varied force with which he sings give the affect of a man not fully present and capable of accomplishing what he wishes to.

Curtis's inability to adequately control his muscles and breath, causing him to sing under pitch and with an extreme vibrato, combine to produce a shocking difference between his isolated vocals and the more familiar vocals. The overall effect of Curtis's vocals routinely being unintentionally flat and not hitting the desired notes draws attention to his physical vulnerability, anguish, and exhaustion. While, at times the vibrato is less audible, for many of the sustained vowel sounds the vibrato oscillates widely and slowly enough to be considered a vocal wobble. Curtis has better control over his wobble when he has just inhaled and is singing with more force or when singing higher notes such as the E for the first "love" in the chorus, "Then love, love will tear us apart again." Especially in the first chorus, this is the clearest word he hits, with force of breath behind it and only a minimal amount of vibrato. As he runs out of breath the wobble asserts itself more, becoming increasingly noticeable as he drops to the D B of "apart." Breath is not the issue in the lowest and most wobbly note, the "gain" of "again" (sung syllabically on D then A), as he audibly breathes just before singing the word. In fact, you can hear his regular and shallow sounding intakes of breath. Vocal wobble can be caused by many things, whether it is a flaccid and depressed tongue that puts pressure on the larynx or undisciplined muscles that do not provide proper breath support, but it is often the result of exhaustion and the inability of the singer to control their muscles effectively. This exhaustion reads as such, and Curtis's sounds tired and worn. By the final chorus cycle, he is audibly exerting more energy to sing and there is vibrato on even the line's initial "love" sung at E and the final "apart" disintegrates, sounding like "a-par-rat".

This isolated vocal track contains traces of Curtis's embodied experience of illness,

revealing an artist who struggled to exert control over an ungovernable body. The sounds speak to the isolation of incapacity and depression and fear over human frailty, themes that are present in the produced work. But isolation, depression, and exhaustion are revealed in ways completely different than are affected and selected for in the manipulated and distributed version. In this version, the one that we are most familiar with, artificial signifiers are used to create a sense of isolation and resignation that is then aestheticized. Altered and repositioned by Hammet, the themes in Curtis's late works are encouraged and supported through technological mediation that simultaneously removes the sounds of Curtis's embodied illness by creating a straight vocal tone that refuses his body and presents an aural image of a lead singer who is distanced and full of angst but not ill.

The differences between the isolated and the mixed vocals are immediately apparent. The first word of the song, "when," comes in with a punch on the album version, compared to the sleepier sound on the isolated vocals. The slurring, especially in "changing our ways/Taking different roads," is still audible, but becomes less noticeable when surrounded by the instrumentation. While there is a slight amount of reverb on Curtis's isolated vocals, a great deal more is added on the final recording, which accommodates a certain fuzziness of sound and masks the slurring a fair amount. These production tools and the layering of vocals with instrumentals provide additional resonances and a wide range of overtones that help hide the slurring and conceals when Curtis is out of tune. The reverb and other effects similarly serve to hide the width of the vibrato. While "apart" and "again" have a slight perceptible vibrato, it is nothing compared to the original sound of Curtis's voice. While other adjustments are made to reinforce the aimed for affect—such as in the sound of the first "love" in the second chorus where the bend upward in the vowel is exaggerated from the original recording, giving the sense

of love being pronounced as a bubble, of love as hollow—I will focus on the technological alterations that allowed the Curtis’s bodily traces to be removed from the representation of his voice, thereby creating a version of the voice that sounded more control and was defined by it, rather than by its lack..

The primary modifications I will discuss are the addition of the reverb, and the elimination of breath and vibrato. We know that, starting at least by his production of *Unknown Pleasures*, Hammett used an AMS DMX 15-80, a 15-bit digital delay line that allows for long delays and pitch shifting; as well as a Marshall Time Modulator, an analog device, developed in the late 1970’s, capable of creating deep flanging and modulation.⁹³ During the era Hannett was producing Joy Division Marshall Time Modulator was cutting edge technology that had:

two independent analog delay lines each with three output taps that used analog "bucket brigade" charge-coupled devices. Unique to the MTM at that time was that the delay time could be swept either manually or via an LFO. The dry signal was mixed with the delay line outputs with one delay line permanently set out of phase. You could also add varying amounts of feedback to the output mix.⁹⁴

Using the tools at his disposal, Hannett added a lot of reverb to Curtis’s voice, which served to lessen the sound of the tension obvious in his jaw, the slurring, and the wobble in addition to creating a sense of distance.

Reverb is the principle effect used in production to create the impression of space and, therefore, distance. Jonathan Sterne ably describes the ways that artificial-reverb devices multiply a sound, “creating echoes so fast and in such multitude and variety (through filtering, stereo effects, and other techniques) that they blur together and convey a sense of ambiance.

⁹³ Hook, *Unknown Pleasures*, 184.

⁹⁴ David Gamson and Barry Rudolph, “Intelligent Devices’ Marshall Time Modulator Plug-In,” accessed April 3, 2017, <http://www.barryrudolph.com/stellar/mtm.html>.

They produce, proliferate, and manipulate sound; the process of modeling acoustic space is thus inseparable from the process of making acoustic space.”⁹⁵ This space in the Joy Division recordings, is being used to create a sense of distance and isolation, but it does so by separating Curtis’s voice from his body, masking the vocal failings resulting from illness (and most likely medications mixed with alcohol) that had also indicated separation and making the distance have an artificially created spatial referent, rather than one that referred back to a sick body.

Curtis’s performance was also modified during the production of the track by removing the sounds of his inhalations. Audible air placed in the voice while singing a word can change the very meaning of a word itself. Words can be understood beyond their meaning or misunderstood as well, due to the construction of the words and the way in which the vocal organ is controlled or constructed. Consider the possible constructions of the word breathe itself, depending on how in is infused with breath in its voicing, it can mean things such as relax or a demand to come back to life and this is how the breath participates in the performativity of the voice. But Curtis’s inhalations, audible on the isolated vocals, are not present on the final version. By never exposing or revealing the singer’s inhalations through audible moments on musical tracks, distance is created between the listener and singer, which feeds into the ideas of purposely structured performances of isolation and alienation that Curtis is associated with thematically.⁹⁶ Inaudible inhalation helps convey distance because to be able to hear the inhalation of a singer is to hear their body at work; when one cannot hear this, an uncanny sense of interaction with something other than human comes into play. The singer is othered and the audience is distanced from the voicer by this othering. What is created is a liminal space where

⁹⁵ Sterne J, “Space within Space: Artificial Reverb and the Detachable Echo,” *Grey Room Grey Room*, no. 60 (2015): 112.

⁹⁶ Curtis was a voracious reader and loved the existentialists we don’t know if in his work with Hanneke he may have expressed the desire to make music that sounded like those books but it was the end result.

the listener comes into contact with the singing voice, standing at the threshold of a moment of change (whether that change is permanent or not is not the issue) and the listener's construction of their identity, of time, of their subjectivity is altered by the collision of bodies via the breath made into sound and lack of audible breath, which is given meaning through reception. In this way the lack of breath in the vocal performance presents and reinforces the affect that the art intends to communicate; however, it once more helps sever the sound of Curtis's voice from the body that generated it, controlling the sound and the projected identity of the band's lead singer.

The work done in the recording studio to smooth out the voice and mitigate the wobble is perhaps the most telling. As Jodi Kriedman writes in her book *The Foundations of Voice Studies*, "Many listeners find vibrato more exciting, while straight tone might signal coldness and monotony, or sometimes mystery and foreboding."⁹⁷ A lack of vibrato can also seem matter-of-fact or resigned, giving the impression of a person acknowledging something they perceive as an unavoidable truth. The sounds of illness related to physical (and psychological) exhaustion that result in the loss of muscle control are transformed into the created sound of emotional exhaustion, resignation, and dread. In this way, Hammett uses technological mastery and mastering of the song once more work to create a tune that deprives the work of its bodily connection to Curtis—hyper aestheticizing it, and serving themes in Curtis's lyrics around exile, temporality, and isolation.

On both "Decades" and "In A Lonely Place" a lack of continuity around space and time plays out in the music, production, and lyrics. "Decades" narrates an inability to reconcile the changes between what is current and what was, and—more importantly—the changes in sense of

⁹⁷ Jody Kreiman and Diana Sidtis, *Foundations of Voice Studies: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Voice Production and Perception* (Malden, MA [u.a.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 396.

identity, how Curtis once perceived himself and his life, and how that has changed. This rupture is reflected in the songs' lyrics as they speak of "now" and "before," "here" and "not here." The young men of "Decades" are "here now," but they were not here before. Curtis croons this confusion of identity and place in time:

Here are the young men, the weight on their shoulders
Here are the young men, well where have they been?
We knocked on the doors of Hell's darker chamber
Pushed to the limit, we dragged ourselves in
Watched from the wings as the scenes were replaying
We saw ourselves now as we never had seen
Portrayal of the trauma and degeneration
The sorrows we suffered and never were free⁹⁸

Utilizing the suffering of war to describe the type of trauma that forces a person to re-evaluate identity once taken for granted, Curtis speaks to the rifts that separate versions of a person. As he repeats the final line of the song, "Where have they been," and it fades ever so slightly at each utterance, we hear Curtis slipping away, full of sorrow, full of a lost youth it seems he never truly possessed, as he drags himself through the "doors of hell's darker chambers." At 23 years old, Curtis was incapable of seeing his current state as anything able to be alleviated—an apt description of lateness, a state that cannot be transcended—and this is consistently expressed through his music.

"In A Lonely Place" the final song demo Curtis ever recorded, similarly points to space and time with every verse ending with "How I wish you were here with me now"—a clear moment of Curtis being out of time. He is in his own time, exiled from others, a time not shared that cannot be shared except through the experience of his music. He wants someone here and now, but ultimately he is in isolation. One further lyrical example of this type of untimeliness is the lyric "The hangman looks round as he waits." The hangman's wait is a very different

⁹⁸ Joy Division. *Closer*, LP (Factory Records, 1980).

experience of time than that of the person waiting for the floor to drop out from beneath them.

Both “Decades” and “In a Lonely Place” are songs where Curtis’s voice drags behind the music, sounding slightly off time. Curtis’s baritone trudges through the low, descending vocal lines in an extremely clear timbre that lacks any kind of vocal embellishment, such as vibrato. On each of these tracks, reverb has once more been added to Curtis’s voice. This reverb lends a distance to his vocal presence, as if he is singing from the beyond, or inside a large tomb. There is also just a touch of echo (the slower delay, rather than the sped up reverb) added, an untimely repetition that is removed from the act of utterance, taking the vocal out of its time and repeating it as a memory, so it functions as something that is both current and of the past. In these ways, Curtis’s voice is made to sonically and timbrally reflect the alienation and emptiness it describes. Michael Bibby conveyed this as well when he wrote that Joy Division’s music and lyrics are “organized around absences, the musical sound reflecting the empty spaces expressed in the lyrics—emotional voids filled out only by melancholy.”⁹⁹

In the aural world created by the band and Martin Hennett on “Love Will Tear Us Apart” and *Closer*—a dystopian world ruled by Curtis’s voice—we hear all the anxiety, disturbance, fear, anguish, desire, and shame of a man, a very young man, on the brink. If someone feels they are not in control of their own body and destiny, often the case with an illness like epilepsy that strikes unexpectedly, there are very few options for a way out, or for regaining control. Maybe, in some ways, in taking his own life Curtis was taking control by not letting his illness decide his fate, deciding it for himself instead. In a letter Curtis once wrote, he stated that for his job he had to visit the David Lewis Centre (a place where all the worst cases of epilepsy and other disabilities were sent for treatment or to live full-time) and that that visit “left terrible pictures” in

⁹⁹ Michael Bibby, “Atrocity Exhibitions: Joy Division, Factory Records, and Goth,” in *Goth: Undead Subculture*, ed. Lauren Goodlad and Michael Bibby (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 253.

his mind.¹⁰⁰ After the job he had, he knew what was possible, what might be coming, and decided that he didn't want it. He was both so afraid of and wanted control over his illness that as his wife Deborah recalls, "After a gig he would not go to sleep until he'd had a fit, and it became a ritual for him to sit there and wait for an attack. He was afraid to go to bed in case he died in his sleep, as (so he told me) one of his clients who was epileptic had choked in her sleep."¹⁰¹ Maybe this is what put him in what Tony Wilson, co-founder of Factory Records, called a "trancelike state in the *Closer* sessions."¹⁰² A sick person's time is much different than a healthy one's, just as a lonely person's time is much different than that of someone who is fulfilled by their relationships. This difference meant that Ian Curtis did not sound young, did not perform youth through his utterances as he had singing for Warsaw; late style became his style, and became more pronounced as his illness worsened and his end grew near. In unmixed and unprocessed recordings, we can hear the passage of time through Curtis's singing, his grain changed, and a quality of excess was introduced to tone, a raw yet distant agony filled with uncertainty and loss. In modified ones, the very processes that exerted control over the sound of his vocalizations helped construct a representation of his voice where a measure of control had been metaphorically returned to him through the sonic eradication of his illness.

Nina Eidsheim describes the embodied practice of vocalizing and singing as imprinting upon the "the musculature of the body . . . narratives of the body, race, class, vocal genres and

¹⁰⁰ David Church, "'Welcome to the Atrocity Exhibition': Ian Curtis, Rock Death, and Disability," *DSQ Disability Studies Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (2006).

¹⁰¹ Curtis, *Touching from a Distance*, 72–73.

¹⁰² Tony Wilson, Liner Notes, *Heart and Soul*, Rhino, 1997, compact disc.

practices.”¹⁰³ She goes on to detail what happens during the paired acts of vocalizing and listening, and how auditors hear voices in relation not only to themselves but also to all the voices they have ever heard.¹⁰⁴ She follows the Derridian logic of there being “nothing outside the text”¹⁰⁵ and, thus, she considers the action of sounding one’s voice as an act of narrative inscription, of all the layers of one’s identity that are able to be held within the voice.¹⁰⁶ That grain of the voice that she is discussing is not consistent.¹⁰⁷ Rather, it changes and morphs as the result of shifts in personal experiences of bodily existence and social relationships. This is precisely what occurs with Ian Curtis’s voice once he learns of his illness, and once that illness starts to enact itself upon his body.

The experience of listening to music is to experience time passing. Music is, at least partially, a way of organizing time into a linear progression. Simon Frith describes it, music “enables us to experience time aesthetically, intellectually, and physically in new ways . . . [Music] allows us to stop time, while we consider how it passes.”¹⁰⁸ Yet, with late style, we are experiencing the art created by a person exiled from normative time and, therefore, listeners ultimately experience that exile in miniature. For Ian Curtis, late style manifests in these songs, in a very particular sense of “here” and “now” inaccessible to anyone else but wholly occupied by him as the artist. This “here and now” is filled with the personality of Ian Curtis and it is that

¹⁰³ Nina Sun Eidsheim, “Voice as a Technology of Selfhood: Towards an Analysis of Racialized Timbre and Vocal Performance” (University of California, San Diego, 2008), 209.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 158.

¹⁰⁶ Eidsheim, “Voice as a Technology of Selfhood,” 209.

¹⁰⁷ Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice,” in *The Sound Studies Reader*, ed. Jonathan Sterne (New York: Routledge, 2012).

¹⁰⁸ Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*, 1998, 149.

space we sonically enter when we hear his voice. There is only the “here and the now” of “In a Lonely Place” with no connection to a future, as it is too late for that. Death is beckoning him.

Curtis’s experience of being ill and being suicidal is aestheticized through his music. His illness and mental state inform both the lyrics and the voice that sings them. Ian Curtis without epilepsy would not be the same Ian Curtis performatively or lyrically. The songs suggest a despairing, late artist for whom the medium of music provided “an occasion to stir up more anxiety, tamper permanently with the possibility of closure, and leave the audience more perplexed and unsettled than before.”¹⁰⁹ Mental or physical illness and the decay of the body are not reserved for the aged and lateness and late style can be observed in those still in their youth. All of these factors can bring about an untimely end. Curtis’s songs were abject, and far from performing any type of resolution. His music and performance is defined by the fact that he is out of joint with his body and subject to lateness, expressing a feeling of unease with his own time. Even when production techniques severed Curtis’s voice from its bodily origin, the producer worked to recreate this uneasiness via technology. It is that sense of uneasiness, of being removed and alienated, that is fundamental to the character of Joy Division’s music, and why it has a timelessness that allows it to always sound current and to continue to speak to many generations.

¹⁰⁹ Edward Said, “Thoughts on Late Style,” *London Review of Books*, August 5, 2004, accessed October 20, 2015, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n15/edward-said/thoughts-on-late-style>.

CHAPTER TWO

The Rhythm of Chronic Illness: The Fragmentary Late Style of J Dilla

In 2006, the year J Dilla (Jay Dee) died and *Donuts* was released, I had just begun the journey that culminates in the production of these pages. I had left the film business, the music business, and the overall party scene that was a huge part of my work life. I was unsure what I wanted to do, but knew I wanted it to involve teaching, books, and music. I had been an avid consumer of a wide variety of music since a very young age. I grew up listening to my mother's extensive collection of Motown, soul, blues, and disco records (with a few Helen Reddy and Joan Baez thrown in). By age nine, I was taping a penny to a Columbia House order form taken from the Sunday papers, and selecting my own music (I still have three of those original 8-track tapes I first ordered—Kiss's *Dressed to Kill* (1975), Santana's *Abraxis* (1970), and Michael Jackson's *Off the Wall* (1979)).

Like Dilla, my whole life I have been devoted to “digging in the crates,” although that was not what I called it. My pre-teen years were often spent by myself at the public library across from my mother's workplace in downtown Lancaster, Pennsylvania. I enjoyed my time there and my relationship to librarians has always been a special one because, in part, they were the ones raising me and directing me towards things that would help shape the person I was to become. But at 12 years old, my foraging grounds began to spread out from the library: I would slip out to Stan's Records, BBC Records, and—my favorite spot—Web of Sound. Each record store was unique in what it carried, so I made sure that I looped them all at least once a week. Bill and Carl, the two lovely men who ran Web of Sound, soon took the place of the librarians, turning me on to the weird, wild, and wonderful in music. My first romance was with a person who loved music and records as much as I did—and had a car and drivers license—which meant

I could now get to Columbia, PA for the monthly record show, where men (always men) from all over the East Coast would display milk crates of what I considered to be magical objects. They were old to some, but new to me, and I gathered as eclectic a bunch of “vintage” records around me as I could afford.

Fast-forward to 2006: I was taking a class with UCLA professor and poet Harryette Mullen and I picked up her book *Recyclopedia: Trimmings, S*PeRM**K*T, and Muse & Drudge* (2006). It opens with “If the encyclopedia collects general knowledge, the recyclopedia salvages and finds imaginative uses for knowledge. That’s what poetry does when it remakes and renews words, images, and ideas, transforming the surplus cultural information into something unexpected.”¹¹⁰ About two weeks later I picked up J Dilla’s *Donuts* at Amoeba Records. It was an impulse buy. I had heard his name tossed around at the Los Angeles experimental hip-hop and electronic music club night *Low End Theory*, and it happened to be right there in the front of the store in the “Staff Picks” section.¹¹¹ As I listened to the album on my drive home, Mullen’s words about creating the “unexpected” popped back into my mind. Dilla’s record surprised me. It was nothing like anything I had heard before—strange, eerie, sexy, and fun all at the same time—and that happened more and more rarely as time (and life) passed. To me *Donuts* functioned then and continues to exactly the way Mullen outlined. Hip-hop itself had always been a reimagining of the obscure and forgotten combined with the surplus ubiquitous sounds of well known cultural and musical information. Dilla had snatched bits and pieces from the

¹¹⁰ Harryette Romell Mullen, *Recyclopedia: Trimmings, S*PeRM**K*T, and Muse & Drudge* (St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2006), vii.

¹¹¹ To be honest, I was not completely myself at the time, a little overwhelmed by the sheer size of Amoeba, the blaring of the music, and the booming voice over the intercom calling the name of whatever hapless person was selling their collection to the store. 2006 was a bad year for music retailers. My favorite record shop, Aaron’s Records, had recently shut down (as had the world-famous Tower Records outlet on the Sunset Strip), and I felt like an orphan searching for a home.

musical past to create something different and new, expanding the possibilities of what hip-hop music could sound like.

I thought all this not knowing he was already dead.

Donuts begins with the 13 second “Donuts (Outro)” and ends with “Welcome to the Show.” Thus the album’s “intro” is the “outro” and the “outro” is the “intro.” The final 13 seconds of “Welcome” is the first track repeating. In this way, the album is cyclic, an unending moment that is constantly beginning. This time is circular, that is, it has the shape of a donut. But, like those old vinyl records in the milk crates that both Dilla and I dug, a donut has a hole...missing right out of the middle.

Donuts, was crafted from Dilla’s hospital bed with a limited selection of records, a laptop, and a thrown-together recording set up. The album is characterized by Dilla’s use of microsampling and has abrupt rhythmic shifts, both sonic representations of his experience with lupus and thrombotic thrombocytopenic purpura (TTP). Created during the times when his condition was at its worst, the sonically disjointed album gave Dilla the means to express what he was going through, the extreme presentness of intense pain, the fractured sense of time, and temporal displacement.

This chapter considers the multiple sonic apparitions that make up *Donuts*, creating an uncanny and abrupt sense of untimeliness through Dilla’s distinctive refusal to quantize his beats while manually chopping up and microsampling records. Dilla cut, stretched, and literally “recycled” time, taking brief fragments and making longer musical statements with them. I attend to the sonic processes that create an alternate present, where disembodied voices and reverse chops can be manipulated, leaving us in doubt about the relationship between

subjectivity, authorial voice, and embodied identity. I further explain how Dilla's music exposes his temporality of illness that manifests in the interplay of the obscure and obvious songs he chose to sample, and his reshaping and restructuring of those samples into strangely accented meters that created musical vignettes that grooved as a body might that couldn't always keep to the beat, as if from too much drink, weed, or maybe illness.

The Donut Maker

James DeWitt Yancey (also known as J Dilla and Jay Dee) was born into a musical family on the east side of Detroit, Michigan, on February 7, 1974. He was the oldest of Beverly Dewitt and Maureen "Ma Dukes" Yancey's four children. His father, Maureen, was a touring and recording bassist and vocalist for 25 years, who co-wrote "It's A Shame" for the Spinners. His mother, Beverly, was a trained opera singer and had a deep love of classical music. By the time he was in high school, Dilla was obsessed with hip-hop beat making. It was in high school that he formed his friendships with Baatin (Titus Glover) and T3 (RL Altman, III), who would go on to form Slum Village with him. By the mid-1990s, word of his production and beat-making skills had traveled and he was collaborating with artists like A Tribe Called Quest, D'Angelo, Busta Rhymes, Common, Erykah Badu, De La Soul, and The Pharcyde.

Dilla's early entrance into music making allows us to evaluate differences between his early and late styles. Dilla had three very distinct musical styles, and the two phases that came before are stylistically very different from *Donuts*. The first period was during his early days in Detroit shortly after Dilla graduated high school. In Slum Village, Dilla, rapped and produced along with his high school friends. However, personal circumstances intervened when Dilla and T3 confronted Baatin about his drug dealing and Baatin walked away from the band for a short

time. A record deal then fell apart with Hoops, a start up studio and label in Detroit founded by RJ Rice, so Slum Village took some time to get off the ground.¹¹² During this time Dilla's friend and mentor, Joseph "Amp" Fiddler, was part of George Clinton's touring band, and shared a tour bus with Q-Tip and Ali Shaheed Muhammed of A Tribe Called Quest. Fiddler played them a tape of Dilla's beats; they loved his sound, and made him part of their collective, The Ummah. While sampling four bar loops of rare records with Slum Village, he was racking up production credits with Busta Rhymes, Janet Jackson, A Tribe Called Quest, and The Pharcyde. It was during this apprenticeship, between 1993 and 1998, that Dilla developed his style and mastered control of the available technologies.

Dilla's next phase (1999 - 2002) saw him learn to integrate his ideas and beats with live instrumentation as part of the Soulqarians collective. His retro-grooved sound was the sonic foundation of neo-soul, as he produced gold and platinum tracks for Common, Mos Def, The Roots, Erykah Badu, Bilal, and D'Angelo.

But unbeknownst to him, 2002 was the start of what would be the final stage of Dilla's career. Arriving back in Detroit in January following a string of shows in Europe, he went straight to his mother's home. He was ill with flu-like symptoms so severe that he felt "that night he needed to be with his mother...hoping she could somehow make it all better."¹¹³ Eventually, he and his mother went to the emergency room. "His blood platelet count was below 10,000."¹¹⁴ It should have been between 150,000 and 450,000.¹¹⁵ "Doctors told his mother they

¹¹² Ron Hart, "A Decade Old, Still Fresh: How J Dilla Wrote the Future With 'Donuts,'" *Observer*, February 9, 2016, <http://observer.com/2016/02/a-decade-old-still-fresh-how-j-dilla-wrote-the-future-with-donuts/>.

¹¹³ Kelly Carter, "Jay Dee's Last Days," *Stones Throw Records*, February 25, 2006, <https://www.stonesthrow.com/news/2006/02/jay-dee-s-last-days>.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

were surprised that he was still walking around.”¹¹⁶ He was ultimately diagnosed with a pair of autoimmune disorders: lupus and thrombotic thrombocytopenic purpura. The doctors told him that there was no cure and no clear treatment path; all that could be done was to manage the symptoms as they arise. Dilla was hospitalized for over a month and then released, but was back in the hospital within weeks—a pattern of hospitalization and home that would characterize the final four years of his life.¹¹⁷

Dilla was always extremely private, shy even, and he rarely became personal in interviews. However, I believe it is safe to assume, (though there is no first-hand mention of it from Dilla) that this wasn’t an easy time for him. His diagnosis came on the heels of his major label release as an MC for MCA, which was rejected by the record executives and shelved. Then a flood struck his Detroit basement studio, destroying most of his gear. The flood was a particular loss. His studio was an extension of his personality and work ethic. Erykah Badu recalled that “I went into his basement and every wall from floor to ceiling was records, categorized. He was a scientist. If you opened his fridge, all the cans were turned the same way. It looked like a graveyard, everything was perfect.”¹¹⁸ Water damage caused him to move his vinyl collection and his personal master tapes into a storage space. With his studio packed up, Dilla decided it was a good time for a change of scenery.

In the spring of 2004, at the urging of longtime friend and fellow Soulquarian, Common, Dilla relocated to Los Angeles. He had found a musical soul mate in renowned L.A.-based

¹¹⁵ “Thrombocytopenia (Low Platelet Count) Causes,” *Mayo Clinic*, accessed April 2, 2017, <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/thrombocytopenia/basics/causes/con-20027170>.

¹¹⁶ Carter, “Jay Dee’s Last Days.”

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Erykah Badu, “When Erykah Met Dilla,” *Red Bull Music Academy Daily*, February 21, 2013, <http://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2013/02/when-erykah-met-dilla>.

producer Madlib, after working with him the previous year on a pioneering collaboration and album, *Champion Sound* (2003). Making a packing decision that would come to affect his future production, Dilla left the majority of his vinyl behind in Detroit. He made the most of a limited record selection by taking one bar loops and chopping them into 1/8, 1/16, 1/32 or smaller segments—becoming a master innovator of microsampling. Shortly after moving to Los Angeles Dilla became severely ill again; his mother came out for what was planned as a two-week visit, but lasted for the next two years as he moved in and out of Cedars-Sinai Medical Center until his death in 2006. His final phase of music making, his late style, would be one that would be marked materially and sonically by fragmentation and rhythms *just* out of sync.

Interruptions and Breaks: The Formation of the Chronically Ill

Lupus, like epilepsy, does not have a fully understood cause. Also, similar to epilepsy, it is a disease that has effects that are only sporadically visible, only showing itself only when it is at its most extreme. In lupus, “the immune system, which normally protects the body, turns against the body (*auto*) and attacks it. Lupus has no known cause and, as a result, no known cure.”¹¹⁹ In the body of a person with lupus, an internal war is being waged, their white blood cells attacking their own organs and tissue. Lupus is thought to contribute to the triggering of TTP, the other disease that affected Dilla. TTP is an extremely rare blood disorder that is characterized by clotting in the small blood vessels in the body. The clots restrict or prevent the flow of oxygen-rich blood to the body’s organs, including the brain, kidneys, and heart.¹²⁰ Beyond affecting the

¹¹⁹ Robert G. Lahita and Robert H. Phillips, *Lupus Q&A Revised and Updated, 3rd Edition: Everything You Need to Know*, 3 Rev Upd edition (New York: Avery, 2014), 1.

¹²⁰ “What Is Thrombotic Thrombocytopenic Purpura? - NHLBI, NIH,” accessed March 22, 2017, <https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/health-topics/topics/ttp>.

way in which vital organs receive blood and oxygen, the disease can also cause internal bleeding, bleeding under the skin's surface, or bleeding from the surface of the skin itself.¹²¹ People with TTP often manifest symptoms of neurological dysfunction as well, including mood swings, seizures, visual issues, and extreme pins-and-needle or burning sensations of the skin.¹²² Both of these diseases are arduous, harrowing, and at times excruciatingly painful, but Dilla rarely discussed his condition even in private. Erykha Badu noted, "He didn't even tell me he was sick and we were very close."¹²³

Illnesses like TTP or lupus that are not well understood—mostly those that are invisible, fluctuate unpredictably, and are difficult to explain—can cause a person to be perceived as not sick and experience "systematic disconfirmation of the experience of being ill."¹²⁴ Questions arise in the general population concerning whether things are really quite so bad, leading to the suspicion that the suffering may be psychosomatic, causing those who are well to wonder if the person is fraudulent, lazy, or lacking in morality rather than actually being ill.¹²⁵ Though physical pain is considered part of the human condition, it is generally understood that pain comes and

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Svetlana Stankovikj, Kata Martinova, and Vera Stankovikj, "Thrombotic Thrombocytopenic Purpura (Syndroma Moschkowitz), Severe Disease with Potential Fatal Outcome," *International Journal of Science and Research* 5, no. 2 (February 2016): 891–93.

¹²³ Badu, "When Erykah Met Dilla."

¹²⁴ Norma C. Ware, "Toward A Model of Social Course in Chronic Illness: The Example of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome," *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 23, no. 3 (September 1, 1999): 312, doi:10.1023/A:1005577823045.

¹²⁵ Though her book does not deal with Lupus, Kristin Barker, *The Fibromyalgia Story: Medical Authority And Women'S Worlds Of Pain* (Temple University Press, 2009). is filled with useful frameworks of how an invisible chronic illness is constructed socially by those who are well, including the medial community, and the psychological and sociological impact and damage these constructions can have upon the person who is unwell. It is also takes a valuable look at the ways in which invisible illnesses have historically been feminized.

goes. Crises involving pain are typically regarded as significant "ruptures in the order of things" that are expected to be temporary.¹²⁶ Think of the definition of the word "crisis," it is a "turning point" and though it is a "condition of instability" it leads to a "decisive change."¹²⁷ Then Stones Throw Records General Manager Eothen Alapatt, better known as Egon, recalled, "We were trying to sell an instrumental record by a producer most people had written off because he was sick. That's the thing most people don't say. People got tired of him being sick, and they stopped talking about him, they stopped using his music, it disgusted me."¹²⁸ So, at the extreme end of being chronically ill and in pain, there are those who experience a "falling out of culture" because their symptoms defy the common cultural understanding of the transient nature of pain and illness, and, importantly, most individuals' personal experiences with it.¹²⁹ "Because 96% of people with chronic medical conditions live with an illness that is invisible," most people can't understand or recognize that anyone could be in debilitating pain for no obvious reason for years on end, calling into question the character of the person.¹³⁰ Those with more prevalent illnesses that are better understood by those in their community may be better able to integrate their identity with their condition. Yet many cannot and their sense of self, especially as perceived by others, starts also to shape their own conception of who they are in the world. "Fears about others tolerance can lead to the construction of discrediting versions of the self, and

¹²⁶ Henrik Vigh, "Crisis and Chronicity: Anthropological Perspectives on Continuous Conflict and Decline," *Crisis and Chronicity Ethnos*, 2008, 8.

¹²⁷ "Crisis, N.," *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed April 3, 2017, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/44539>.

¹²⁸ Egon Alapatt in Gus Sutherland, *All Ears: A Glimpse into the Los Angeles Beat Community*, 2013.

¹²⁹ Richard A Hilbert, "The Acultural Dimensions of Chronic Pain: Flawed Reality Construction and the Problem of Meaning," *Social Problems Social Problems* 31, no. 4 (1984): 375.

¹³⁰ "Invisible Disabilities List and Information," *Disabled World*, accessed May 4, 2017, <https://www.disabled-world.com/disability/types/invisible/>.

to an experience of stigmatized identity, with resultant humiliations of information control” in order to “pass” and appear normal in public settings.¹³¹ Those who suffer from less known, invisible, and chronic illnesses, even if they get well, may never recover from the way in which their identity has been reshaped due to the social stigmatization caused by their illness.¹³² Those in chronic pain from TPP or chronically fatigued by lupus are not only stigmatized, they also occupy an liminal space. Their status as neither ever completely well nor totally incapacitated means that they are exiled from full participation in communities formed by the sick or the well.

For people with lasting degenerative diseases, every day is a renegotiation. One never knows what symptoms one will experience, or to what degree, so there is no stability from day to day. Nor is it possible to predict how fast the degeneration will happen over the long term. Neither the present or the future are really knowable. Those with chronic illnesses that intensify and recede find themselves in and out of time—their daily life becoming a liminal existence. Sometimes there is no graspable present or future; at others, such as during extreme pain, the present becomes a prison.

The temporality of chronic illness isolates the subject from the well population who experience time “chrononormatively.” Chrononormativity was first defined by Elizabeth Freeman, who describes it as the “use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity.”¹³³ In this understanding of time, its regulation gives social meaning to embodied subjects who have a sense of connection to one another through specific arrangements

¹³¹ Clive Seale, *Constructing Death: The Sociology of Dying and Bereavement* (Cambridge [u.a.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 25.

¹³² Ariela Royer, *Life with Chronic Illness: Social and Psychological Dimensions* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 1998), 101.

¹³³ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

of time.¹³⁴ Those unable to participate in this shared organization of time are excluded from the temporal collective.

Dilla was most certainly suffering for many years on multiple levels, but he did not speak publicly about his illness, and rarely even to friends. David Morris terms “the irreducible otherness of suffering” as the “nonverbal dimension of suffering that can never be put into words,” however at least a few of his tracks allowed Dilla to do so sonorously.¹³⁵ He was quiet, shy, and really liked only to talk about music, his central form of expression. This natural tendency combined with the isolating experience of his illness and the constricted social access because of hospitalization. During this period, Dilla did make two records where he rapped in addition to producing. As noted, the record where he tried his hand as an MC was shelved by MCA in 2003. The second album, *The Diary*, was completed and ready for release in October of 2005, but once again his label, Stones Throw, said they would have to wait to release it because they did not think it would sell the 10,000 copies needed to justify a release (as I write this in 2017 that record *The Diary* has just been released). Once more, Dilla was being told that the voice that resonated with people was not the one emanating from his body but, rather, the one he technologically produced through his manipulation of the music of others.

Dilla and Composing the Authorial Voice

Ethnomusicologist Kyra D. Gaunt argues in her pioneering study of black girls' double-dutch games:

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ David B. Morris, “Voice, Genre, and Moral Community,” in *Social Suffering*, ed. Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock (Berkeley (CA); Los Angeles (CA); London: University of California Press, 1997), 26.

the body is a technology of black musical communication and identity. *Merriam Webster's Dictionary* defines “technology” as “the practical application of knowledge, a manner of accomplishing a task (i.e., identifying with blackness, the African diaspora, Africans), using a skill or craft, a method or process” (1999). Extra-somatic instruments (drums, flutes, violins, steel pans, and, arguably, in some circles, turntables) are acceptable media of *artistic* technology.¹³⁶

As Thomas F. DeFrantz observes, "In general, black expressive cultures value the process of signification over the signified, the performance of spirituality over scriptural exegesis, talking by dancing over talking about dancing."¹³⁷ Though black dancing is typically regarded as pure entertainment, that is, devoid of deeper meanings, DeFrantz suggests that kinesis comprises dynamic captions of black vernacular intellectualism. He argues, "Dance movements convey speech-like qualities which contain meaning beyond the formal, aesthetic shapes and sequences of movement of the body"; they are “physical building blocks of a system of communication we may term corporeal orature.”¹³⁸ Given that dance has become a central focus of many commentators on African and African American cultural expression, this places the sick body—one that cannot dance—at odds with the dominant discourse of that culture. So what does a quiet man like Dilla do, when he no longer has the option to express himself through bodily movement because he is in a hospital bed? He made beats and they had groove.

As Dilla made *Donuts*, he was increasingly unable to control his body—confined to a hospital bed for eight months and then to a wheelchair. The “technology” or mind/body that felt the groove and reacted to it was completely broken. Yet there is still a bodily skill in what Dilla did. His ears still functioned, as did his hands (though at times he had to stop working because

¹³⁶ Kyra Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play* (NYU Press, 2006), 59, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/7808>.

¹³⁷ Thomas DeFrantz, “The Black Beat Made Visible: Hip Hop Dance and Body Power,” in *Of the Presence of the Body: Essays on Dance and Performance Theory*, ed. André Lepecki (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 66.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

of the joint pain caused by the lupus, making him unable to tap out his beats on the MPC pads). Deprived of control over his body, he created music using extra-somatic means.

It is perhaps counterintuitive to use as a case study on how the bodily experience of illness affects style on an album on which the artist does not sing or play an instrument, where the voices and sounds heard were initially generated by other bodies. As I hope the previous chapter has demonstrated, the voice carries so much information about the originating body that this may seem a missed hermeneutic opportunity. Rap is the both the verbal and musical domain of hip-hop, arguably a fundamentally oral form of expression through which personal and social perspectives are amplified. When there is no rapping, as with instrumental hip-hop, how, then, is “the voice” of the artist sounding? The voice is not just a material thing, which is why we can understand Dilla’s “experimental hip-hop”¹³⁹ album as constituted by his voice; corresponding to a long musicological scholarly tradition of analyzing the voice of the composer.

Edward T. Cone’s ground-breaking volume *The Composer’s Voice* (1974) led the way in introducing the subject of voice in instrumental music. Cone posited that all forms of music are kinds of expression that depend on a form of imitation by the performer(s). Cone describes a theoretical persona in instrumental works that is the “experiencing subject of the entire composition, in whose thought the play, or narrative, or reverie, takes place—whose inner life

¹³⁹ I am using “experimental hip-hop” rather than instrumental throughout this chapter in describing J Dilla’s work on *Donuts* because as Mike D’Errico notes, “[Experimental hip-hop] is perhaps the only phrase in circulation that has yet to be completely shot down by the artist and audiences making and consuming the music.” Further, D’Errico points out J Dilla’s death and the practice of “off-the” grid rhythmic sequencing are 2 of the 3 reasons this “style has coalesced into a distinct and recognizable sub genre,” which are key factors in my argument within this chapter. See Mike D’Errico, “Off the Grid: Instrumental Hip-Hop and Experimentalism After the Golden Age,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop*, ed. Justin A Williams, 2015, 280.

the music communicates by means of symbolic gesture.”¹⁴⁰ In this case, when music is performed, it is a dramatization of emotional expression that a specific persona experienced in the past and is being reenacted by those playing it.

The rap MC, and vocal elements in pop music more generally, are understood to be the primary conveyor of self-expression. Since hip-hop is so often dominated by the MC (the rapper), who is a clear location that we can attribute the origins of the voice (authorial and physical) to, it may take some adjustment to analyze the genre as is accepted for other forms of “absolute” music. But, J Dilla’s late instrumental hip-hop is far more comparable to later works by Beethoven as described by Adorno, because they are more like absolute music. The difference is that Dilla is sampling voices and does not require another person to perform the mimicked expression that most composers need from performers. This differs from the juxtaposition of the composer’s voice with the material singer’s voice, because the sung voices are not interpreting the composer’s work; the composer is interpreting and repurposing their already sung and interpreted work. In a way, this gives even more control to Dilla as a composer, since the final interpretation is his own. Discussing Schubert, Cone stated, “What he deals with is not the poem but his reading of it. He appropriates that reading and makes it a component in another work, entirely his own.”¹⁴¹ Dilla, similarly, reads the parts of songs that he uses as samples and makes a work entirely his own. We can hear his emotions and experience in it as surely as if he were speaking, but it is the composer’s voice—an immaterial voice that utilizes disembodied voices.

This differs from the juxtaposition of the composers voice with the material singer’s voice, because the sung voices are not interpreting the composer’s work; the composer is

¹⁴⁰ Edward T Cone, *The Composer’s Voice* (Berkeley [etc.]; London: University of California Press, 1974), 94.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

interpreting and repurposing their already sung and interpreted work. What does that mean? We can hear his emotions and experience in it as surely as if he were speaking, but it is the composer's voice—an immaterial voice that utilizes disembodied voices.

Scholars who deal with ideas of immateriality or disembodiment do not disregard the physical necessities required in creating or perceiving sound; instead, the aspects of the voice they focus on do not have to do with the body, but rather with meaning and affect.¹⁴² Because of the ways vocality is investigated in this mode of analysis—with a focus shifted away from the human body's production of sound—it harmonizes well with considerations of the mechanically reproduced voice. History shows that with each innovation and/or modification of technology comes a new way of reconceptualizing the human subject through reconfiguration of vocal presence. Attention to immaterial voices often involves theorizing disembodiment, dematerialization, hypermaterialization, and how technology correlates to the destabilization or diminishment of the body. In popular music especially, one encounters an ideology of the “authentic voice,” imagined as natural and not technologically altered through electronic devices. Yet, no existing recordings actually capture a “real” performance, since microphones, studio spaces, and the engineer's mixing board are just some of the mediators that make this authentically “real” voice a fallacy. There is no clear consensus on exactly how much of the body remains in popular music vocals when the voice's originating physical presence is removed. When the connection between body and voice is obscured, through recording, manipulation, or other means, we get talk of the disembodied voice—this becomes especially

¹⁴² There are many scholars whose methodology of examining the voice is based in immateriality. While there are differing nuances in the way they approach the voice, the following scholars all consider the voice from the standpoint of its immateriality including: Gary Tomlinson, *Metaphysical Song* (2009), Jeffrey Sconce *Haunted Media* (2009), Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (2002), Brian Kane, *Sound Unseen*, (2014).

salient when analyzing how an artist can create an authorial voice using samples of other people's voices.¹⁴³

The term “immaterial” covers a broad spectrum of vocal theories: it can be used to describe the process that a voice must go through to be perceived or may simply shift the focus to questions of process, for which Joseph Auner's work is particularly useful. Untethered voices have become commonplace in our everyday lives and thus, as Auner points out, their strangeness and corporeal absence goes unnoticed. Focusing on the use of sampled voices in instrumental hip-hop, but touching on a broader range of recorded voices from political robo-calling to advertising voices in the Disney film *Wall-e*, Auner's work considers the implications of the ubiquity of recorded and technologically produced voices, their disembodied nature appearing through a myriad of media as they make their way into the discourses surrounding ubiquitous computing, music production, and conceptions of the post human. Given that technology and digital media could allow producers of instrumental hip-hop to use any sounds they chose, Auner ascribes significance to the fact that these producers routinely come back to vocal recordings. He uses the instrumental hip-hop music of artists such as Blockhead and Madlib to discuss the “staging” of sampled voices to produce a sense of strangeness and disorientation as part of a long history of recorded voices categorized as uncanny, simulacral, schizophonic, or acousmatic.¹⁴⁴

In electronic music spanning the last half century, from Stockhausen to Burial, Kraftwerk to Kanye, it has been routine to play with sampled voices, shifting them in terms of pitch, time, gender, race, and history. Importantly, Auner's work helps us begin to consider the legal, ethical,

¹⁴³ Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006).

¹⁴⁴ Joseph Auner, “Losing Your Voice: Sampled Speech and Song from the Uncanny to the Unremarkable,” in *Throughout: Art and Culture Emerging with Ubiquitous Computing*, (London and Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), 137.

and moral implications of detaching a voice from the flesh and blood of its unique physical and temporal starting point. Also, to go a step further, there are such things as artificial speech software that never had flesh and blood attached to it that we must now consider. If “we hear a voice, . . . we have to question whether there actually is someone on the other end of the line.”¹⁴⁵ Auner deals with an immaterial voice completely divorced from the generating body, the total absence of which creates a lack palpable enough to be uncanny, noting that perhaps the strangest thing of all is that the “remarkable act of speaking through borrowed voices” is contextualized within this genre as commonplace.¹⁴⁶

Sampling follows a long series of African American innovations in *bricolage*, in borrowing and piecing together what is available to them in order to create something different and new.¹⁴⁷ As McMullen points out, there have been always been artists, writers, and musicians whose works stemmed from the creative instinct to reuse, recycle, or rework previously created material. This impulse includes the distinct practices of borrowing, remixing, and mimesis.

Artists have long been involved in the quotation of earlier artists and one could argue that art

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ I am not going deeply into the history of sampling practice as there are many studies that have done so and with much more depth and precision than I can muster here. See the following in depth works on the history of the practice: Thomas Porcello, “The Ethics of Digital Audio-Sampling: Engineers’ Discourse,” *Popularmusic Popular Music* 10, no. 1 (1991): 69–84.; Andrew Goodwin, 1988. “Sample and hold: pop music in the digital age of reproduction,” *Critical Quarterly*. 30 (3): 34-49.; Kembrew McLeod and Verlag Peter Lang (Frankfurt nad Menem), *Owning Culture: Authorship, Ownership and Intellectual Property Law* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007).; Thomas Goetz, “Sample the Future,” *Wired*, November 1, 2014, <https://www.wired.com/2004/11/sample/>.; J. Peter Burkholder, *All Made of Tunes: Charles Ives and the Uses of Musical Borrowing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).; John Oswald, “Plunderphonics - Essay,” *Plunderphonics*, 1985, <http://www.plunderphonics.com/xhtml/xplunder.html>.; Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010). Justin A Williams, *Rhyming and Stealing: Musical Borrowing in Hip-Hop* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2013), <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=3570489>.; Joseph Glenn Schloss, *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop*, 2014.

more generally has been an ongoing conversation for thousands of years. Historically musical borrowing is ubiquitous; "every composer or improviser borrows and reworks existing music, and procedures of borrowing are as important a part of a composer's equipment as counterpoint, harmony, texture and form."¹⁴⁸ There has been more contestation around this practice via sampling because of the fact that there is often a great deal of money involved in popular music due to this practice immersing in the era of copyright law.¹⁴⁹ Further, sampling involves actual copying of audio data, as opposed to other kinds of traditional musical quotation or borrowing that work on the immaterial level of the idea or of the notated melody.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. influentially described the process of black signification: "Free of the white person's gaze, black people created their own unique vernacular structures and relished in the double play that these forms bore to white forms. Repetition and revision are fundamental to black artistic forms, from painting and sculpture to music and language use." Gates chose to "analyze the nature and function of Signifyin(g) precisely because it is repetition and revision, or repetition with a signal difference. Whatever is black about black American literature [or music] is to be found in this identifiable Signifyin(g) difference."¹⁵⁰ African-American music is often characterized by pastiche which turns on repetition of formal structures and their differences."¹⁵¹ One instance of Gates's "double play" especially pertinent to hip-hop and sampling is what Mark

¹⁴⁸ J. Peter Burkholder, "The Uses of Existing Music: Musical Borrowing as a Field," *Notes* 50, no. 3 (1994): 851, doi:10.2307/898531.

¹⁴⁹ See the section in for a broad and deep discussions of everything from the growth of copy right law as it aligns with the growth of the popularity of hip-hop to the ways in which the law is used weaponized as a tool for racial violence.

¹⁵⁰ Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York [etc.: Oxford University Press, 1989), 23.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.52.

Katz notes as the “double-voicedness” imbedded in the “digital form of signifying,” as the virtuosic sampling and looping of beats “draw[s] upon and honor[s] the work of the hip-hop DJ.”¹⁵² Indeed, Auner argues that an authorial shift can be heard in sample-based music when the producer alters the vocals, which serves to further disconnect the record from the agency of a living singer who would demand the listener’s attention. By doing so, the producer signals to the audience that the voice can be responded to in the same way that they might an instrumental sound of nonhuman origin.¹⁵³

Vocal samples cannot be understood as simply an instrumental component, however, because they evoke specific affective responses in listeners and tie to memory.¹⁵⁴ Human brains have evolved to search for meaning in voices, “the sound of the voice also adheres to a truth supposedly understood beyond language, revealing the physical and emotional state of the speaker as being, for instance, in a state of anger, nervousness, mirth, congestion, or psychosis.”¹⁵⁵ Indeed, voices are registered as a special kind of sound in their own category and we are primed from infancy to give them special attention.¹⁵⁶ With their inbuilt emphasis, vocal samples have the potential to command more attention and be more affecting. When the sample is of a recognizable voice, the affect is compounded. Phillip Auslander’s “Music as

¹⁵² Katz, *Capturing Sound*, 154–55.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.* 141

¹⁵⁴ I cannot in this work attempt to uncover the social, diasporic, or cultural significance of the hip-hop genre as that has been and continues to evolve through scholars (Gilroy 1991; Lipsitz 1994; Rose 1994; Neal 1999; Forman 2003; Chang 2005; Perry 2006; Harris 2009; Schloss 2009, 2014) whose proficiency in these areas is beyond my own. What I am trying to do is not ignore the way in which race and the techniques of his genre help frame Dilla’s expressions of ill style and the formation of his voice.

¹⁵⁵ Dyson, *Sounding New Media*, 9.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 142

Performance” provides a theory of the disembodied voice, one which is present but un-sensible and, ultimately, insignificant as compared to the memory of a voice. He takes The Beatles 1965 Shea Stadium concert, where the screams of the fans were so loud that the band could not be heard by the audience, as an example of what he calls a “dematerialized performance” in which hearing the material voice, which is in proximity to the fan, is of no importance.¹⁵⁷ Thus, the material voice is rendered meaningless due to its spatio-temporal transcendence in the moment, for it is the memorial, immaterial voice that is meaningful in these circumstances. This puts the agency of the vocal performance in the ears and minds of the audience in order to make a theoretical turn away from the performer and their vocal construction of presence, to that of how an audience “construct(s) performers and performances.”¹⁵⁸ By doing so, he is able to posit that in considering the voice “materiality and immateriality are not necessarily ontological conditions: they can be socially and contextually constructed states.”¹⁵⁹ This figures the voice as immaterial, as memory, and solidifies the actual bodies of the performers and audience, but as separate from the voice.

Ultimately, the notion of “voice” denotes so much more than simply the sound that is produced from a person’s “vocal organ.” Voice studies, though concerned with the emanations from a specific person’s larynx, make more of the fact that the voice is so synonymous with identity that to deny a person’s voice is to deny their very humanity.¹⁶⁰ What, then, are we to make of artists like J Dilla, who take sounds created by others to express artistically his unique

¹⁵⁷ Philip Auslander, “Music as Performance: Living in the Immaterial World,” *Theatre Survey* 47, no. 2 (2006): 263.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 266.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 267.

¹⁶⁰ Nick Couldry, *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics After Neoliberalism* (Sage Publications, 2010), 122.

perspective? For someone like Dilla, the vocal organ is not the sole source of individual agency and identity. His authorial voice is manifested through chopping and reconfiguring the voices of others, to express himself creatively. Dilla's gestures of signification are aligned with the genealogy of hip-hop and the longer history of black artistry on which it is based.

The Presence of Illness: The Ill Style of J Dilla

As his body lost the ability to recognize itself (the battle between the white blood cells and the rest of his organs and tissue) and his kidneys couldn't keep up with processing the blood clots, J Dilla flipped samples and made music. He had his studio moved into his room, determined to finish his latest album, despite the pain and discomfort. His mother said when his hands had swollen so much that he couldn't use them for anything, least of all the delicate work of programming his drum machine, she would sit by his bedside massaging his fingers. When he couldn't work, he would listen. J Dilla was 31 years old as he was creating *Donuts*. His mother and friends would bring him a new stack of 45s when they visited him in the hospital. His set up in his hospital room at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles consisted of a turntable, a Mac, and an MPC. The product of those hospital sessions was *Donuts*, released February 7th, 2006. J Dilla died of a heart attack three days later.

Jordan Ferguson, writing about the album in the *33 1/3* series, interprets *Donuts* as Dilla coming to terms, through music, with his immanent death, describing *Donuts* as Dilla's swan song. Ferguson writes, "Donuts is as much a result of an artist's declining health as it is an example of what scholars call "late style," placing the album in a musical tradition that stretches back centuries."¹⁶¹ However, I hear the sounds of ongoing illness more than the sound of

¹⁶¹ Jordan Ferguson, *Donuts*, 2014, 99.

approaching death. I contend that his late style addresses the experience of living through the endlessness of illness and disabling pain, not just running out of time. That is why it is fractured, and untimely. While the album is certainly marked by the sounds of a very present struggle, Dilla had been in and out of the hospital for three years and was living with a volatile pair of illnesses that made death difficult to predict. We have no proof about what he thought his life expectancy was, but Dilla was laser focused on the present artistically, once saying “Anything I’ve done, I’m not about to do.”¹⁶² A distinguishing affect of the illness on his music, in contrast to a death-centric late style, is that *Donuts* creates an altered reality where the listener is fixed in the moment, intensely experiencing the present, which differentiates it from other conceptions of late style. This album does not sound to me like a late style career summary and it is not fixated on death. It sounds like Dilla working in the moment or moments he had when his illness wasn’t completely debilitating him, and it is unequivocally full of life. I believe that the timing of his death relative to the release has a lot to do with the way that it is commonly interpreted.

The album that would come out of Dilla’s unlikely recording studio has 31 tracks, but is only 43 minutes long. The sounds on *Donuts* are not so much songs, though they are infused with melodies and musical qualities, as they are fragmentary ideas that fit together, creating a modern mix-tape that is expressive, unrelenting, and moody. Listeners are provided with musical ideas that range from 13 seconds to just under three minutes; and with the exception of that one 2:57 song there are none that reach two minutes.

It is really hard to ignore *Donuts* when it is on. This is in part because the tempo and rhythms do not sustain themselves for very long (just as he could not). A way of listening to the album is to think about the way in which each short track represents roughly his stamina at a

¹⁶² J Dilla, *J Dilla Interview on Gilles Peterson Worldwide Bbc Radio 2001*, 2001, <http://archive.org/details/JDillaGillespeterson>.

given moment of creation. Though this might not be literally true, it may be figuratively true so that the listener experiences short burst rather than sustained events. Sounds and vocal samples are either literally alarms, like his signature siren,¹⁶³ or they often function in an alarming way, jarring the listener and drawing attention to them. Added to that, the songs themselves are short, so even when there is melody and pattern in a song, the listener does not have time to settle into it. This means our attention is constantly being drawn back to the music, to which the listener is asked to give their full attention. Because there is nothing constant, you are constantly brought back to attend to the ever-changing music. In addition, Dilla uses vocal samples sometimes to create percussive elements, or to flood the track with the layered and competing sounds of voices, as he does in “Light My Fire.” Since humans are wired to process the sound of voice differently and seek added layers of meaning from it, using vocal samples in this way keeps the listener trapped in the moment of listening.¹⁶⁴ This makes *Donuts* something that you cannot listen to casually; it demands continual engagement and attention. Listening is being there, in the present that Dilla created. The very same idea is often attached to highly repetitive music with a slow rate of change, like minimal funk or techno: it is about “being in time,” in an endless present focused on the difference within the repetition. This kind of temporal state has only been

¹⁶³ The siren sample that people say is J Dilla’s is originally from the 1992 Chemical Brothers/Dust Brothers’ “Song to the Siren.”

¹⁶⁴ See these works of those in the field of cognitive science to explain in detail the ways in which the brain operates in perceiving voices: Lori L. Holt and Andrew J. Lotto, “Speech Perception Within an Auditory Cognitive Science Framework,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 17, no. 1 (2008): 42–46. Pascal Belin, Shirley Fecteau, and Catherine Bédard, “Thinking the Voice: Neural Correlates of Voice Perception,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 8, no. 3 (March 2004): 129–35. International Symposium on Hearing and Brian C. J Moore, *Basic Aspects of Hearing: Physiology and Perception* (New York; London: Springer, 2013). Kreiman and Sidtis, *Foundations of Voice Studies*.

framed as being about pleasure.¹⁶⁵ Rather than focusing just on pleasure, Dilla's *Donuts* is about an entire embodied experiences that includes pain with the pleasure. The frequent and abrupt song changes are destabilizing. Thus the album sounds the disruptive nature of his disease and pain, which so often kept him "in, but apart from the present."¹⁶⁶

The resulting songs as I will soon show, are characterized by fragmentation, unstable time from unquantized microsamples, and temporal displacement as the result of spectral voices.

The Crumbs: Donuts and Fragmentation

Donuts is a strange, fractured record, dense and detailed. The listener hears the struggle of pain trapping a person in the present, but also the kind of "intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction" Said pointed to when he wrote of an unresolved late style that is not a summation of a life's work.. We never hear the sound of Dilla's physical voice on *Donuts* but right off the bat he tells us his name: J Dilla. Next we get what has been called his signature siren, another marker of himself.¹⁶⁷ *Donuts* is Dilla asserting his enduring connection to the tradition of sample-based hip-hop. Post-modern fragmentation is a feature of hip-hop aesthetics, but Dilla takes the tradition and reimagines it, using microsampling to create a new sound—one that is fragmented over a steady wobble of shuffling hi-hats and expansive drum loops.

By chopping and slicing at such a sonic micro level, Dilla cuts away the network of association, dismembering the syntax of the original track and reconstructing it in a way that

¹⁶⁵ See Anne Danielsen, *Presence and Pleasure: The Funk Grooves of James Brown and Parliament* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2006).

¹⁶⁶ Said, *On Late Style*, xi.

¹⁶⁷ I don't think this is the most unique of J Dilla's sounds as sirens have been sampled across tracks for a long time. The sample he uses sounds very much like the siren foregrounded in The Dust Brothers 1992 track "Song of the Siren." However, it is agreed upon in beatmaking and instrumental hip-hop circles that this is the marker Dilla used to demarcate a beat as his.

often makes one forget the original sample. In some ways this is what one that is sick or in pain desires to do: to sever oneself from the body that is in pain or be able to replace certain parts of it. It speaks to the desire to physically fragment and then put yourself back together again in a way that works and is uniquely you. This microsampling allowed for a new style of complex restructuring of samples to create new and distinct grooves. But Dilla wasn't working with the kind of software samplers that autoslice your sample by note length; all that stuff was in storage. He was using a turntable and a hardware sampler, slicing by ear.

The album is built on intense breakbeats and obscure samples that bend, wiggled, and twist. He did not use samples as a sturdy structure to carry a listener through a song but rather, he reshaped them, reconfigured them to make something that was both working references to the past but was also in the present something fundamentally new, ultimately pointing to the future of what sample based music might become.

Rest in Beats: Cultivating Unstable Time through Quantization Refusal and Microsampling

Classic hip-hop beats were rigid. They slapped hard and consistently as MCs rapped over them, their lyrical flow creating the groove. Such beats were created using a method known as quantizing, which lets a producer perfectly subdivide drum-machine sounds and samples within a measure. In the process of musical production, quantizing is the computerized process of removing imprecision found in notes or rhythm due to human error. In sampled or electronic based music, it takes the midi note data and "snaps" it into a temporal grid so that all patches/samples land precisely on a given beat and a chosen set of subdivisions. The resulting pattern can be repeated, looped, or chopped again in, all in perfect time. Quantization thus transforms performed, expressive, and possibly imprecise rhythm into a precise beat lacking any

sort of rhythmic imperfection, stripping away from it the very thing that marks it as made by a human. J Dilla broke away from stereotypical beat creation by refusing to quantize his samples and beats. Dilla “Loved mistakes. He would actually make you stop the tape and back up. ‘Play that again for me...keep that, we’re using it.’” he would say.¹⁶⁸ As a result of the pleasure he found in sonic errors, he deliberately did not quantize his music. By not quantizing, or pulling samples that maybe were quantized originally and de-quantizing them by chopping them and re-sequencing them, pulling them back off the grid, Dilla was able to create swing and groove. Further, he would “play beats on a drum machine by hand in real time. That allowed him to color his creations with a signature rhythmic sway: languorous, leaned back, landing just behind the beat.”¹⁶⁹ This “landing just behind the beat” and his refusal to quantize his samples is the musical expression of *Donuts* being literally and figuratively out of sync with norms in his field—out of sync, and untimely.

When Anne Danielson writes on the increasing experimentation of the “microtiming of rhythmic events” she talks of “creating overlapping layers of rhythms with multiple locations of their basic pulses at a microrhythmic level”; she says it “became something of a fad among producers in the late 1990s and gives the artists D’Angelo, Common, and the Roots as examples of this.¹⁷⁰ It is hardly a coincidence and is difficult to miss that J Dilla was a producer for all those she named. Frank Nitt, from the group Frank & Dank, described Dilla’s off-timing: “A lot of musicians would say that Dilla was slightly off timing, but ultimately that's what made him

¹⁶⁸ Ronnie Reese, “Son of Detroit: The Oral History of J Dilla,” *Wax Poetics*, May 19, 2016, <http://www.waxpoetics.com/blog/features/articles/son-of-detroit-j-dilla-remembered/>.

¹⁶⁹ Giovanni Russonello, “Why J Dilla May Be Jazz’s Latest Great Innovator,” *NPR.Org*, accessed March 26, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/sections/ablogsupreme/2013/02/07/171349007/why-j-dilla-may-be-jazzs-latest-great-innovator>.

¹⁷⁰ Anne Danielsen, *Musical Rhythm in the Age of Digital Reproduction*, 2016, 1.

unique. He could make a machine feel like a live band. From a rapper's standpoint, it allowed you to jump in and out of the different pockets with your flow."¹⁷¹ Swing and a particular head-nodding groove, which were due to his manual chops, eventually became the trademark of his beat compositions and nowhere was this more pronounced than on *Donuts*. Most of the beats on the record were not made by long loops or by using a multiplicity of samples arranged and layered on top of each other. Dilla tended to take one sample, cut it up, and rearrange the microscopic, fragmentary cuts into a new groove.

A fine example of this style of musical composition is Dilla's song "Don't Cry." His samples come from only one song, The Escort's "I Can't Stand (To See You Cry)," itself a cover of The Whatnauts' original version. Dilla puts on display his source materials, mixing sections from the song in its original form across the first 40 seconds of the track. Dilla then begins to literally fracture time. He takes what the listener has heard, chops it down, and then rearranges it to create a new beat. Just after the 40-second mark, the samples sound like the original source was sped up, but in reality Dilla manipulates the length of each of those microcuts, by shortening some of the chords, kick hits, and bass notes cut by cut. He creates the aural illusion of the song (his source sample) being played faster. This is how he makes the beat that runs through the song, by changing the time of the microsamples and then rearranging them. He does this repeatedly all over *Donuts*, but this is the most clear example his chop and flip process. The cuts he made sometimes get only a millisecond of a voice that he then stitches into the beat, creating a composition in "Don't Cry" that is a completely different groove to what the original was and has the vocals of a jazz scat over top of the head nodding bounce he created. "Don't Cry" goes

¹⁷¹ Davide Sciortino, "Why Would You Quantize All of This - J Dilla: The Perception of Groove and the Re-Definition of Hip Hop and Electronic Beat" 2014, 14, https://www.academia.edu/6864310/Why_would_you_quantize_all_of_this_-_J_Dilla_the_perception_of_groove_and_the_re-definition_of_hip_hop_and_electronic_beat.

beyond the swing that he had been known for, exaggerating it. This kind of manipulation literally alters time in the recorded samples and, in so doing, gives listeners access to a new temporality.

Through microsampling, Dilla creates a hyper-cut-up sonic experience, one that has a historical precedent in African American traditions of Creolization and pastiche. With a close listen, however, one will notice that Dilla moves this tradition in a different direction. He takes the vocal snippets and shifts them semi-tone by semi-tone, subverting the precision of a certain kind of controlled masculine vocal often found in hip-hop. To contextualize it within his own career, it gives the feeling more of the neo-soul artists that he worked with as a member of the Soulquarian Collective (D'Angelo, Q-tip, and Common, for example) than his earlier work with Slum Village. Due to his technological choices working with the MPC 3000 and the SP-303, Dilla not only leaves room for misalignment and imperfections, but also aesthetically aims for them. Nitt claims that J Dilla's approach is unexplainable, and he also said that J Dilla never looked for the obvious loop. Instead, he would dissect the whole song in search a loop he could make his own in order to make a machine (such as the MPC) sound human.¹⁷² Dilla describes his initial attraction to small defects, "I used to listen to records and actually, I wouldn't say look for mistakes, but when I hear mistakes in records it was exciting for me. Like, 'Damn, the drummer missed the beat in that shit. The guitar went off key for a second.' I try to do that in my music a little bit, try to have that live feel a little bit to it."¹⁷³ Dilla actively cultivated this "live" feeling in his work, and *Donuts* was no exception. The difference, however, is that the "live" feeling of time that he had had been altered. He was no longer a member of the group bound by chrononormativity, so the "liveness" of *Donuts*, while

¹⁷² Sciortino, "Why Would You Quantize All of This - J Dilla." 18.

¹⁷³ J Dilla, "Still Lives Through," February 2006, <http://www.nodfactor.com/2010/02/07/still-lives-through-j-dillas-last-interview/>.

undeniable, is also characterized by more exaggerated misalignment. He worked to recreate a live sound, but did so during a time when he had a different corporeal rhythm than most and a different sense of temporality.

It takes a trained ear and proficiency in technical manipulation to make Dilla's kind of chops. It takes more than knowing interesting samples or simply deciding where to chop. It requires the producer to have a highly attuned sense of time. Dilla had a background as a drummer, which would have helped him better hear what he needed in the original material. After slicing out a sample, he resliced it, and then could take its chopped up pieces and rearrange them in time. With his absolute embrace of unquantized rhythms, he thus altered the linear flow of time, stripping *Donuts* of a basic means by which humans try to control time. The notion of "obsolescence" is inherent to technologically enabled methods of music production and recording, and often fought—but Dilla embraced the obsolete. He tried to be inventive, and his beats had to be innovative, but he kept old technology, with which he was most familiar, to facilitate his virtuosity.

The aural architecture of "Waves," one minute and thirty-six seconds long, is built from one three-second sample from 10cc's "Don't Do It Johnny" from 1972. These three seconds are sliced and sequenced to construct one of the most cohesive grooves on *Donuts*. It is of a reasonable length (at one minute and thirty-nine seconds long it ties for the eighth longest song on the album). The Roots drummer Questlove has been quoted as saying that the track is an encoded message to his younger brother to carry on the family's musical tradition and that the sample is flipped to say "Johnny Do It."¹⁷⁴ But, that message to the future is not what I hear. I hear a man playing with time *in the moment* in a way that is strange and uncanny.

¹⁷⁴ Questlove, "Questlove on Run-D.M.C., D'Angelo, Dilla, and More.," *Pitchfork*, June 24, 2010, <http://pitchfork.com/news/39226-5-10-15-20-questlove/>.

“Waves” represents, in one song, time’s simultaneous fragmentation and elongation. The track has a consistent, but oddly unstable groove, composed of dozens of microsamples that are then each slightly altered, manipulating both the order of time and the timbre from the original base sample. 10cc’s song “Don’t Do It, Johnny,” is about Johnny Kapulski, known as the rebel boy Johnny Angel. During the song listeners are informed of this fact by a radio reporter’s voice underneath the voices singing “Johnny, don’t do it.” (The part that Dilla samples starts at 1:52.) The original song is in 6/8, but Dilla takes the 6/8 rhythm of the original sample and flips it to 4/4. The waltz sway of the 10cc song, which has that “Johnny Angel” girl group feel, is now turned into a very modern and complex groove counter-rhythms. The tempo feels slower because of the elongation of the vocal sample, which Dilla effects by detuning (transposing) the vocals down two semitones. However, he uses the wave function so that the rhythm of the sample stays the same, which means that the tempo being slowed is an illusion resulting from the process by which the voice was detuned. In other words, he pitch-shifts without timestretching.

Though Dilla was sick, his ears were certainly working. One of the chops he makes is to the radio voice saying “Kapulski,” cutting just the “pul” out of “Kapulski,” making it into a 1/16th sample that he triggers in as another rhythmic element. In addition to the “pul” sample that he uses for rhythm, he makes six clear original chops to a five-second portion of the song that listeners initially hear unaltered at the start of his track.



Figure 2.1: Above I have recreated the cuts Dilla makes as I have just explained. He takes the elements that fall between each yellow pair and shuffles them repeatedly to create the groove of “Waves.” It is important to remember that though I am using Ableton to help visualize microsampling he did he was not using computer software such as this but rather he would make these chops by ear and hand on his SP-303 or MPC 3000.

After that, he starts to denature time by changing the order in which he triggers each sample, which are all now at a different tempo/beats per minute (bpm). In its original state, the 4/4 of the original 10cc sample is at 120 bpm. These subtle shifts in tempo and arrangement sound the concept that continuity is an illusion because, even while things share the same characteristics (timbre), they are not actually the same or reliably so. The chart below shows the order in which the microsamples are played across the start of the song. Each sample is a different bpm, vocal enunciation, and their order is constantly shifting. As the song progresses, they create a head-nodding funky groove, but one that also feels off-kilter, just a bit unstable. As Danielson notes in her original theorization of the funk groove, it is designed “to sound like a single rhythm...[any] counter-rhythm should destabilize the main meter without being so

articulated as to threaten to take it over.”¹⁷⁵ This is exactly what happens in “Waves.” The voices seem to bleed over the 4/4 steady measures of the bass and cymbal, creating a counter-rhythm to the instrumental groove.

	beats per minute (bpm)/vocal or musical element					
Order 1	164.54 Guitar Strum	238.64 Johnny	155.19 Itt	149.24 hi-hat it	195.35 Rim Shot Johnny	206.26 ooo it Kapulski
Order 2	155.19 It	195.35 Rim Shot Johnny	206.26 ooo it Kapulski	155.19 Itt	149.24 hi-hat it	206.26 ooo it Kapulski
Order 3	155.19 It	195.35 Rim Shot Johnny	206.26 ooo it Kapulski	164.54 Guitar Strum	238.64 Johnny	149.24 hi-hat it

Figure 2.2: The chart shows what is in each micro sample section of the “Waves” I have discussed. It reveals the linguistic grabs and augmentations and also charts the bpm speed of the sample. Where I have struck through the letter in the chart it signifies that Dilla only grabs a portion of the sounding of the letter from the source material. When the letter is double, as in the case of Itt, it means he has elongated the sound of that letter.

It is worth noting how different this new way of working was from standard sample-based production. We are not getting loops of the same sample repeated over and over; rather, Dilla is drumming out the samples in different orders, over and over. There is no single pattern being played and the sequences are not quantized, the effect is to mimic the unpredictability of waves falling on a shore. Dilla manipulates sound through fairly simple hardware technologies, to create complex rhythms and grooves that alter listener’s perceptions of time and space. This is historically in line with the ways counter-rhythm was created, live in the studio and onstage, by James Brown and his musicians, the most sampled group of artists in history. Brown himself is

¹⁷⁵ Anne Danielsen, *Presence and Pleasure: The Funk Grooves of James Brown and Parliament* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), 67.

never sampled in “Waves”; but the ontology of his grooves is there. That is what creates the untimely nature of the song.

When a sensitive listener hears these subtle lags and shifts in tempo they will simultaneously experience a destabilized sense of time, and respond to the groove, perhaps by moving. Freeman suggests that untimeliness can be “felt in the bones, as a kind of skeletal dislocation” and that when something is not in sync, it is “something felt on, with, or as a body, something experienced as a mode of erotic difference or even as a means to express or enact ways of being and connecting that have not yet arrived or never will.”¹⁷⁶ The listener has a bodily experience of the untimely when exposed to this product of ill temporality. The “feel” is the feeling of untimeliness, a lateness that is struggling to stay balanced, but that wobbles and crashes. Like waves.

Spectral Samples, Subjectivity, and Layers of Time

“Audio has naturalized what could be called the disembodied effects of new media technologies, and thus paved the way for further mediations of the embodied subject.”¹⁷⁷

While, Dilla’s use of many samples taking from the introductions of different songs point to the album and its songs being very much in the present, and keep the listener in the present, that present is a haunted one. Just because there are no lyrics rapped by Dilla doesn’t mean there isn’t a narrative connecting the sonic apparitions manifested on *Donuts*. In “Airworks,” for example, offbeats, echoes, and voices float in and out of the soundscape, giving the impression that they long for a place, a solid form.

¹⁷⁶ Elizabeth Freeman, “Introduction - Pdf,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 2–3 (2007): 159, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/215003/pdf>.

¹⁷⁷ Dyson, *Sounding New Media*, 3.

Ghosts and apparitions are equally vital components of a haunting. The two terms are often used interchangeably, but I would like to distinguish between them, since the difference is critical to my discussion of Dilla's sound. Both manifestations shape the atmosphere of a space, whether sonic or physical, and both make us question our visual sense and, perhaps, our other senses as well, including hearing, whether as a ghostly whisper or as the apparition of a sample from Firesign Theatre. Both trigger memory. "Contrary to popular opinion, apparitions are not always of the dead: they can also be of the living. Where a ghost is thought of as a vague shadowy figure, apparitions generally seem solid like a normal living being."¹⁷⁸ Ghosts are figures of the deceased, translucent, barely visible, or not visible at all. They are caught in a state of becoming body but never reaching a solid form. Apparitions have more to do with a particular moment when a disembodied spirit or something that was at one time invisible (thus not necessarily dead) manifests as a physical form and becomes visible to the human eye. This is how the ghost connects to the living. As they become visible (or audible) they become meaningful to us. In the action of the haunting, at the moment of apparition, they confuse the boundary between life and death. Humans tend to have a need for death to be final and for time to be fixed, even as we fear that finality for ourselves. Ghosts create a fraught liminal space as they erase concrete boundaries between presence/absence, death/life, here/there, now/then, past/present. It's this co-mingling in and with the present in and with us that makes these ghosts poignant to my discussion. The ephemeral nature of ghosts contributes to feelings of loss.

¹⁷⁸ Raymond Buckland, *The Spirit Book: The Encyclopedia of Clairvoyance, Channelling, and Spirit Communication* (Canton, Mich: Visible Ink, 2006), 11.

Apparitions tend to be more intrusive than ghosts, a clear, almost physical form that makes a definite appearance but is out of place and time.¹⁷⁹

A ghostly effect can create melancholy in the subject, including those who create and listen to music. For example, in her discussion of Chopin's ghosts, Ewelina Boczkowska details the ways in which it is possible to hear musical apparitions in a given piece through a "hermeneutics of musical haunting." These aural ghosts speak through what she calls a "melancholic narrative." "Unlike a mourner who has come to terms with loss and can speak comfortably about the past, a melancholic struggles to articulate memories and feelings of grief. The melancholic narrative is distinguished by discontinuity, lack of direct voice, masked expression, temporal disjunction, and the use of idiosyncratic expression or quotation."¹⁸⁰ This description applies quite well to *Donuts*. Dilla's diseases caused his physical condition to shift radically, requiring constant reassessment. Not only could Dilla not speak comfortably about his grief over his condition, constant renegotiations such as those required in sufferers of chronic degenerative illnesses make coming to terms with their loss difficult and make hard work of establishing a clear relationship to it.

In both form and content, Dilla's music is filled with sonic specters and performing phantoms that sound out of time, none more so than his signature siren. In "Waves," his "Dilla siren" is fragmented; it starts, stutters slowly, and fades into the ether. In all, seven of the 31

¹⁷⁹ For expert theories of the terminology used to describe paranormal visions see the following: Joseph Baker, "A Social Anthropology of Ghosts in Twenty-First-Century America," *Social Compass* 61, no. 4 (2014): 569–93.; Mary Schlitz, "Of Two Minds: Sceptic–Proponent Collaboration within Parapsychology," *British Journal of Psychology* 97 (n.d.): 313–22.; Paul Savage, "Anomalous Phenomena and the Limits of Science" (Temple University, 2013).; Brenda Gardenour Walter, "Phantasmic Science: Medieval Theology, Victorian Spiritualism, and the Specific Rationality of Twenty-First Century Ghost Hunting," *Jefferson Journal*, 2013.; Bryan Williams, "Apparitional Experiences: A Primer on Parapsychological Research and Perspectives," 2010.

¹⁸⁰ Ewelina Boczkowska, "Chopin's Ghosts" *19th-Century Music* 35.3 (Spring 2012): 212.

tracks have a siren. “Workinonit,” the album’s first full length and longest song, uses his signature sound to forcefully introduce the track on which vocal samples repeat “play me,” “buy me,” “save me,” and “workin’ on it.” “One for Ghost” features a muted version, ghostly, and weak. “The Factory,” a Pink Floyd sounding track, normalizes the sound of the siren amid the beeping digital machine noises that are equally intrusive, but that ultimately create a representation of the hospital, recalling the sounds of life support. In “People” the siren immediately follows the intelligible sample of the titular words of Eddie Kendricks’ “My People... Hold On,” with Dilla perhaps identifying himself as one of those people who have struggled both historically and personally, but who have hope.¹⁸¹ The siren on “The Diff’rence” nearly blends with the sampled horns that it bookends in the beginning of the song, informing the way the horns are perceived so that they sound alarming, even when unaccompanied by the siren. “Lightworks” has the siren sound at regular intervals that make it sound as if it is functioning as a siren would, but blends it in with sci-fi sounds and percussion that hint (along with the voice that introduces the track with “This is Bendix, the tomorrow people”) at afrofuturism, complete with a utopian sentiment of being transported through time. Used throughout *Donuts* in different contexts and to different effect, the siren seems to haunt the album—Dilla’s ghostly presence making itself known. The siren is used in different contexts; at times seeming subject to the sound around it like in “One for Ghost,” at others seeming to exert agency by defining the subsequent sounds as with “The Diff’rence.” Though it may be truncated, diminished, or muted in certain songs, it is a reminder from Dilla that he is there persisting, even in an altered state.

Dilla creates songs with multiple sonic apparitions, which allude to the rich history of African American music of the past, to build a tone poem that describes the temporality of

¹⁸¹ *People-- Hold On* (Detroit: Tamla, 1972).

illness. The ways Dilla pulls out and weaves various samples makes it clear that he has a deep knowledge of earlier music, not just his own genre, but also R&B, pop, Motown, and many other styles, which he mines for his samples. There is a staggering array of variety on display here, a case in point being the duo of the Burt Bacharach-sampling ‘Wakinonit’ and the 10cc-sampling ‘Workinonit,’ both of which are chopped up, rearranged and—without even adding additional drums—transformed into proper, head-nodding monsters. Dilla was known for using a mix of incredibly obscure and quite well known samples side by side. In some ways, this act lends recognition to forgotten artists and resurrects them, even as it repurposes the sample to create something new and turns it into an instrument of his authorial voice. Dilla puts listeners in an imagined space, but one so close to reality it can be felt through its vibrations. Dilla also signifies the between space by the altered vocal samples he inserts into his tunes, never fully formed, always becoming but never reaching a full presence. *Donuts* explores the deficit between what is, what was, and what is desired as a future.

Dilla’s methods of micro and reverse sampling have obscured perhaps the majority of the source-recordings. But on *Donuts*, it is obvious that there were certain samples he came back to over and over. Notably, among these is Dilla’s 2004 collaboration with B.R. Gunna, “Do Ya Thing,” is repeatedly sampled. Not only does this mean that he is inserting a past version of himself into the work again and again, he is also artistically going into the past and manipulating it to create a new present. Artists such as 10cc, Raymond Scott, Mantronix, and Shuggie Otis are also reused, but substantially altered each time. While we cannot know if this was because he was in a hospital bed with limited access to new 45s, or if these were purely aesthetic choices, recurring samples do serve to create a through line, if an unreliable one. Much like a body always present, but non-functional in different ways from day to day, these samples unify the

album sonically, but also signal instability because of the extent to which they have been modified. They evoke a feeling of dislocation (exile) and temporal disruption.

Desynchronized Ending

Experimental/instrumental hip-hop, inherently a hypermediated method of production, is not only symptomatic of the early 21st century; it also allows for the body of the beatmaker to be obscured. This is not a genre that demands live performance, and thus it allows the artist's body to be hidden, but the bodily experience is revealed in the music. In many ways Dilla's music is an ultimate gesture of infinite longing for an existence outside of the finite and is marked by the sonic principles of Dilla's chronically ill subjectivity: minute fragmentation, groove construction, and a connection to the musical lineage of the African American community.¹⁸² Dilla worked to make beats in order to remove himself from his immediate reality of being bedridden, but ended up creating an album that expresses that very experience—filled with flights of fantasy, humor, hope, despair, and destabilization. *Donuts* is marked by spatiotemporal and affective straddling which does not attempt to resolve incongruities, fulfilling a fundamental feature of Said's understanding of unresolved late style.¹⁸³

Donuts is always in the present but it is his present, not ours; for listeners it resonates from a liminal place—the in-between, fragmented and temporally displaced. Elizabeth Freeman's concept of "erotohistoriography," with its emphasis on "the value of surprise, of pleasurable interruptions and momentary fulfillments from elsewhere, other times," might help

¹⁸² For another example of music and longing see: E. T. A. Hoffmann, "Beethoven's Instrumental Music," trans. Martyn Clarke, in *E.T.A. Hoffmann's Musical Writings: Kreisleriana, The Poet and the Composer, Musical Criticism*, ed. David Charlton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1989).

¹⁸³ Said, *On Late Style*, 24.

us to understand the haunting immediacy of Dilla's work.¹⁸⁴ "Erotohistoriography does not write the lost object into the present so much as encounter it already in the present, by treating the present itself as hybrid."¹⁸⁵ This is especially apt for an art form such as hip-hop, which is both a hybrid and reliant on blending and juxtaposition to create music. "Erotohistoriography admits that contact with historical materials can be precipitated by particular bodily dispositions and that these connections may elicit bodily responses, even pleasurable ones, that are themselves a form of understanding."¹⁸⁶ Though Freeman links this kind of temporality to pleasure and being queer, I would argue that the experience of being a young black man (who are often discursively figured as a physical threat and hyper virile) with lupus and TPP (diseases that not only incapacitate the person physically with chronic pain and fatigue, but that are often associated with women, who have lupus in higher numbers) queers Dilla's subjectivity. His work traps the listener in a hybrid present. Fractured and modified until unrecognizable, highly modified samples slow time and bend our idea of object constancy. The listener is locked in a series of present moments, not allowed to settle for very long. So the experience of the listening body is one of constantly changing entrainment to the different grooves. Desynchronized rhythms and counter rhythms make it clear that time is no longer a clear linear progression, while the voices on the few samples we can identify become apparitions that haunt the work. Dilla's *Donuts* is an expression of altered temporality, yet one that swings and grooves as much as it jars or unsettles.

¹⁸⁴ Elizabeth Freeman, "Time Binds, or, Erotohistoriography," *Social Text* 23, no. 3–4 (Fall-Winter 2005): 59.

¹⁸⁵ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Duke University Press, 2010), 95.

¹⁸⁶ Stankovikj, Martinova, and Stankovikj, "Thrombotic Thrombocytopenic Purpura (Syndroma Moschkowitz), Severe Disease with Potential Fatal Outcome," 95–96.

CHAPTER THREE

David Bowie and The Aesthetics of Ending

On New Year's Eve, 2015, I sat in the darkened New York Theater Workshop space in Manhattan, seeing and listening to *Lazarus* (2015), the musical by David Bowie and Edna Walsh. I knew this was as close as I'd ever be to Bowie again, and I will admit that I had hopes he would be there watching from the back of the room.¹⁸⁷ If he was, he did not reveal himself to the audience, but he was ever-present throughout the performance nonetheless.¹⁸⁸ Little did I know that just ten days later Bowie would be dead and the world would be in mourning. On the day of Bowie's passing Toni Visconti, his long-time producer and friend, wrote, "His death was no different from his life—a work of Art."¹⁸⁹

Some accounts of Bowie's death, mostly found in British tabloids, have gone as far as to report that his death was a well-orchestrated assisted suicide and not the result of his body failing at an un-chosen time.¹⁹⁰ For example, former BBC1 DJ Andy Peebles is quoted as saying "It has been suggested to me in quite a number of phone calls that his death was the result of assisted

¹⁸⁷ I had seen Bowie perform live on a number of occasions throughout my lifetime, *The Glass Spider Tour* (1987), *Sound + Vision Tour* (1990), *Outside Tour* (1995), *Earthling Tour* (1997), *Heathen Tour* (2002) at the Area2 festival, and finally *A Reality Tour* (2004) where I last saw him grace the stage in person at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles with Macy Gray as his opening act.

¹⁸⁸ Bowie was also going through his illness while creating his musical *Lazarus*. However, for the purposes of my dissertation I don't want to dive too deeply into the analysis of the play on top of the music. I will note that, according to director Ivo van Hove, the work is an "existentialist play about a man who is living dead, in eternal mourning for the love of his life, wondering how to make sense of it all." <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/nov/06/ivo-van-hove-i-give-it-all-like-bowie-gave-it-all-in-a-masked-way-lazarus-interview>

¹⁸⁹ Visconti. Official FB Page. <https://www.facebook.com/tony.visconti>

¹⁹⁰ These statements can be found in 2016 between September 17th through the 21st in *The Mirror*, *The Daily Mail*, *Inquisitor*, *Metro*, and *The Morning Ledger*.

suicide.”¹⁹¹ Claims such as these draw on the mere days separating Bowie’s death from his birthday and the release of *Blackstar* (2016). But framing his death as a kind of marketing stunt, or the record, its videos, and even his musical, *Lazarus*, as part of seamlessly constructed long farewell is reductive. We know from his friends and collaborators that he spoke of creating a sequel to the musical *Lazarus* and that he had every desire to make another record after *Blackstar*. Whether he knew it was his final work or not, David Bowie worked in a late style which, though filled with palpable musical and personal anxiety, is marked by aesthetic and artistic control.

Given this, how can we talk about *Blackstar* and its musical style, so as not, blasphemously, to make an unholy relic of it (like the jeweled human skull in the video for “Blackstar”)? How can we talk about Bowie’s illness, and its effect on his music, without making claims about genius and greatness, and using lateness as a way to assure the artist’s place in the canon? As I argued in my introduction, traditional understandings of late style are inherently problematic; this chapter uses David Bowie to continue the critique, analyzing the way late style is used to further a particular narrative or mythology around Bowie, dehumanizing him and decentering his illness. Recognizing how the illness may have played an unpredictable part in his creativity is a better path for all of us than making a fully controlled, heroic figure out of him, thinking that was his plan all along. The experience of illness gives rise to uncertainty that can either produce fertile creative ground or stunt artistic output, depending on the individual. The ambiguities of illness are perhaps most salient on the frontlines of the realization that there are some processes to which we are subject and the reevaluations of self-concept that

¹⁹¹ Lesley-Ann Jones, “David Bowie May Have Killed Himself According to a New Book,” *Daily Mail Online*, accessed March 29, 2017, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3794451/Did-David-Bowie-kill-explosive-claims-rock-writer-followed-move.html>.

result from such renegotiations. While it is tempting and maybe even comforting to instead imagine orchestrated “swan songs” that imbue the dying individual with control, in so doing we are denying a fundamental aspect of the artist’s experience and risk limiting our understanding of that artist’s creativity and humanity.

During my visit to the *David Bowie Is* exhibition at the V&A Museum in 2013, I copied down these album notes scrawled in Bowie’s hand that I think are appropriate and speak to Bowie’s own understanding of the relational responsibilities of the artist and the audience in the construction of meaning around art:

Taking the present philosophical line we don’t expect our audience to necessarily seek an explanation from ourselves. We assign that role to the listener and to culture. As both of these are in a state of permanent change there will be a constant “drift” in interpretation. All art is unstable. Its meaning is not necessarily that implied by the author. There is no authoritative voice. There are only multiple readings.¹⁹²

I have elsewhere argued that Bowie’s music has a “pastiche nature” to it; as Kathryn Johnson notes, “Bowie’s music is purposely porous; leaving listeners various points of entry – and exit – so that multiple forms of connection and meaning have room to proliferate.”¹⁹³ Admitting “multiple readings,” Bowie confers “creative agency on us, his audience.”¹⁹⁴ But this does not automatically write the listener or critic a hermeneutic blank check. As Simon Frith writes, “The experience of pop music is an experience of identity: in responding to a song, we are drawn, haphazardly, into emotional alliances with the performers and with the performers’

¹⁹² David Bowie. Manuscript notes on *I.Outside*. 1995. The David Bowie Archive and the V&A Museum.

¹⁹³ Kathryn Johnson, “David Bowie Is,” in *David Bowie: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Eoin Devereux, Aileen Dillane, and Martin J Power, 2015, 185.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

other fans.”¹⁹⁵ The death of a musician unleashes a complicated network of emotional and cultural responses from fans, friends, journalists, academics, and institutions. Thus, as Frith warns, “Musical experiences always contain social meaning, are placed within a social context—we are not free to read anything we want into a song.”¹⁹⁶ I, like many Bowie fans immediately following his death, wanted to hold onto *Blackstar* as a deliberate “gift,” as a musical token of his love and a keepsake to cling to as we mourned. Diving headfirst into lyrical readings colored by the emotionality of a fan, I cherished him telling us that though “he couldn’t give everything away” (“I Can’t Give Everything Away”) he would be “free . . . just like that bluebird” (“Lazarus”). Now, though, after spending a year with the album, it has become clear that I need to be very careful about reading the artist into the music because, as Tanja Stark keenly points out, “death has been an enduring companion to Bowie from the beginning.”¹⁹⁷

If Bowie’s aliens, gender-bending glam, thematic isolation, and 1970s-era dystopianism defined his earlier work as the voice of a generation of outcasts, what defines his late period? The music on *Blackstar* can certainly be considered Bowie’s “late period” because of its relation to his career’s timeline, his declining health, and his age. However, the style that emerges seems to be another matter that I do not believe is tied to age solely, but rather to the particularities of being displaced from normative time. Long before the creation of *Blackstar*, Bowie was operating within a temporality of belated fatherhood, having had a newborn daughter at the age of 53, and this procreative-but-aging temporality was almost immediately layered on the temporality generated from his multiple illnesses.

¹⁹⁵ Simon Frith, *Popular Music: Music and Identity* (Psychology Press, 2004), 36.

¹⁹⁶ Simon Frith, *Taking Popular Music Seriously: Selected Essays* (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2007), 36.

¹⁹⁷ Tanja Stark et al., “Confronting Bowie’s Mysterious Corpses,” in *Enchanting David Bowie: Space/Time/Body/Memory* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 61.

Thus, if we are to search in Bowie's works for the affect of mortal subjectivity and the awareness of mortality, then we cannot confine ourselves to his final album. In a 2002 interview, Bowie reflecting on his passion for the late work of Richard Strauss, his *Four Last Songs*, which were composed shortly after World War II and just prior to the 85-year old composer's death:

[O]ne of the things that has gotten to me over the years is Strauss's *Four Last Songs*. They literally were the four last songs he ever wrote. He was in his 80s when he wrote them. There was Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter. They are such moving pieces of music that I just wanted to start something that in a pop/rock way captured some of the gravitas, the spiritual questioning, that was so evident on those four songs of his.¹⁹⁸

Though many have tried to determine which might be Bowie's "four songs" on *Blackstar*, I believe, rather, that we need to look at his own four final *albums*, which are full of the kind of solemnity and "spiritual questioning" he heard in Strauss. In this view, David Bowie's late style is not restricted to *Blackstar*, but stretches across the his final four albums: *Heathen* (2002), *Reality* (2003), *The Next Day* (2013), and *Blackstar*.

My reading of his work of the new millennium is that Bowie's sense of his own mortality became much more present in his music after his daughter was born in August of 2000, when he was 53 years old. In 2001, just eight months after his daughter's birth, his mother died. During a 2002 interview with John Wilson, in which he discusses the impetus behind his album *Heathen*, his first record of the 21st century and the first since his daughter's birth and his mother's death, Bowie spoke about penning the title song, "Heathen." His account raises so many interesting issues that it is worth quoting at length:

Writing "Heathen" was a traumatic epiphany. Why I called it 'Heathen' is that it is not a dialog between a man and his god, it's a dialog between a man and life itself, so it's almost pagan in some respects, but it definitely has a heathen

¹⁹⁸ Sean Sennett, "Classic Bowie - Smh.Com.Au," *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 13, 2002, <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2002/05/13/1021002431619.html>.

propensity in that way. It's a man confronting the realization that life is a finite thing and that he can already feel it, life itself going from him, ebbing out of him, the weakening of age, and I didn't want to write that, you know I didn't want to know that I do feel that, who does?...I am now getting to that stage, where I'm sure that, it's not the age itself you know age doesn't bother me, so many of my heroes were older guys. It's the lack of years left that weighs far heavier on me than the age that I am. I feel pretty good frankly, and I have a wonderful life. I'm so lucky to have found the right woman to share my life with. We have a child, and I do what I always wanted to do, I'm a writer. But yet it's having to let go of it all you know. Even more so now. It's so much more poignant for me – often there's such a cloud of melancholia about knowing I'm going to have to leave my daughter on her own. I don't know what age that's going to be thank god. But it just doubles me up in kind of grief...I wouldn't have made this album if we didn't have our daughter. I'm not saying the whole album is about her, but I think it provoked questions that searched certain areas of my own discomfort and anxieties.¹⁹⁹

Bowie is essentially describing the goals and methods behind music that is traditionally considered late style. "Heathen" is a reflection on the relationship between a person and life, or a person and death, or both, because life and death each define the other. We can see that David Bowie's late style did not suddenly emerge with *Blackstar* or even *The Next Day*, although the sudden flowering after a ten-year hiatus would be a perfect basis for a clichéd "Indian summer" narrative of late-stage creativity. Bowie's late style unfolded much earlier, as he acquired a revised sense of futurity through, first and foremost, having a child. His personal idea of the future changed when his daughter came into the world, which led him to renegotiate what he understood life to be and how he felt about his own life ending. For Bowie, it is not just age, or the prospect of his career winding down, but rather the new view of time attendant to his new beginning as a father. For Bowie it starts with a new awareness of death in relationship to someone else's life, his daughter's. In the Wilson interview he explicitly separating aging from death, that time is removed, but death remains as do concerns about a failing body.

¹⁹⁹ "John Wilson Talks to David Bowie in New York, in 2002," *Front Row* (Radio 4, June 2002), <http://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-35278805>.

Again you must understand, I don't have a problem with aging. I in fact embrace that aspect of it...it doesn't faze me at all, aging. It's the death part that's really a drag. [quiet laugh] You know everything else I can quite cope with, quite cope with. I don't know, I'll see when my body starts seizing up, if I can cope with that as easily as I'm saying now. Probably not, I'll probably get very angry and irritable, when I can't lift my leg up.²⁰⁰

In the same interview with Wilson, he confesses that he has recently started to write more autobiographically. Thus, the shift to his musical late style comes with a turn to the autobiographical, and with this more exposure of a personal expression of artistry that Bowie maybe was in his previous works, but that he never openly admitted to until this moment. He has been critiqued for decades for being a chameleon and an ever changing pop musician who jumps on the whatever happens to be the next popular train, but yet, as each record came out after *Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1972), critics fans alike play a game to find the “real” Bowie in his music and musical personae. It may be that Bowie, in his late works, let us glimpse the real person, David Jones.

Four Last Albums

Heathen (2002)

One might apply Harold Bloom's poetic theory of historical “belatedness” to Bowie—but with a twist, locating him and his music within his own musical canon. Bloom famously claimed that *all* modern poets are constantly haunted by their predecessors, and must always define themselves agonistically in relation to those looming figures. In Bloom's construction, poets who are derivative of their predecessor and never escape his influence are “weak.” (The masculine pronoun is deliberate. In this Oedipal struggle, the precursor is always a Father figure.) Those able to overcome influence and compose original work, are considered “strong,” worthy of

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

themselves becoming precursors to future poets.²⁰¹ This anxiety of influence has been explored in musicological studies where the Bloomian model has been applied to Beethoven, Brahms, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and Bartok, to name but a few.²⁰² As with many artists who have enjoyed spectacular early success, Bowie needed to contend with the fact that he was his own precursor. Bowie was always trapped in the shadow of his own inescapable past by everyone (fans, critics, scholars) including himself at times. Instead of asserting himself as distinct from previous generations of artists, Bowie's challenge was to top himself, to create new music that met his aesthetic goals and was not overshadowed by his most popular work.

When *Heathen* came out, it was hailed as Bowie's best release in years, if partly because most critics had ignored his work of the 1990s and written off his commercially lucrative 1980s work as pop trash.²⁰³ One reviewer of *Heathen* began in his review to hazard a critical announcement of a late style for Bowie, that the record was the sound of Bowie accepting that he was beginning to grow old rather than fighting it in ways that the reviewer found to be distasteful, where Bowie was "just trying too damn hard."²⁰⁴ Yet "acceptance" maybe a misidentification of what the songs convey: they are in fact filled with intimations of mortality,

²⁰¹ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1997).

²⁰² See Raymond Knapp, *Brahms and the Challenge of the Symphony* (New York: Pendragon press, 1997); Joseph Nathan Straus, *Remaking the Past: Musical Modernism and the Influence of the Tonal Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990); Kevin Korsyn, *Towards a New Poetics of Musical Influence* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); Richard Taruskin, "Book Review: Towards a New Poetics of Musical Influence," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 46, no. 1 (1993): 114–38.; Jeremy Yudkin, "Beethoven's 'Mozart' Quartet," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 45, no. 1 (1992): 30–74..

²⁰³ See reviews Ken Tucker, "Let's Dance," *Rolling Stone*, June 17, 1997, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/albumreviews/lets-dance-19970617>.; Ryan Schreiber, "David Bowie: Hours," *Pitchfork*, October 5, 1999, <http://pitchfork.com>.; David Fricke, "Outside," *Rolling Stone*, October 19, 1995, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/albumreviews/outside-19951019>.

²⁰⁴ Eric Carr, "David Bowie: Heathen," *Pitchfork*, accessed February 21, 2017, <http://pitchfork.com>.

and musical undertones of fear and anxiety. Bowie said of the album, “What I wanted to do was pull together all the things I thought were central to me as a writer and singer and create a piece of music that has its own time. I hesitate to use the word ‘timeless’, because it sounds immodest but I really think we were trying to create a timeless piece of work.”²⁰⁵ As would be written of *The Next Day*, this album in particular is one that, as David Fricke writes, “sparkles with hindsight.”²⁰⁶ *Heathen* reunited Bowie with producer Tony Visconti for the first time since *Scary Monsters* (1980). Visconti, who produced and played on some of Bowie’s most memorable musical moments, including *David Bowie* (1969), *The Man Who Sold The World* (1970), *Young Americans* (1975), *Low* (1977), *Heroes* (1977), and *Scary Monsters* (1980), would remain with Bowie as a producer and collaborator from this point until his death.

Taken together, the songs on *Heathen* create an atmosphere of tension, discomfort, and dread. On September 11th, 2001, Bowie was in Woodstock recording *Heathen*. His wife and one-year-old child were at their home in SoHo, just a mile and a half from ground zero. Although all of the album’s songs were written prior to the event, Bowie stated in an interview that the record “had one foot astride that awful event in September” and that it “was quite a traumatic album to finish.”²⁰⁷ Nick Stevenson describes the affect that the attacks on September 11th, 2001, had on the style that emerged in Bowie’s subsequent works, situating a new aesthetic component in the albums in context with the political climate during the seemingly endless war on terror. Bowie’s work, Stevenson states:

²⁰⁵ Sennett, “Classic Bowie - Smh.Com.Au.”

²⁰⁶ David Fricke, “Heathen,” *Rolling Stone*, May 22, 2002, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/albumreviews/heathen-20020522>.

²⁰⁷ Anthony DeCurtis, *In Other Words: Artists Talk about Life and Work* (Milwaukee, WI: H. Leonard, 2005), 263.

needs to be understood as emerging from a wider culture where the broader sense of being under the threat and in danger is ever present. If this fear has also led to violence and the exercise of imperial power elsewhere then these features do not occupy center ground here. However, what Bowie does do effectively is offer the uncertainty, anguish, and fear of the wider culture. Bowie's late style then does not suddenly discover protest rock (and unlikely prospect) but rather turns his gaze both inward and outward at the same time. The fear evident throughout the album may be performed but it has a disturbing and visceral nature. The evil of our society then is not to be faced by converting the poor, Muslims, and gay people into Others. Instead, Bowie's late work suggests that we look inward at our own sense of fear and uncertainty resisting the idea that we can ever escape from a vexed sense of uncertainty."²⁰⁸

Heathen is thus the confession of an individual wrestling with doubt in the face of existential threat, which can be heard sonically throughout the album. Pete Townsend's Frippian guitar sound introduces the opening song on *Heathen*, "Sunday," which starts on an E-flat minor chord, heralding the sensorial dissonance that will remain throughout the record.²⁰⁹ Building to A-flat, the chord makes its way through Visconti's looping processed vocals, and we feel the tension of the clashing, closely spaced frequencies. The song is sparse, electronic, and chaotic, hinting at Bowie's previous work on *Low* and *Earthling*. The layering of synthesizer noises steadily increases as the song expands and swells, until the drums kick in about midway through, giving the track its edge and feeling of unease. We hear echoes of *Heroes* in Bowie's voice as he pushes his baritone vibrato to that trademark point of desperation.

The subsequent tracks add to this feeling of foreboding. "Slow Burn" evokes the gradual destruction of the world. The unchanging harmonic rhythm of Bowie's voice highlights

²⁰⁸ Nick Stevenson, "David Bowie Now and Then: Questions of Fandom and Late Style," in *David Bowie: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Eoin Devereux, Aileen Dillane, and Martin J Power, 2015, 290.

²⁰⁹ Robert Fripp is known as one of the seminal prog rock guitarists for his time spent with King Crimson. His unique guitar sound that combines a tuning of all the strings but the G are tuned to fifths of a low C, digital or tape looping, and pitch shifting pedals. Fripp played the iconic guitar line on David Bowie's "Heroes."

the fact that nothing can be done about it, and hints at resignation around annihilation. “Afraid” is an aggressive, rocking song that sounds like a leftover track from *Diamond Dogs* in the vein of *Scary Monsters*; a merging of the doom filled musical fury of “Big Brother” with the synthesized terrors contained in “Scream Like a Baby.”

The title track, a conversation with death, drags itself to life—the opening crescendo and slow build up on instruments and texture, the relatively soft processed guitars weaving around one another only to lose themselves in a murky synthesized haze. The vocals sustain over three short verses, during which Bowie’s voice is constantly in conflict with the crushing force of the synthesizers. His voice climbs up in register over the course of the song. The oddly joyful drum groove underpinning the track is a classic girl-group beat, the same as the Shirelles’ “Will You Love Me Tomorrow.” Using this beat simultaneously evokes pop and the innocence of youth with the song’s accompanying undercurrent of melancholy and anticipatory regret that made it justly famous. But the listener is not permitted to remain with the manicured girl-group anguish of young love. More and more synthesized sounds enter and exit, seemingly from nowhere, disrupting the rhythmic bounce of the drums and demanding we listen to an anguish far less contained or controllable.

It is a song full of contradictions and despair, confusion and loss. In it, little bits of the rest of the record (“Sunday,” “Slip Away,” “5:15 and the Angels Have Gone,” and “A Better Future”), chopped up, fractured, and reassembled with no hope of cohesion. In many ways, Judith Peraino’s description of lateness as “the disappearance of the subject in the opacity of surfaces, the fascination with conventions and forms to the seeming neglect of content, spatial or cosmopolitan imagination cut loose from historical memory”²¹⁰ is also true of *Heathen*’s title

²¹⁰ Peraino, *Giving Voice to Love*, 85.

song. The shards of disparate formal elements and genre allusions are connected only by their proximity and inclusion in the same song, which makes their significance unclear, causing the listener to question their own ability to understand. Confronted with something unintelligible, or at least where the meaning is not readily apparent, we are asked to make sense of it. In this way the listener experiences a diluted version of the artist's experience of embodied mortal subjectivity, experiences untimeliness. With no clear interpretation and references to past attempts at self-expression interacting with no obvious cohesion, "Heathen" sounds very much like a man in a losing negotiation with imminent death, whose artistic life almost literally flashes before his ears.

Confronting personal mortality could be described as an emotionally charged experience, but it is amplified when we take full account what death will sever. Bowie's work always engaged death and destruction, but fear of loss and skepticism about loved ones being reunited after death became more pressing following the birth of his daughter:

The idea of fear is strong in *Heathen* . . . A fear that there is no spiritual life... I confront it every day of my life. It is something I've always thought about. I'm a very spiritual person, in as much as I've had this awful bloody journey searching for a spiritual life. . . that firstly actually meets my expectations of how a spiritual life should be, and how and what kind of part it should play in my life. Maybe I ask too much. I keep coming to a dead end. As I get older my questions are fewer but I ask them, I bark them more. I keep approaching them from a different direction each time. But I probably only have 3 or 4 questions left. I guess by the time I do my last album I'll only have one question.²¹¹

During the making of *Heathen*, Bowie was struck by the absolute possibility and fear of losing what had become most important to him, his family. Within the span of a year his relationship to time shifted dramatically twice; he simultaneously felt strongly the need for a future with his daughter and understood the precarity of that future. Having a new baby when

²¹¹ "John Wilson Talks to David Bowie in New York, in 2002."

older emphasized these two in a much more uncommon way than the average progression of time. It was not long after the release of *Heathen* that Bowie was back in the studio recording *Reality*.

Reality (2003)

After finishing recording *Reality*, Bowie talked once again about family, fatherhood, and time.

I never thought I would be such a family-oriented guy; I didn't think that was part of my makeup. . . All the clichés are true. The years really do speed by. Life really is as short as they tell you it is. . . So I'd like to think that in 10, 20 year's time, I've been able to maintain a responsible and secure harbor for my child to grow up in, and that I can still retain the closeness that I have with my son from my first marriage . . . that I can keep that kind of stability. That for me is my priority.²¹²

There was a clear shift in his priorities focusing on his personal life and making the most of the time that he had with his family.

At the time, there was discussion that the closing track on the album, "Bring me the Disco King," was a swan song and might be his last recording. Similar in sound and theme to "Heathen (The Rays)," it again presents a man in conversation with Death: "You promised me the ending would be clear/You'd let me know when the time was now/Don't let me know when you're opening the door/Stab me in the dark, let me disappear"²¹³

"Bring me the Disco King" is a song Bowie had been toying with for over two decades, originally working on it with Nile Rodgers in 1985, then Brian Eno in 1995, and finally releasing it on *Reality* in 2003. In the short conceptual film made for the special edition of *Reality*, viewers are given an interesting tidbit from Bowie. As Mike Garson's piano concludes and Matt

²¹² DeCurtis, *In Other Words*, 267.

²¹³ *Reality* (ISO : Sony Music Entertainment, 2003).

Chamberlain's drums halt at the end of "Bring Me the Disco King," Bowie comes back on screen in the interview format and says, "You hear all these sounds that have just emerged since we started talking about the supernatural? That's the sound of death ... that's what it sounds like when you're dead ... doors opening." This expresses a much more optimistic view of what might happen after death than the song itself; it would not outlast the eventualities of Bowie's next concert tour.

When *Reality* was released in 2003, Bowie promptly went on a world tour—the longest tour of his career—to support the album. Earl Slick, in the 42 years he knew Bowie on and off, said that he had never seen him happier than on that tour. While performing in the German town of Scheessel, he experienced terrible chest pain that he thought was a pinched nerve. He then sought treatment in a German hospital, where he found out that he had experienced a heart attack and needed emergency heart surgery for a blocked artery. Following the surgery, he cancelled his remaining tour dates and was telling his longtime friend and collaborator Tony Visconti that he "wasn't going to work for a while and wasn't sure if he would record or tour again. He just wanted to take time off."²¹⁴ As it turned out, after this unexpected illness Bowie was rarely seen in public again. Life with his family did come first. Few things shift one's experience of everyday life quite so abruptly as a sudden life-threatening event: "Nearly half of heart attack survivors" have a form of depression or anxiety that sets in during or after recovery and that percentage goes up when the heart attack strikes before the age of 55.²¹⁵ Studies have shown that 1 in 8 people who survive a heart attack develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Bowie's

²¹⁴ Francis Whately, *David Bowie: The Last Five Years*, Documentary, (2017).

²¹⁵ Harvard Health Publications, "Depression and Heart Disease: Learn about Depression after Heart Attack," *Harvard Health*, accessed March 29, 2017, http://www.health.harvard.edu/press_releases/depression-and-heart-disease.

reality shifted “out of time”—he was, disorientingly, experiencing two parts of the life cycle at simultaneously, being at once a new father, which had come late for him at age 53, and on the brink of death, which came early at age 54.

The Next Day (2013)

On his 66th birthday, following ten years without a record release and seven years without performing live, David Bowie “appeared in cyberspace unannounced and without fanfare with a new song and music video, ‘Where Are We Now?’”²¹⁶ The album from which the song comes, *The Next Day*, was made in secrecy over two years working with Toni Visconti and mostly the same group of musicians found on *Reality* and *Heathen*. Questions of mortality hover throughout the album, which documents Bowie’s obsession with time, how it functions with memory, the ways that memory ties to identity, and the fragility of life. It also allows listeners to think about the forty years that David Jones spent being David Bowie, the enigmatic rock star.

A deep thematic of violence underpins the record, reflected in the songs about high school mass shooters, corpses hanging from beams, and the violence of religious hypocrisy, all of which are evident in the music video for “The Next Day.” However the record concludes with “Heat,” a song sonically and lyrically more akin to “Heathen” than the rest of *The Next Day*. It recalls the bleak vision and timbre of “Heathen” fading to silence, concluding the record much like “Bring Me the Disco King” did on *Reality*. “Heat” is a summation from a distance of his feelings about death and mortality, the themes explored on the previous two albums.

The album’s cover simultaneously refers to the past while pointing towards the future, “the next day.” The cover is the cover of *Heroes* with the old album title struck through and a

²¹⁶ Tiffany Naiman, “When Are We Now?: Walls and Memory in David Bowie’s Berlins,” in *Enchanting David Bowie: Space/Time/Body/Memory*, ed. Toija Cinque, Christopher Moore, and Sean Redmond, 2015, 305.

white square imposed over the image of Bowie's face with the title of the new album centered in black text in the blank space. Jonathan Barnbrook, the graphic designer who collaborated with Bowie on the cover, stated:

The *Heroes* cover obscured by the white square is about the spirit of great pop or rock music which is 'of the moment', forgetting or obliterating the past. However, we all know that this is never quite the case, no matter how much we try, we cannot break free from the past . . . It always looms large and people will judge you always in relation to your history, no matter how much you try to escape it. The obscuring of an image from the past is also about the wider human condition; we move on relentlessly in our lives to the next day, leaving the past because we have no choice but to.²¹⁷

Nick Stevenson writes that the images evoked in the cover design, song, and from the video of "Where Are We Now?" "might also be said to represent the ways that identity faces annihilation through time."²¹⁸ In fact, the very act of continuing to grow, of constructing our identities and narratives, necessarily obscures and alters our past versions and understandings. In some ways, *The Next Day* can be understood as Bowie's reflection on the importance of a personal narrative in the face of mortality.

The Next Day is self-referential sonically, filled with allusions to Bowie's back catalogue. We hear sonic and lyrical echoes of everything from "Five Years" to "Life on Mars" to "Space Oddity" to "Let's Dance" to, yes, "Heroes." The song "You Feel So Lonely You Could Die" fades out of the identical drumbeat that "Five Years" fades into; the Motown bounce of "Dancing in Outer Space" is essentially identical to "Modern Love"; and, as I've written about in detail elsewhere, "Where Are We Now?" melds many of the elements of "Heroes" to activate "a series of memories" that are "tied both to temporal and spatial referents to create a political

²¹⁷ Jonathan Barnbrook "+-+-+ Barnbrook Design | VirusFonts | Blog +-+-+," accessed March 31, 2017, <http://virusfonts.com/news/2013/01/david-bowie-the-next-day-that-album-cover-design/>.

²¹⁸ Stevenson, "David Bowie Now and Then: Questions of Fandom and Late Style," 289.

critique.”²¹⁹ In this later song that Bowie sings of “A man lost in time . . . just walking the dead.” Many of the sonic markers sound several decades old, the early digital sounding synthesizers and the reverb and flanging of the voice and instruments, which allude to the 1980s, Bowie’s moment of greatest success and influence. At times Earl Slick’s guitar playing is straight out of Mick Ronson’s Ziggy-era playbook.

Making specific reference to past works and utilizing forms from many different genres is not new for Bowie, even within the context of his late style. But, the affect created by their use in *The Next Day* differs fundamentally from *Heathen*. In Bowie’s 2002 work, the disparate formal elements and links back to his past work are presented in short, provocative bursts that were, it seemed, completely disconnected. It is as if the listener is presented with rubble and asked to reassemble the National Statuary Hall. Though *The Next Day* includes Bowie’s deeply personal ruminations on prior songs, and draws on diverse instrumental influences ranging from jazz to electronica to classical, these elements are employed to create a clear narrative. Instead of disconnected pieces, it is like deciphering the slow accretion of sedimentary rock. The strata are distinct, but the layering creates a coherent geologic story. The memories, represented lyrically, help ground the listener in Bowie’s perspective, especially in the track “Where Are We Now,” which describes specific places in Berlin, a city that figures prominently in the public narrative of Bowie’s evolution as an artist. References to Bowie’s back catalog, rather than disrupt, situate the listener in the context of a long career. Similarly, the formal elements, though of disparate origin, are used more cohesively. They last longer, recur with more frequency, and are more integrated one into the other. Because of the way they are sustained and placed in the soundscape, sonic signifiers do not compete; there is not the same sense of tension and anxiety.

²¹⁹ Naiman, “When Are We Now?: Walls and Memory in David Bowie’s Berlins,” 315.

Bowie created a work that openly and masterfully draws on his experiences and influences, weaving them together to present the result of years of reflection.

Stevenson described the album as “a return to the mystery of identity that so preoccupied Bowie in the past. Yet the theme of identity is no longer a joyful exploration of who we might become and self-invention, but rather under the shadow of death we are left to ponder the emptiness, mystery or illusion of the self.”²²⁰ *The Next Day* does not necessarily lack playfulness, but it certainly explores the drive to create, clarify, and examine personal narratives in the face of death. This album is not a conversation between a man and death, but is a reflection on a life lived in the face of the ending and what that might mean. The questions posed in *Heathen* may not have been answered and the door referred to in *Reality* may not have opened, but Bowie has had a decade to become accustomed to the uncertainty, and is telling himself, and us, his own story. This sense of calm pensiveness is attached to a lateness that resulted from Bowie’s age and family situation. It would change as he became ill.

***Blackstar* and the Struggle with Mortality**

Blackstar is not a radical shift thematically for David Bowie. As I have just sketched out, themes of time, aging, and mortality occupied Bowie through his entire career (and especially across his previous three records). Time, that “sniper in the brain,” whose “script is you and me” is always there “waiting in the wings” to cause “Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes.”²²¹ In 1972 Ziggy warned us over Woody Woomansy’s hopeless, repeating drumbeat that “We’ve got five years, that’s all we’ve got.”²²² Thankfully that wasn’t true for the planet or for our time with Bowie. He went on

²²⁰ Stevenson, “David Bowie Now and Then: Questions of Fandom and Late Style,” 289.

²²¹ From “Time” on *Alladin Sane* (RCA, 1973).; “Changes” on *Hunky Dory* (RCA, 1971).

²²² From “Five Years” on *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (RCA, 1972).

to give voice to characters in his songs who wondered if “maybe I’m born right out of my time” or if he was already “gone through a crack in the past, like a dead man walking.”²²³ Bowie certainly isn’t the first musician to think about himself as being not part of their present time—for example, Brian Wilson sang “I just wasn’t made for these times” on *Pet Sounds* (1966). Yet when Bowie was creating his final album, when time had clearly run out for him, he makes very little mention of it. Rather, he produced a work that lyrically and musically isn’t distinctly rooted in time at all. The songs are more opaque in their lyrics, musical form, and genre bending than much of his previous work (which was by no means transparent), yet there is a clarity of feeling. His three previously released records brought together basically the same ensemble of musicians and people he had worked with over his career. With *Blackstar*, the only remnant of his past musical relationships was producer Toni Visconti. *Blackstar* achieves a timelessness that Bowie had worked toward in *Heathen*. The difference between the two is that mortal subjectivity was the topic of musical meditation for the earlier album and for the final it was an embodied experience of illness that informed the work.

David Bowie isn’t the first popular musician to die of liver cancer; it is sadly common among popular musicians of his generation. Artists such as Robin Gibb, John Coltrane, and a pair of Bowie’s close friends and collaborators, guitarist Mick Ronson (1946 -1993) and Lou Reed (1942-2013) fell prey to the same illness. It is known to be an extremely painful kind of cancer and it is likely that Bowie endured a great deal of pain and discomfort due to the disease. More often than not, people get liver cancer as the result of cirrhosis, long-term tissue damage that scars the liver and increases the risk of cancer. Often, the cirrhosis is caused by alcohol

²²³ From “Thursday’s Child” on *Hours* (ISO Records, 2004).; From “Dead Man Walking on *Earthling* (New York: Sony, 2004).

abuse and it can be further developed by drug abuse often leading to hepatitis C.²²⁴ The five-year survival rate from liver cancer is 17%.²²⁵ According to the Cancer Society, often no obvious symptoms reveal themselves during the early stages, which allows the cancer to go undetected until it has spread through the body. Signs in the later stages include weight loss, loss of appetite, abdominal pain and swelling, fever, weakness, fatigue, nausea, vomiting, and jaundice.²²⁶ Most of these symptoms, even in the later stages of the cancer, are not visible except to those closest to the person. This is partially why Bowie was able to keep his illness a secret right up to his death.²²⁷ He must have known his time was running short, because a week prior to his death he sent an email to his longtime collaborator Brian Eno that reads in retrospect as a goodbye. It ended with, “Thank you for our good times, Brian. They will never rot.”²²⁸

Bowie was a unique musician, but the secrecy regarding his terminal condition is not confirmation that he was attempting to “mastermind” his own death as an aesthetic act. Once Bowie and Iman were married, and especially following the birth of their daughter, their private lives remained very private. That kind of privacy can, of course, lead to misinformation and the creation of myths. I would add that the process of dying has become a thing to (try to) control—an event to arrange and manage. The effect can be heartbreaking for family, friends, or in his

²²⁴ “Liver Cancer Risk Factors,” accessed February 20, 2017, <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/liver-cancer/causes-risks-prevention/risk-factors.html>.

²²⁵ “Liver Cancer: Statistics,” *Cancer.Net*, June 25, 2012, <http://www.cancer.net/cancer-types/liver-cancer/statistics>.

²²⁶ “Signs and Symptoms of Liver Cancer,” accessed February 20, 2017, <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/liver-cancer/detection-diagnosis-staging/signs-symptoms.html>.

²²⁷ Visconti, the band, Hove, his family.

²²⁸ Luke Britton, “Brian Eno on Final Email from David Bowie: ‘I Realise Now He Was Saying Goodbye,’” *NME*, January 11, 2016, <http://www.nme.com/news/music/david-bowie-159-1196092>.

case fans who had no chance to say goodbye. This kind of silence around disease is also a way for those with terminal illnesses to “avoid what they may consider the indignities of disease and the exhaustion of attention.”²²⁹

Bowie signals that *Blackstar* is more centered on the experience of mortality than any of his previous three albums, and time plays a key role. Multiple accounts agree that Bowie was told he had cancer in late 2014, and was informed that the cancer was terminal in September of 2015. *Blackstar*, recorded swiftly between January and March of 2015 is short, created and released with a sense of urgency like no other record he had ever made. Bowie was in a fury of creativity and his earlier public ruminations about death and dying allow us to assume he was deeply afraid about leaving his life, wife, and child. One way to stave off fear is to dive into work. It is good to be busy while waiting for death to come. The temporality imposed by this illness, the cancer, was a shift from the slower temporality that governed his devotion to fatherhood and his retreat from the public following his heart attack and heart surgery. Mortality came more into focus at that time, but he recovered; when the cancer showed up, he knew he would finally run out of time. Bowie’s pre-cancer aesthetic involved distance and observation of life and death. This changed with *Blackstar*—he was “terminal,” he was now at the end, he had reached the boundary line of his life.²³⁰

²²⁹ Ann Neumann, “David Bowie Planned His End as He Lived – on His Own Terms, Blazing a Trail,” *The Guardian*, January 12, 2016, sec. Opinion, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jan/12/david-bowie-death-end-of-life-plans-cancer?CMP=fb_us.

²³⁰ There have been multiple and conflicting reports regarding when David Bowie was officially told his cancer was terminal and that there was no longer any point in continuing treatments. However, I think being told by a doctor is one thing and knowing, or sensing, one’s own body failing is another. Bowie also knew full well that liver cancer was rarely a curable disease. Just a few years prior his friend Lou Reed had succumbed to it as did Mick Ronson, his guitarist of the Ziggy era. Thus, whether or not the words “your cancer is terminal” were spoken, he was certainly told he had a cancer and he knew had a slim survival rate prior to recording this album.

The temporality of illness is not a fixed temporality any more than late style or disability style are. Being *terminally* ill is quite different than being ill. With treatable or chronic illness, though one leaves normative time, there is the possibility of either an ongoing existence in that state or, by recovery, a restoration of normative time. To be “terminal” is to know that you are about to be altogether out of time as you know it. The customary structures that operate in our lives, that regulate our behavior and affect our understanding of causality, cease to have the same meaning.

The aesthetics of ending, the themes and lyrical images of loss, confusion, and approaching death that pervade *Blackstar* and its accompanying videos, do hearken back to musical and lyrical themes Bowie used in his youth (“Five Years”) and the recent past (“Heathen,” “Bring Me the Disco King”), but they now come with solemn ritualistic incantation, reflexive anxiety, and chaotic fury (depending on the song you are listening to) that his three previous records did not exhibit. *Blackstar*, asks no more questions, even the existential ones he repeatedly posed through his post-fatherhood, post-heart attack music:

As you get older, the questions come down to about two or three. How long? And what do I do with the time I've got left? When it's taken that nakedly, these are my subjects. And it's like, well, how many times can you do this? And I tell myself, actually, over and over again. The problem would be if I was too self-confident and actually came up with resolutions for these questions. But I think they're such huge unanswerable questions that it's just me posing them, again and again.²³¹

The conversation, the questioning, is over. No more distanced musical dialogs with death, or life; Bowie is kicking and screaming, enacting a very human struggle. This is a subjective account of a fight with a deadly cancer. Ivo van Hove, the director of *Lazarus*, said that Bowie

²³¹ Jon Pareles, “David Bowie, 21st-Century Entrepreneur,” *The New York Times*, June 9, 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/06/09/arts/david-bowie-21st-century-entrepreneur.html>.

“was not in a death struggle but a struggle for life – he wanted to live on.”²³² At the opening night of *Lazarus* on December 12th Hove tells us he “could see the tears behind [Bowie’s] eyes” and that the artist was “in deep fear” of leaving his teenage daughter behind. Hove was conscious of the fact that the opening night “perhaps would be the last time I would see him [Bowie].”²³³

Though Bowie hired a quartet of jazz musicians to execute his sonic vision for the album, it would be inaccurate to label *Blackstar* a jazz record. Like most of what he created since the mid-1970s, the album is a hybrid of musical styles and sounds that defies simple genre classification. As producer Toni Visconti aptly points out, “For this record, we had a jazz band but we didn't make a jazz record. We made a Bowie record.”²³⁴ Likewise, Visconti also stated that, “the goal, in many, many ways, was to avoid rock & roll” and went on to say that in the studio they “were listening to a lot of Kendrick Lamar.”²³⁵

So, then, how do Bowie’s final albums differ from his “early,” or “middle,” styles? Is there some uniqueness in Bowie’s music ingrained in his late style? Most of Bowie’s 20th-century music fell into the very broad genre of rock ‘n roll. His early sounds, what he first became famous for, were songs recognizable as folk, rock, and rhythm & blues. *David Bowie* (1967), *Space Oddity* (1969), *The Man Who Sold the World* (1970), *Hunky Dory* (1971), *The*

²³² “Iman ‘Holding up’ after David Bowie’s Death | Celebrities | Entertainment | Toro,” *Toronto Sun*, January 13, 2016, <http://www.torontosun.com/2016/01/13/iman-holding-up-after-david-bowies-death>.

²³³ Sean O’Neill, “‘He Was Really in Deep Fear’, Ivo van Hove Says of David Bowie,” January 13, 2016, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/the-times/he-was-really-in-deep-fear-ivo-van-hove-says-of-david-bowie/news-story/a9a4f28b82e38ac6211543f52bb18168>.

²³⁴ Sasha Frere-Jones, “An Insider’s Look behind the Making of David Bowie’s Secretive ‘Blackstar’ Album,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 8, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/music/la-ca-ms-david-bowie-essay-20160110-story.html>.

²³⁵ Andy Greene, “The Inside Story of David Bowie’s Stunning New Album,” *Rolling Stone*, accessed February 19, 2017, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/features/the-inside-story-of-david-bowies-stunning-new-album-blackstar-20151123>.

Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars (1972), *Aladdin Sane* (1973), and *Pin Ups* (1973) do not exhibit the fragmentation, obtuseness, and lack of musical resolution in his later work. The songs on these early records worked within the conventional forms of their genres, verse-chorus-verse, with catchy guitar hooks, and time signatures and rhythms that were absolutely rooted in rhythm and blues and rock traditions, and could be tapped out with your toes. Though dystopian in content and filled with questions of death and mortality, they were, formally, the antithesis of “late style.”

If there is a single musical style that is prominent and coherent throughout his final four albums, binding these songs together, it could be their engagement with jazz. These albums are not jazz albums, or even jazz fusion, despite the pervasive jazz elements found in them, but it is clear that that Bowie was trying to summarize his career at this point in his life, and he appears to have chosen jazz as the sonic medium to narrate his musical stories. Both *The Next Day* and *Blackstar* give the sense that the “party is over” and have a depth of sadness to them that recalls a particular strand of jazz blues performed by such figures as like Billie Holiday and Bowie’s friend Nina Simone.

Jazz itself, a “descendant of African American ‘sorrow songs’,” can be associated with loss and mourning.²³⁶ Yet historically, as in New Orleans’ unique jazz funerals, there is both solemnity and joy, sadness and pleasure in memorial music making. The slow funeral procession to the cemetery is filled with sounds of melancholy; drums are muted, and often the slow weeping of a clarinet puts sorrow into sound. But the mood changes after the burial and the mourners head out of the cemetery and back into the land of the living: with a snappy snare roll the beat turns celebratory with bouncing trumpets and a polyphony of joyful noise that returns

²³⁶ Patricia Rae, *Modernism and Mourning* (Lewisburg; Cranbury, NJ: Bucknell University Press ; Associated University Presses, 2007), 26.

participants to the unpredictability and pleasure of life through upbeat improvisation. Finally, jazz—one of the great improvisational forms—can be seen as synecdoche for life itself, the basic structure of which we may know and attempt to map out, but the details of which are always determined as life is lived.

Jazz was key to Bowie's early years growing up in postwar Britain (McCay 2005, Moore 2007, Heining 2012). In some ways, his embrace of jazz in the final albums is as an attempt to bookend his career, to sum up his continuity and connection with African American musical culture. Enlisting saxophonist Donny McCaslin and his trio—keyboardist Jason Lindner, bassist Tim Lefebvre, and drummer Mark Guiliana—and adding veteran jazz guitarist Ben Monder, Bowie worked to combine the virtuosic skill and tonal intensity of '70s Miles Davis and the primal power of Russian period Igor Stravinsky and his *Rite of Spring* with the ambient and rhythmic electronic sounds of Bowie's own works including *Low*, *Heroes*, *1. Outside*, and *Earthling*. But if *Blackstar* may at times aurally evoke Bowie's past catalog, it is nevertheless far removed from anything he had created earlier in his career. It is a sonically brutal, yet beautiful album that shape-shifts all along the way.

Blackstar offers a complex yet palpable atmosphere of loss and longing, both musically and lyrically. Both age and illness give Bowie's voice solemnity. At times, Bowie sounds ageless; other times, he sounds like what he was: a man on the brink of his 70s who had previously suffered a heart attack. His diction and sound references crooners: Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, and one of the most obvious influences, Scott Walker. McCaslin's sax weeps and wails along with Bowie, particularly on "Lazarus," which suggests the gothic, post-punk sorrows of the Cure crossed with the glittery schmaltz of Roxy Music. However, there is also an intensely frenetic feeling to the record and it is extremely short, clocking in at

only 41 minutes. The album's fixation on death, illness, and the hope of transcendence is at times over the top. The songs are full of bluster and defiance, as is Bowie's voice, but in other moments Bowie's creaky diction and slurs reveal a body that may not be fully in his control. We will most likely never know if all the odd bodily sounds that appear on the record were left there intentionally, but they are there and are part of the work.

Analyzing "Blackstar" as Multi-Media

Given the layers of meaning within each song, it will be expedient to concentrate on one song from this multifarious album to illustrate the kinds of signification throughout *Blackstar*.²³⁷

Musically, *Blackstar*'s title track is a rollercoaster of timbral emotion, careening from despairing persistence to desperate love and joy. Bowie's vocal tone evokes retro sci-fi textures, melancholy, and, at times, deep human warmth. The music does the same, juxtaposing mercurial currents of tension and tranquility, alternating between acute frailty and a bravado that recalls Freddy Mercury, with vocal crescendos nested inside diminuendos and musical surges layered within lengthy unwinding passages. Time itself was an issue for the song, originally more than

²³⁷ There is more to analyze and consider on the album, songs, and videos that comprise the final creative works of David Bowie than I can address in this chapter. However, I will take a moment to mention a few things that might be included in a more extensive treatment, and which other discussions have noted. There is the Elvis Presley song "Black Star" from 1960 that opens with the lines "Every man, has a black star, a black star over his shoulder, and when a man, sees his black star, he know his time, his time has come" and it goes on with Elvis pleading with the black star not to shine on him because "there's a lot of livin' I gotta do." The "ooooing" of the chorus behind Elvis is strikingly similar to the moments of "ooooing" on Bowie's "Blackstar." Bowie was a huge fan of Elvis and he felt a special connection to the King as they shared a birthday. Then there is the "sol niger" or the "black sun" found in the late alchemical works of Carl Jung and later taken up by Stanton Marlan in his book *The Black Sun: The Alchemy and Art of Darkness*, which considers the sublime nature of darkness and the unknown self. Some have pointed to the fact that some cancer lesions have been called "black stars," but this tends to occur in breast cancer. Finally there is Julia Kristeva and Leon Samuel Roudiez, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Oxford : Columbia University Press, 2006), that addresses melancholia through the context of art, literature, and philosophy. Critical to the relationship to Bowie and lateness is her discussion of how the love of a lost identity of attachment is at the core of depression.

11 minutes long: commercial realities dictated that it be cut due to iTunes standards, which require that songs for individual sale be no longer than 10 minutes. Visconti has said that the song was constructed from two separate tunes that they later combined to get the end result, stating that Bowie was determined for the song to be the singer and saw cutting it down to be a better option than having a single and an album version, which Bowie found to be over complicated.²³⁸ Thus the song was truncated.

There are thus two kinds of musical time in the song: the very present and steadfast repetition of Bowie's vocals, and the futuristic keyboard sounds mixed with the asymmetrical rhythm pattern with its odd number of attacks, leading the song forward to the future. On both tracks the rhythm repetitive but progressive and there is forward movement to the future, but in a restrictive manner. Constant and constantly, Bowie's musical past is always there: the track contains hints of "Station to Station," "Lady Grinning Soul" (with its flamenco guitar), and "Subterraneans." These "flashbacks" give the music a disjointed temporality or, more precisely, multiple temporalities at once, as in the famous Augustinian taxonomy of time and the mind:

[T]here be three times; a present of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things future." For these three do exist in some sort, in the soul, but otherwise do I not see them: present of things past, memory; present of things present, attention; present of things future, expectation.²³⁹

Bowie's musical story is impossible to tell in a linear way (it is difficult to even talk about this one song in such a way) as he is always creating a bricolage of sounds, phrases, and timbres from his past work; from other cultures; from musicians and artists outside of music; and

²³⁸ Greene, "The Inside Story of David Bowie's Stunning New Album."

²³⁹ Augustine, F. J Sheed, and Michael P Foley, *Confessions* (Indianapolis, Ind.; Lancaster: Hackett ; Gazelle Drake Academic [distributor, 2007).

from other times.²⁴⁰ Bowie resituates these borrowed elements to create new compositions, entirely different yet with little shards of sameness that allow for multivalent readings, mark the music as distinctly Bowie, and often cause the listener to feel not quite in the present. Bowie's most prevalent musical appropriations on "Blackstar" are from John Coltrane's "Olé"²⁴¹ (the rhythmic pattern is almost identical) and Annette Peacock's "I'm the One." With the former, he is inserting himself into a lineage of unique and progressive musical artists drawing on inspiration from Spain that includes Miles Davis (*Sketches of Spain*, 1960). The song is constructed from two separate Bowie compositions. The first opens and closes the track, with the second sandwiched in the middle.²⁴² The first section is the one that truly harkens back to Davis's and Coltrane's Spain, with its Phrygian ritual incantation set against the Andalusian cadences of flamenco.

"Blackstar" fades into existence (much like "Heathen (The Rays)", becoming audible at a point where you feel like you may have missed something—as though you have come late to the song. It is not dissimilar to the opening of *To Pimp a Butterfly*, where "Wesley's Theory" fades in with the sample of Boris Gardiner's "Every Nigger is a Star" —a black star, to be specific. Ben Monder's guitar playing is delicate and interweaves with McCaslin's flute playing, doubled in the mix. The flute, as the listener will come to discover, is playing a fragment of the main motif of the song. A synth drones underneath, pulsing irregularly, barely audible; then the

²⁴⁰ See Tiffany Naiman, "Art's Filthy Lesson," in *David Bowie: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Eoin Devereux, Aileen Dillane, and Martin J Power, 2015 for further discussion of Bowie's trans-historic borrowings.

²⁴¹ Coltrane had been an early and constant influence on Bowie. His jazz-loving half-brother Terry, who was both dear to and musically influential upon the young David Jones, was the first to turn him on to Coltrane. In 1999 during his commencement speech at the Berklee School of Music Bowie also mention Coltrane as a major influence upon his musical thinking.

²⁴² A classic example of this kind of musical structure is The Beatles' *magnum opus*, "A Day in the Life." Bowie often talked about how important John Lennon was to him as both a friend and a musical influence so, maybe not coincidentally, a dreamy yet morbid encore is constructed here by Bowie.

deep and foreboding bass joins. The dark moment is interrupted by a loud snare hit, escalating into an arrhythmic skitter of sputtering and slippery off-beats and silences. What grounds the song in this moment is the bass line and Bowie's vocals.

Bowie's voice provides something solid and recognizable to cling to when it first appears. The vocal rhythm and tones echo the opening bass, reinforcing the song's Spanish feel. The vocal part starts and stays on B, intoning "In the Villa of Orman/Stand a solitary candle." Here is Bowie's own ostinato, simultaneously minimalist and liturgical. But what is this liturgy? *Orman* is the Norwegian word for serpent, a symbolic creature whose actions in Genesis catalyzed the entry of death and sin into the world and that figures prominently in the occult. Bowie was well versed in hermetic ritual, having studied The Order of the Golden Dawn and toyed in the 1970s with the "sex magick" of occultist Aleister Crowley.²⁴³ A similarly occult group, The Order of the Gnostic Star, use an initiation ritual that requires the Neophyte to be "secluded with but a single candle and a skull or similar device to meditate upon." The instructions continue: "The Neophyte is charged with these words: Meditate upon your death/ Keep your death always before your eyes/ Knowledge of death should be cause for honesty in life."²⁴⁴

This ritualistic liturgical chanting is then followed by a wordless vocalise on C, D, E, C. (McCaslin's saxophone is in there too, at least doubled, undulating between C and B.) Bowie's voice is chilling, ethereal, and haunting, like a shadow trying to run away from itself in fear. This

²⁴³ The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn was founded by a group of three Free Masons in Great Britain to practice rituals of magic that would lead to spiritual development. Unlike the Masons, the Golden Dawn admitted women who were viewed as equals. At its peak in the Victorian era it included famous people such as W.B. Yeats, Bram Stoker, Florence Farr, and Arnold Bennett. See R. A. Gilbert and R. A. Gilbert, *The Golden Dawn Companion: A Guide to the History, Structure, and Workings of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn* (Wellingborough: Aquarian, 1986).

²⁴⁴ "Gnostic Star Ritual," accessed March 30, 2017, http://www.gnosticstar.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/initiation_degree1.pdf.

effect is, in part, created by a “second” voice intertwining with Bowie’s, a twin that sounds distant and otherworldly. Bowie’s original vocal performance was dubbed and layered, then transposed up a perfect fifth in a clear instance of vocal medievalism.²⁴⁵ Strata of electronic textures continue to be added, bleeping and clicking to a danceable rhythm. There is a feeling of forward progression, even as the vocals often remain on or circling the B, and the lyrical repetition serves to give a sense of impetus without movement—of a thought repeating as the person works to find the path forward.

Following the first two verses, layered sounds accumulate, leading to a climax where synthesized strings sweep in along with Bowie’s “Ah-Ah-Ah,” sliding down from D through C to a B that flattens at the end of the final “Ah.” McCaslin’s echo-ed saxophone then takes over, shifting tension out of the song with an improvisation that points back to Coltrane’s “Olé,” filled with half steps and augmented seconds, evocative of the exoticized Mediterranean where flamenco and North Africa meet. This is a moment of high significance to which I will return when analyzing the video.

The middle section, beginning at 4:22, is a totally different tune that was initially a separate song. A bright keyboard sound enters, reminiscent of the digitized Hammond organ sound of—to take a suggestive example—Prince’s “Let’s Go Crazy” (“Dearly Beloved... We are gathered here together to get through this thing called...*Life*.”) All the electronic noises, filters, and layers drop away and Bowie sings, “Something happened on the day he died, spirit rose a meter and stepped aside.”²⁴⁶ The guitar tone is clean, and the part presents similar notes to the ones at the start of the song. Bowie’s vocals clear and crisp vocals harken back to his trademark 1970s “plastic soul” voice. Yet between these clear lovely phrasings, the “ghost” Bowie voice

²⁴⁵ Tony Visconti in Whately, *David Bowie*.

²⁴⁶ *Blackstar*, LP, 2016.

that was raised up a fifth is untethered from its lower counterpart and then layered upon itself as it bursts in, repeating “I’m a Blackstar, I’m a Blackstar.”²⁴⁷ Bowie’s soulful singing continues to be juxtaposed with the oddly filtered repetition of this line, which becomes and remains the secondary motif of the song. After about a minute, a swooshing synth comes in behind the lyric “I’m not a gangster” and we shift to yet another time signature and section of the song that gives way to a more unsettling minor scale and another vocal change by Bowie; moving away from the clear timbre of the last section to a vocal with flange and slight delay effects on it, giving it an “evil” tinge. In this section, as the raised “Blackstar” voice continues to burst in, Bowie vocally portrays the Judeo-Christian God as a cruel huckster, one who “can’t answer why” he’s doing what he’s doing while reminding us that all others are “just a flash in the pan” and he is speaking as “the great I am.”²⁴⁸ These three vocal guises continue in conversation across the next few minutes of the song.²⁴⁹ The clear voice changes once again, to something in between the slightly inhuman voice and the “nice” one, singing “I can’t answer why, but I can tell you how, we were born upside down, born the wrong way round.” As the raised Bowie vocal keeps repeating “I’m a blackstar,” it is juxtaposed with descriptions of the stars it is *not* (white star, film star, wandering star). The track becomes more layered, adding first the opening “ohhh ohh ohh,” and flanged guitar echoing this, all chugging along to a very clear 4/4 drum beat; the doubled sax re-enters as the dynamics built to a crescendo. The flute returns, briefly playing the notes that lead us right back to the main motif and “the Villa of Orman.” Dramatic synthesized strings are added in this section of the song stepping up and up, the flute continuing with

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ See Tiffany Naiman, “Art’s Filthy Lesson,” in *David Bowie: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Eoin Devereux, Aileen Dillane, and Martin J Power, 2015, 179 for a detailed discussion of Bowie’s uses of vocal characters and masks.

Bowie's voice. Finally, we are back to the first song of the two that make up the track. When this music was first heard it presented the off-kilter, skittish, drum n' bass era Bowie of *Earthling*. But here, all of the song's elements converge at a slower tempo over a steady groove. It's all slowing down, a growing resignation to illness, death, and being the one fated to die (and asked to sacrifice).

In the final 30 seconds of the song, as the curtain closes, a combination of the flute and saxophone occurs fluttering around each other with short plucked guitar notes. To these ears, the effect is strongly reminiscent of the twittering woodwinds that "awake" before the curtain rises on Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. Underneath though, a droning synth B note takes the sweetness and makes it sound sour and foreboding. Then, after almost ten minutes the song suddenly concludes, cutting off, in a way that feels like it ends just a moment too soon. A practical matter, given iTunes and their rules; but also, perhaps, a musical allusion to sacrifice and premature ending.

Because no physical being can be in more than one place at a single time (excepting, of course, *The Great I Am*), the trick of presenting multiple Bowie vocals fractures time as surely as it manifests several distinct sonic Bowies. The vocal tracks and the variations on his voice give the sense of Bowie being multiply located and dislocated, present and not, in another world and not. This combined with the distinct roles played by each instrument, each following its own path, isolates each voice, both human and instrumental, in its own time and within its own stratum, like characters in a story who never meet and whose time is thus defined by their solitary journeys rather than a shared narrative. In this way the song emphasizes formally the isolation of one who is approaching death, even as the players are brought to the same place in the end.

Late Style as Mythmaking – Death as Sacrifice and Bowie’s Visual Late Style

Bowie, whose definitive anthology was called *Sound and Vision*, always included the visual as part of the experience of his music, whether sartorial choices in live performance, album artwork, or music videos. Indeed, one of Bowie’s strengths as an artist throughout his career was his curatorial prowess and his ability to find partners able to collaborate with him on these components. In making *Blackstar*, Bowie completed a final artwork that would survive long after he was gone, and one that seemed at the time quite special, filled with mysteries and revelations that would continue to unfold. In the black on black vinyl artwork, there are special surprises, such as a galaxy that appears on the album cover when it is exposed to sunlight, or the album’s star image, which turns a radiant blue under ultraviolet light. Three-D images that leap off the pages if illuminated with a flashlight in a darkened room are hidden within the record booklet.²⁵⁰ David Bowie was no stranger to the uses of film to complement music, as he had been image-making on film since 1969, over a decade before MTV made it commonplace.²⁵¹ As with “Where Are We Now?,” Bowie released “Blackstar” on November 19th, 2015, with no advance warning.²⁵² Also, as with “Where Are We Now?,” it didn’t just arrive as a single, but came with a dramatic, not to say enigmatic, music video. It is appropriate, even necessary, to analyze the

²⁵⁰ The font used on the back cover to give the duration of the songs is “Terminal.”

²⁵¹ He made the *Love You Til Tuesday* promo film in 1969 with songs from his self-titled album, though this was not released until 1984. He then worked with Mick Rock in 1972 on a series of promotional clips for his songs “John I’m Only Dancing,” “The Jean Genie,” and “Space Oddity.” He again worked with Rock in 1973 on the now famous, vibrant yet stark “Life on Mars?” “Ashes to Ashes,” his 1980 song from *Scary Monsters*, which saw Major Tom as a junkie Pierrot figure, was also pre MTV and would go on to influence the surrealist construction of New Wave videos of the 1980s. At the time, it was the most expensive music video ever made with a budget of \$500,000.

²⁵² It was known that David Bowie was creating music in some sense, as a brief snippet of an earlier version of “Blackstar” was used for the opening credits of *The Last Panthers* (2015) by Johan Renck, and was previewed on the internet on October 6th, 2015.

two together.

The music video begins with close-up shots of unidentifiable fabric, then a duct-taped boot, a helmet, a shoulder with a smiley-face patch,²⁵³ and suddenly—with the sound of Bowie’s first line, “In the Villa of Ormen”—the image cuts wide to a lunar night scene and we realize we have been seeing the crumpled form of a space suit. At 1:45 minutes in, when we first hear the Coltranesque sax assert itself, the spaceman’s helmet visor is lifted, revealing a bejeweled skull, not after the Damian Hirst fashion,²⁵⁴ but rather much more like the human skulls used in the Vajryana Buddhism of Tibet and Nepal. Bowie’s commitment to Buddhist thinking²⁵⁵ extended to his planning of his death in that he asked he be cremated “in accordance with the Buddhist rituals” and that his ashes be scattered in Bali.²⁵⁶ Rather than representing individual death or loss, in Tibetan Buddhism skulls serve as a symbol of the pivotal concept of emptiness (*sunyata*). In Buddhist ontology, emptiness is considered to be a quality of the universe. In a state of universal emptiness, experience has no inherent meaning by itself; rather, we attach meaning to what we experience, so that all events are neutral until we do something with them in our minds. This is how Bowie saw his own art as it appeared in the world. As the images of the astronaut are

²⁵³ The smiley-face badge on the astronaut’s jacket in the “Blackstar” video is the face of Gerty, the robot companion in Bowie’s son, Duncan Jones’, film *Moon* (2009).

²⁵⁴ Bowie had made reference to visual artist Damien Hirst, known as one of the famed Young British Artists of the 1990s, a number of times in interviews prior to 2000 and he is also referred to in the notes on *I. Outside*. See Tiffany Naiman's, “Art’s Filthy Lesson.” for more on that relationship.

²⁵⁵ David Bowie discovered Buddhism early in his life. He recalled in a 1997 interview with MTV News: “When I was about eighteen I studied Tibetan Buddhism for about two-three years, and I had a teacher named Chimi Tulku Rinpoche.” He went on to say that he “was within a month of having my head shaved, taking my vows, and becoming a monk.” See Nicholas Pegg’s *Nicholas Pegg, The Complete David Bowie*, (London: Titan Books, 2011).

²⁵⁶ James Barron, “David Bowie’s Will Splits Estate Said to Be Worth \$100 Million,” *The New York Times*, January 29, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/30/nyregion/david-bowies-will-splits-estate-said-to-be-worth-100-million.html>.

shown, we may decide Major Tom is in that space suit, or maybe Bowie himself, but upon the reveal, what we find is emptiness. Bowie created figures that were empty enough for those who came into contact with his music to fill in what was needed in that moment. Because we thus have a personal relationship to his figures—in a sense created by us, his fans, not Bowie—they become important to us in a more deeply personal way.

The music video contains imagery that positions “Blackstar” as an avatar of modernist late style that evokes Adorno and Said’s intransigence and difficulty—and like many such late works, it looks pointedly towards posterity, a witness to Bowie’s desire to be remembered like a Picasso, Yeats, or Beethoven. As I have noted elsewhere, it is clear to me that Bowie was “endlessly determined to insert himself into the canon of the great musical artists.”²⁵⁷ In the recent documentary, *The Last Five Years* (2017), Bowie’s longtime pianist, Mike Garson, supports this claim, extending it to the modern canon of rock:

You could feel that David wanted to be the greatest artist and the next Elvis Presley. You could feel it from every pore of his body. He would bring me up to his suite and we would watch Elvis Presley videos and Frank Sinatra, and we’d have discussions about it. He would do certain moves and would ask if it seemed right and natural. He set such icons as his goals.²⁵⁸

A vaunting ambition was revealed when he stated in 2002 that, “I would like to feel what I did actually changed the fabric of music.”²⁵⁹ Bowie lived in a world post Adorno and Said; it would

²⁵⁷ Stevenson, “David Bowie Now and Then: Questions of Fandom and Late Style,” 189.

²⁵⁸ Mike Garson in Whately, *David Bowie*.

²⁵⁹ David Bowie in Michael Apted, *Inspirations* (USA: Home Vision Entertainment, 2002).

be unlikely, voracious reader that he was, if he had not come into contact with ideas about late style and music.²⁶⁰

Bowie's late style is, in part, a musical expression of his ongoing struggle with emptiness and its relationship to death and the afterlife. The video plays with a diverse array of mythological images of life and death across cultures. A leading motive links images of an eclipsed, blackened/blacked-out star that looks much like the pupil and iris of a giant eye, perhaps symbolizing the remote Eye of Providence. Some things in the video are alive (women, a preacher) and some things are dead and emptied out (a skull, straw men in the field, a headless floating skeleton). The general import of the video's complex of images is brutally simple in a Cartesian sense: all Bowie knows is that he is alive in that moment and he is about to be dead. That's all he knows. Staying with the Buddhist interpretation for a moment, we encounter an empty skull, which may have been someone's teacher—now it can be transformed (reincarnated) into a cup, and we can drink from it, drink from a now empty skull where the consciousness of a thinker once thought it “really” existed. One ought to seek wisdom, and meditate on emptiness, on death, on rotting flesh. In the Tibetan tradition, if you do that assiduously enough you will lose attachment to it and become enlightened. Bowie put that struggle on display in the video.

To the ear alone, the middle section of “Blackstar” sounds much less intimidating and spooky, but a light/dark, good/evil binary plays out here that may be more troubling than the overtly “occult” images of the opening. Over time, faith and doubt became an obsession, it seems, for Bowie; it may have been that last question to which he predicted above his work

²⁶⁰ Though I have written in this chapter and elsewhere (see Naiman, “Art’s Filthy Lesson.”) about Bowie’s work to situate himself as artist within specific lineages and gain a place within the canon of Western Art Music, and though his desire for recognition as a master of his medium may well have been tied to his own fears about death, my analysis of his late style will not address his relative success or failure to do so. This is not only because Bowie’s hope to be his generation’s genius was not confined to his late period, but is also because the concern of my analysis is not to evaluate if he achieved his goals, but to identify the ways that Bowie’s experience of altered temporality affected the aesthetics of his work.

would eventually reduce. In the video, as Bowie begins a more soulful pop vocal, he is pictured standing as if pleading, hands clasped, head tilted to the sky. The moment has a iconically Christian feel to it, thanks to the “heavenly” rays of light pouring in from the openings between the wooden slats that frame the triangular attic in which he stands. (Christians will remember the “upstairs room” where the apostles first saw the resurrected Jesus.) This is one of Bowie’s great saccharine vocal moments, akin to “When I Live My Dream,” and “Never Let Me Down.” But the sweetness doesn’t last long, his image blurs momentarily and he voice shifts to that of the huckster. The music becomes funkier, but his voice remains on that powerful and unrelenting B-natural. Bowie’s face contorts with all his actor’s training to sarcasm, anger, and downright creepiness. His gestures reinforce the idea of an unkind and uncaring religion, represented by a dark-clad servant of an unfeeling God. The representative of the “Great I AM” who offers to “take you home” also thinks little of the short-lived people who are just “flash[es] in the pan”; he callously brushes off all human concerns. Offering no assurance of a caring god or an afterlife, death becomes a meaningless sacrifice.



Figure 3.1: Prayer full David Bowie from “Blackstar” music video (2015).



Figure 3.2: David Bowie as huckster from “Blackstar” music video (2015).

Sacrifice is as old as the history of humanity, with human sacrifice literally present in Celtic and Aztec rituals and symbolically in the well-known Abrahamic stories of sacrificial sons like Saul, David, Absalom, Jesus and (near-miss) Isaac. As with the musical texture, multiple strands of sacrificial ritual are layered upon each other in the video. It will be useful to concentrate on a very small segment of what can be teased out, specifically the choreography of the other characters in the video that surround Bowie. Immediately apparent is the odd shaking and bent wrists of the dancers both in the “upstairs room” and in certain moments when groups of plainly dressed women assemble. These women are attired in garments that look homemade, with silhouettes, hemlines, and neutral tones that make sartorial reference both to the agrarian past and to religious fundamentalism. These particular choreographed moments refer to two time periods: Bowie’s entry into the 1980s and ca.1913, when modernism arrived in music, dance, and art, with such figures as Stravinsky, Nijinsky, Stein, and Picasso.

The reference to the ‘80s comes from an allusion to Bowie’s music video for “Fashion” from 1980. As Bowie sings about a “brand new dance” that is “big and...bland/full of tension and fear,” at 39 seconds he does, what I have always called, the “Bowie bunny bop.” His hands are bent at the wrists like rabbit paws and he does a little bounce in place. About 20 seconds

later in the video, a group looking like they doing aerobics execute a slightly less graceful and exaggerated version of the same dance. Finally, 20 seconds after that, an African American man with a large mustache shakes convulsively along with this “bunny bop.” This odd dance reappears in “Blackstar,” most strikingly at 2:11. It is similar to the final man’s dance, but is performed even more vigorously and is on screen much longer, making it a somewhat nerve-racking reminiscence of the agonal convulsions that accompany death, as nerves stop getting the oxygen they need, causing rapid muscular contractions. This is the nervous system going haywire as the body shuts down; the life force, if you believe in one, slipping away.²⁶¹



Figure 3.3: David Bowie “Fashion” (1980)



Figure 3.4: Dancers in attic “Blackstar” (2015)

This convulsive agon before death references more than just Bowie’s own past. It also draws on one of the most famous dances of death in Western art: the final “Sacrificial Dance” in Vaslav Nijinsky’s choreography of Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*. The slightly spastic “bunny

²⁶¹ I would be remiss in noting that Johan Renck, the director of the video has said that David Bowie sent him a clip of an old *Popeye* cartoon and said he’d “like something like this.” Referring to the jerky motions of the background characters in the clips. See Jon Blistein and Kory Grow, “Watch David Bowie Play Blind Prophet in ‘Blackstar’ Video,” *Rolling Stone*, November 19, 2015, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/david-bowie-plays-doomed-blind-prophet-in-haunting-blackstar-video-20151119>. I’m sure this happened but this could have been just a quick visual reference, a short hand to make things easy on the dancers. Also, their movements go way beyond the standing still and shaking.

bop” dancers directly reference the stomping movements of the opening tableau of *The Rite*, “Augurs of Spring.” This allusion is even more striking during the various scenes, with the group of simply dressed young women. These sections were either shot with a red filter on the camera or an effect was added in postproduction to give these scenes their soft focused, bloody tint. At 3:10, the girls move in a circle, with one girl in the center, frozen, head bent downward—a clear reference to the “Mystic Circles of Young Girls” that determine the sacrificial victim in the *Rite*, as well as the stage picture during her subsequent “glorification.” At 3:29, we see the girls bounce-shaking in place, an obvious Nijinsky reference, and at 3:44 the young girls exit, peeling off from the circle with the same geometric precision as in Nijinsky’s choreography. After their exit, nothing remains but their footprints in the dirt. Viewers are then given a quick glimpse of a field of wheat with the same red overtones as the ritual scenes with young girls—the sacrifice has been successful, and the harvest has begun.



Figure 3.5: Circle of young girls exiting the scene “Blackstar” (2015)

As the video moves to its middle section (discussed above), we encounter the preacher version of Bowie, removed, righteous, and looking rather like the villainous Robert Mitchum in *Night of the Hunter*. The girls aren’t seen on screen for another four minutes. Instead, their story

begins to intertwine with another myth of sacrifice, that of Jesus and the two thieves between whom he was crucified. At 6:18 we are taken back to the field we only glimpsed earlier, and, in a wide shot, three figures are revealed on crosses. The music shifts and Bowie's huckster voice takes over, as the camera zooms in to reveal that the "people" on the crosses are actually straw men.²⁶² Yet they are alive, moving, grinding, and making horrific faces. The video intercuts from one sacrifice to another and they continue to blend together. When the girls return the scene is no longer drenched in red and a new woman (of color) enters, whose jewelry seems to be some type of religious vestment, marking her as distinct from the others. She carries the skull from the opening of the video and, as she displays the skull, the women shake and the chosen one bows, submitting. She places the skull on the back of the girl who was once in the middle of the circle, and who was also dancing in the attic with Bowie.



Figure 3.6: Straw men on crosses in the field "Blackstar" (2015)

At 8:38 we come back to the choreography of the young women: they hold their hands at their side, move side to side with a slight tilt to their bodies and then raise one arm straight into the air, with fists clenched tight, directly imitating the concluding moment of the *Rite's* first

²⁶² I intend to write a whole other piece on the "Blackstar" video and its relationship to T.S. Eliot's poem *The Hollow Men* (1925)—its "straw men," "dried voices," and "world end[ing] . . . whimper." For now, I will just point towards its relevance.

tableau, the violent “Dance of the Earth.” (This punching up of one arm is a leitmotif of the ballet; it occurs in the Glorification of the Chosen One, and in the Sacrificial Dance). They then momentarily rise up on their toes and then drop to the ground on all fours, and begin to shake and swoop back and forth, arms extended.²⁶³ In the end the girls seem to have summoned some sort of god/monster/creature, who heads towards the field with the straw men. The stamping and pawing motions evoke the bear-totem summoned by the Russian tribal dancers at the end of the *Rite*’s first tableau. All these myths of ritual and sacrifice merge as the video concludes, with quick edits of the creature, the crucified scarecrows, the girls dancing in a circle, the skull, and Bowie as the “button-eye figure” from earlier in the video.²⁶⁴ The image of cities from two very disparate times and places (one ancient and looking like the south of Spain or the north of Africa and the other a modern shadow of a city looming over the ancient one with its imposing skyscrapers) is held over the final droning note before there is a flash of a frame of the Bowie *Blackstar* cover, which represents Bowie’s name written in star segments.

²⁶³ The 1987 Joffrey Ballet version of *The Rite of Spring* is available on YouTube, and anyone who chooses to watch it can immediately see the physical allusions to it in “Blackstar.”

²⁶⁴ It isn’t fully relevant to my argument about Bowie’s late style and death as a meaningless sacrifice, but it is important to note this button-eye figure could represent a new manifestation of Pierrot/Petrushka, a figure Bowie had engaged numerous times in his career. His first acting role was in as Cloud in the 1967 *Pierrot in Turquoise* a play for which he wrote and performed all the songs. Nine years later, during a May 5th interview with Jean Rock for the *Daily Express*, Bowie proclaimed, “I’m Pierrot. I’m Everyman. What I’m doing is theatre, and only theatre. . . What you see on stage isn’t sinister. It’s pure clown. I’m using myself as a canvas and trying to paint the truth of our time on it. The white face, the baggy pants - they’re Pierrot, the eternal clown putting over the great sadness of 1976.” Then, in 1980 he did a photo shoot as Pierrot and those images made up the cover of *Scary Monsters* released that same year. He brought that version of Pierrot to life in the music video for “Ashes to Ashes” off the same album. where he played across from Pierrot and w



Figure 3.7: City views from the music video “Blackstar” (2016)



Figure 3.8: “The Glorification of the Chosen One” from the Joffrey Ballet’s *Rite of Spring* (1987)



Figure 3.9: Girls in circle fists raised “Blackstar” (2015)



Figure 3.10: Monster/bear/totem figure in field “Blackstar” (2015)



Figure 3.11: Bear/totem figures in Joffrey Ballet *Rite of Spring* (1987)

It is well documented that Bowie found Stravinsky to be a source of inspiration. On more than one occasion he suggested that his long time keyboard player do something in the vein of some Stravinsky piece²⁶⁵ and he named a 1960s recording of *The Rite* as a piece of music “that changed his life.”²⁶⁶ He said that the “ostinato theme for the four tubas is as powerful a riff as any found in rock.”²⁶⁷ Note that this is the music playing during the “Procession of the Oldest and Wisest One.” Bowie might well have been reminded of the rock’n’roll possibilities of the work by the immense public celebration as it reached its 100-year anniversary in 2013. Over and above of his admiration for Stravinsky, Bowie undoubtedly chose to reference *The Rite of Spring* because of its connection to musical embodiment, sacrifice, and religious ritual. The ballet

²⁶⁵ The story goes that in creating the incredible piano break in "Battle for Britain," on *Earthling*, Bowie challenged Mike Garson to play based on "the idea from a piece of Stravinsky wrote called "Ragtime for Eleven Instruments." See J. D. Considine, "Fi Interview: David Bowie," *Fi - The Magazine of Music & Sound*; *San Francisco, Calif.*, October 1997, <http://search.proquest.com/iimp/docview/1541626>. p.37.

²⁶⁶ David Bowie, "David Bowie's Favorite Albums," *Vanity Fair*, November 20, 2003, <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2016/04/david-bowie-favorite-albums>.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

depicts a sacramental sacrifice in which a young girl is chosen to dance herself to death supposedly to ensure spring's arrival. The girl's selection is completely random: she happens to stumble as the group of girls play a simple dance game in a circle, which makes her "the chosen one." It is a fate that to any modern audience is cruel and unnecessary, since we know that without her death spring still would have arrived. The premiere of *The Rite of Spring* in 1913 is still one of the most mythologized episodes in 20th-century modernism, with the ballet's riotous opening a harbinger of things to come, including the horrors of WWI, during which millions of young men would similarly sacrifice their lives at the command of their elders. In the ballet, as in trench warfare, the individual's death serves no purpose, even when it is culturally construed as meaningful and necessary.²⁶⁸

In "Blackstar" and its accompanying video, Bowie asks whether it is possible to find meaning in death, a meaning that does not prove false. Bowie offers no clarity on what that meaning might be, if one exists. Rather, he points to all the ways in which really powerful myths of various origins are interpenetrated with that question.

The Progression of the Final Songs

Because "Blackstar" includes moments of bodily failure, and the inability to articulate that with language, it makes sense that "Lazarus" would be the song to follow it on the album. The song's opening repeated-note figure is a slower, worn out version of The Cure's "The Big Hand" (1992), a song about human submission and reverence in the face of an unalterable and often

²⁶⁸ Tamara Levitz's, "The Chosen One's Choice," in *Beyond Structural Listening?: Postmodern Modes of Hearing*, ed. Andrew Dell'Antonio (University of California Press, 2004) does an extraordinary job of arguing for the multisensory construction of musical meaning by attending to Nijinsky's choreography of the "Sacrificial Dance" and interpreting it as a "physical expression of a critical spirit of opposition" (72). Levitz's work in this essay has significantly informed my readings of Bowie's work, as he was a musical artist who was also heavily invested in bodily gesture and the visual aspect of meaning making with sound.

uncaring bigger power and the things we will accept in order not to feel alone. We have here a sick man quoting The Cure, while evoking the biblical story of Lazarus of Bethany, a man brought back from the dead by Jesus—an amusing and playful irony. Bowie and Robert Smith, The Cure’s vocalist and guitar player, were friends. Smith had played at Bowie’s 50th birthday, performing “Quicksand,” and “The Last Thing You Should Do.” “Lazarus” has the timbre, mood, and stylings of The Cure circa *Disintegration* (1989), with its warming reverb and overdubs. Other intertextualities abound: the bass when it first arrives is reminiscent of Joy Division’s “Insight.” And, unlikely though it may seem, I also find many allusions to Lynyrd Skynyrd’s “Freebird,” not just lyrically but also in the way in which the song builds to a fervent climax, supported at times by similar vocal rhythm and melody figures. This is especially noticeable when the McCaslin saxophone solo is repositioned to be considered as one might a guitar solo. When viewed alongside the play *Lazarus*, in production prior to the album, I can see how “Freebird” makes referential sense. “Lazarus,” written for the musical of the same name, is told from the perspective of an alien, Thomas Newton, the play’s protagonist, who is trapped on earth and unable to die, while longing for his love. The play is a sequel to *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976), in which Bowie played the alien himself. “Freebird” and the play both address themes of separation and isolation from loved ones as the result of things that the character singing thinks cannot be changed. The lyric, “If I leave here tomorrow/Will you still remember me?” takes on a deeply melancholic aspect when mapped onto Bowie’s situation.²⁶⁹ To go one step further, Lynyrd Skynyrd is a “death-haunted” band, as so many of its members died young—some of them literally “falling to earth” in a plane crash.

²⁶⁹ *Pronounced 'Lěh-'Něrd "Skin-'Něrd" (MCA, 1973).*

The music video for “Lazarus,” although it was made first, can be perceived as a continuation of that for “Blackstar.” The video opens with a close-up on wardrobe doors that then open, reminiscent of both Narnia and the quotation about death being the sound of opening doors from the video for “Bring Me the Disco King.” From the doors and darkness emerges the girl chosen for death from the “Blackstar” video. She lies and crouches under a hospital bed occupied by the button-eyed Bowie. As an un-blindfolded Bowie struggles to write and then frantically scribbles while time is slipping away, the bejeweled skull sits on his desk. When not in the loose-fitting white shirtdress and button blindfold in the hospital bed, Bowie wears an outfit that is the same white-stripe painted shirt and pants he wore in a 1974 photo shoot with Stephen Shapiro in Los Angeles that appears on *Station to Station*. In the 1974 image, Bowie is on the floor, where he has sketched the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, a mystical diagram meant to represent the process of divine creation and the division between the physical universe occupied by mankind and the energy that created it. This photo shoot, the only other time this outfit was seen, has the diagram sketched wildly on the walls, and clearly on the floor.²⁷⁰ In both the “Lazarus” video and the *Station to Station* shoot, Bowie holds writing implements, likening individual self-expression to larger attempts to map the unknowable. At the end, Bowie shakes like the dancers in “Blackstar” and *The Rite of Spring*, like agonal convulsions as he backs away from his desk into the wardrobe, closing the door.

²⁷⁰ Here readers can return to Harold Bloom and his gnostic take on the Kabbalah in *Kabbalah and Criticism* (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2005). The viewer is also directed once again to Bloom’s anxiety of influence and Bowie being his own precursor and his dying self as belated—and—perhaps weak.



Figure 3.12: David Bowie (1976); David Bowie from “Lazarus” (2016); David Bowie, drawing the Tree of Life (1976)

The next song on the album, “’Tis a Pity She Was a Whore,” begins with a deep breath from Bowie, then a mouth-smacking noise, and then yet another inhale before the drums kick in.²⁷¹ The breaths remain, repeating as part of the rhythm of the song, though pulled down in the mix, persisting until Bowie begins to sing and reappearing, each time, just before he sings the line, “’Tis a pity she was a whore.” Clearly, this bodily sound was an aesthetic choice; the breath is clipped, sampled, and placed at the start of the track and reused as a sonic element thereafter. At four minutes into the song his vocals leap into falsetto and the dynamics of the song seem to take their toll on Bowie for a moment: his voice is further back in the mix, and the word “whore” barely makes it out of his mouth, sounding more like a wet gurgle than articulate language. After this messy vocalization, Bowie sings no more words, only hoots and woos until the song ends. As one journalist states, “the album’s contribution to the vexing question of human existence lies in the way in [*sic*] Bowie struggles to articulate the human struggle to

²⁷¹ On the demo of the song Bowie created, the start of that demo kicks off with a more mechanized version of a push of air that repeats within a barrage of other industrial noises.

articulate.”²⁷² The strategic use of breath, which emphasizes the role the body plays in our agency and the devolution of control over language in this song, which in the end resorts to vocalizations instead of words, would seem to signify a loss of bodily control, of the language to even speak of it, and of agency in the face of mortality.

One example of the extra work required to discern the songs on *Blackstar* comes from “Girl Loves Me.” On this track, Bowie captures what it is like to be in chronic pain and heavily medicated. His voice shouts, echoes, and drifts, while the vocals are left isolated by instrumentation that is sparse and dissonant. Its rhythm stutters, skids out, and disappears at times. The electronic sounds in “Girl Loves Me” seem unsystematic and sound as though they are from multiple eras of synthesizers. Perhaps most evocative of the disorientation caused by pain and medication is the languages used in the lyrics. Unless you are a London-based gay man of a certain age who is devoted to the works of Anthony Burgess or Stanley Kubrick, effort and time are needed to translate the song “Girl Loves Me,” written mostly in the Nadsat slang of *A Clockwork Orange* and the Polari patois of the gay disco era. Both languages rely on English for some words and syntax, but neither are readily understood by most native English speakers. Both were also languages used by specific populations (one real and one fictional) that indicated membership in an exclusive group. By using these insider languages, Bowie allows pain-free listeners to experience a common result of intense pain—the feeling that one cannot process language or get the right meaning from it, even when it seems eerily familiar.²⁷³ He is revealing that the cognitive ability to process and respond to language with ease belongs to a privileged group, the healthy and pain-free. There are other reasons he could also be using these languages,

²⁷² Tamara Levitz, “The Chosen One’s Choice,” in *Beyond Structural Listening?: Postmodern Modes of Hearing*, ed. Andrew Dell’Antonio (University of California Press, 2004), 85–87.

²⁷³ Wilson D, Williams M, and Butler D, “Language and the Pain Experience,” *Physiother. Res. Int. Physiotherapy Research International* 14, no. 1 (2009): 56–65.

including, referencing himself once again, this time the gender-bending alien Bowie of the early 1970s.

With all the overt bleakness on the record, the last two songs conclude the record in a peaceful and less menacing manner. The sweetness of “Dollar Days” stands out and flows in after the chaos and confusion of “Girl Loves Me.” It is similar to the way the opening of “Great Gig in the Sky” by Pink Floyd quietly rises following the crushing and chaotic “Time” on *Dark Side of the Moon*. “Dollar Days” offers a moment of respite, like a temporary remission.

The final track on *Blackstar*, “I Can’t Give Everything Away,” opens with a sampled harmonica that David Bowie played on the instrumental song “A New Career in a New Town,” found on 1979’s *Low*. The older song’s title and upbeat feeling reflects a hopefulness that Bowie’s move back to Europe from the United States would be a positive one. The sonic split between Euro synths and the folksy, if not outright Americana-style harmonica and guitar feel like a moment of blending and evolution towards something new for Bowie, his goal for the albums that would later be grouped in the “Berlin Trilogy” (*Low*, *Heroes*, and *Lodger*) and his work following that immediate period. “Bowie’s own attitude to this was that his aim for *Low* (and beyond) was to create a hybrid of European electronic-music techniques and US rhythm and blues.” But why reference this specific moment here, so boldly and obviously? The positioning of the sampled harmonica points a Bowie fan to a specific and recognizable moment of change, the gateway to some of his most critically acclaimed work. It also brings a hopefulness to the rhythm of the new song, which is countered by the opening line: “I know something is very wrong.” A line that would come to mean a great deal more to the public a few days after the record was released. Bowie shapes the musical dynamics with his characteristic croon. The lyrics of the final track, take us back to the porous nature of his music and his desire to have his

artwork engage us: “saying no but meaning yes/This is all I ever meant/That’s the message that I sent.” This is a goodbye different from “Blackstar” or “Lazarus,” having the characteristics of a letter. Self-contained but demanding a response, it derives meaning only from the communication between the author and the audience.

Epitaph and Legacy

"Everyone views everything – past, future and present – in a different way. So I've always been intimidated by this idea of absolutes. There can only be one person's absolute, one person's end result, one person's history."²⁷⁴

“It’s been an incredibly full life and apart from the drugs in the 1970s. I think little of it has been wasted. I’ve been able to harness every moment. I’m a really lucky chap.”²⁷⁵

It is always tempting, though not always fruitful, to evaluate an artist’s final works alongside another’s. Through the many times I have now listened to *Blackstar* and watched the videos made as part of the work, beyond Eliot’s *The Hollow Men* that I mentioned earlier, I have continually been reminded of “Under Ben Bulben” by William Butler Yeats. The two works differ, of course—*Blackstar* lacks any sort of nationalism, nor does it provide an epitaph, which “Under Ben Bulben” did quite literally. Bowie, like Yeats, called out various styles from the historical periods of his medium and particular practitioners he admired, gathering them about him. Both works assert that art has meaning for the living, even in the face of death. As Nick Stevenson writes, “Bowie is also pointing towards the argument that even in our final stages or when confronting ourselves in our darkest hours, we remain creatures who require poetic narratives.”²⁷⁶ Where Yeats seems sure that art could help usher souls to God, Bowie has no such

²⁷⁴ David Bowie 2014.

²⁷⁵ David Bowie. Dir. Whatley, *The Last Five Years*, 2017.

²⁷⁶ Stevenson, “David Bowie Now and Then: Questions of Fandom and Late Style,” 289.

certainty; however, his belief in the affective power of art and the value of attempt self-expression remain unshaken and *Blackstar* is the result and an expression of that belief.

Blackstar is a powerful and heart-wrenching album, and Bowie offers no happily ever after. Moreover, the album not only has songs about mortality, depression, love, and is filled with a bleak tension and anxiety, that is different than what Bowie has expressed through his music before. The record is the story of a man losing the thing that matters most to him, unable to do anything about it, and feeling regret for not living a longer life for his family and himself—the story of a man who is losing everything at the fading of his own heartbeat. While other albums have been about death, dying, and depression, *Blackstar* revolves around fear and loss in ways that make people cringe and weep. It functions as a short story with an unexpected ending that is so heartbreaking it is beautiful. The record is chaotic, filled with fragments, allusions, and a byzantine layering of puzzles that will surely generate thousands more words of analysis in the coming years.

Blackstar summarizes and in some ways encapsulates the history of Bowie's canon. However, as I have noted in previous work on Bowie, his retrospective elements are not just personal, sentimental, and nostalgic moments evoking a desire to cling to his past.²⁷⁷ Instead, they also intentionally evoke memory and use retrospective musical moments and quotation as part of an act or a process of both commenting upon the present and looking ahead to the future by considering the past. For Bowie, the tools of retrospection are used to point towards the hope of a future that is assumed to be there, even when he and we know it is a future in which he may not be participating in a bodily form. This is different than simple nostalgia, the search for

²⁷⁷ See Naiman's, "Art's Filthy Lesson," and "When Are We Now?: Walls and Memory in David Bowie's Berlins."

connection to the past and a desire for a kind of lost authenticity or better time. This attempt to reach across time, to participate in the future through art, is an essential difference in Bowie's work as compared to the others whom I consider in these pages. Bowie is trying to reconcile time, death, and his legacy, as in his early work, but this kind of artistic formulation is much more palpable and clear in "Blackstar" and "Lazarus," which I believe has to do with their introduction to an audience along with a visual component.²⁷⁸ Adorno writes that "late style does not admit the definitive cadences of death; instead, death appears in a refracted mode, as allegory" because art, unlike the artist, is not mortal.²⁷⁹ This is useful in explaining what Bowie did across his final four records –particularly in *Blackstar*, where Bowie is counting on art's immortality.

²⁷⁸ See Naiman, "Art's Filthy Lesson." for a discussion of Bowie's concern with his legacy within the musical canon.

²⁷⁹ Said, *On Late Style*, 24.

CHAPTER FOUR

Selling Sex From Over the Hill, Madonna Lives to Tell

When I was a teenager in the 1980s, Madonna was an unavoidable cultural force, dominating the airwaves and MTV. An accidental byproduct of a reader having persevered this far may be the emergence of a sense of who I was in my youth. To state it explicitly, I took myself *very* seriously and endeavored to let my musical tastes demonstrate my intellect, difference, and discernment. This meant that the music I listened to was music that I deemed to be decidedly political, literary, and underground. I would have never, ever have (willingly) listened to Madonna, who seemed to me too frivolous because she was talking about love and sex. However, as I moved into my twenties, when Madonna released her album *Erotica* (1992) and her *Sex* (1992) book, I began to appreciate the political stance she was taking through her artistry with which she was treating sexual taboos, religion, and female desire across media forms. I had always appreciated bands that had pushed the envelope in some way and I began to see that Madonna's songs had political potential that could appeal to a broader audience. Many of her songs appeared to me to advance female empowerment and sexual liberation, while questioning traditional means of controlling women's behavior. For example "Erotica" with its tight, restrictive rhythm, is an S&M ode to female domination and desire. "Human Nature," off her follow up record to *Erotica*, proclaimed that Madonna wasn't "sorry" for the controversy she had caused over *Sex* and *Erotica* and that sex is "human nature" as she whispered throughout the song the reminder to "express yourself, don't repress yourself."²⁸⁰ Also in 1992 Madonna launched her own multimedia company, Maverick, further increasing my respect for her as I saw

²⁸⁰ *Erotica* (Los Angeles, Calif.: Maverick Recording Co.1992).

the control she took over every facet of her career.²⁸¹ It caused me to question my own biases and those of the journalists and audiences who continued to denigrate Madonna in gendered ways, diminishing her accomplishments and accusing her of sleeping her way up to (and down from) the top. Despite decades of self-actualized success, negative media and popular opinions about Madonna have become ever more harsh as she has aged.

At this point, Madonna has been a pop artist for almost as long as David Bowie, with Madonna's career spanning 35 years and Bowie's 40.²⁸² Only a few women in pop have been active longer, and such longevity is especially rare for women, who are often simply not considered marketable by those in the music industry or "believable" by fans and are therefore not allowed to continue as pop musicians after they are no longer young. Consider, for example, thirty-five year old Britney Spears, 23 years Madonna's junior, who is often critically figured as "washed up" and too old to still be performing pop music.²⁸³ Even pop stars like Madonna, who has proven to be commercially successful decades into a career, face distribution challenges because of the audience that they are perceived as able to attract. In 2015, George Ergatoudis, Head of Music on BBC1, decided that Madonna's first single off *Rebel Heart* (2015), "Living

²⁸¹ Maverick was a joint venture between Madonna, Frederick DeMann, Veronica Dashev, and Time Warner. The record label arm of the company released five multi-platinum Madonna records and helped shape female voices of the 1990s with the release of Alanis Morissette's *Jagged Little Pill* (1995), which was the best-selling record of the decade. By releasing *Plantation Lullabies* (1993), Maverick supported and launched the career of Meshell Ndegeocello, who helped spark the neo-soul movement and provided new representations of intersecting black, queer, and female identities.

²⁸² David Bowie could technically be considered a recording artist for 50 years however, he took a decade off from recording and touring between 2003 and 2013.

²⁸³ Chris DeVille, "Till The World Ends: Britney Spears And The Extended Shelf Life Of The Modern Pop Star," *Stereogum*, August 25, 2016, <http://www.stereogum.com/1895189/till-the-world-ends-britney-spears-and-the-extended-shelf-life-of-the-modern-pop-star/franchises/the-week-in-pop/>; "Is Britney Spears Washed Up?," accessed May 24, 2017, http://m.nzherald.co.nz/your-views/news/article.cfm?c_id=1501154&objectid=10463127.

for Love,” would receive no airtime. The decision, made by a 46-year-old white man, was based solely on her age and the age of her perceived audience: “The vast majority of people who like Madonna, who like her music now, are over 30 and frankly, we’ve moved on from Madonna.”²⁸⁴ This is based on ageist assumptions that Madonna’s contribution to popular music is ineluctably past—and thus could no longer appeal to a new, younger fan base. BBC1 executives are, by extension, rejecting not only Madonna, but Madonna fans, who they perceive to be middle-aged and without enough years of prime purchasing power to be attractive targets for potential advertisers and to cultivate as loyal listeners. Yet, Radio 1 continues to regularly play tracks from aging male artists, such as those by the 49-year-old Damon Albarn’s Gorillaz. This is part of a larger trend of older males being treated as more marketable and appealing to much younger age groups.

By and large, Western cultural constructions of gender allow greater latitude to aging men than women by allowing them to continue enacting identities not eclipsed by age far longer than for women. This is in part tied to gendered ideals of beauty, where social constructions of masculine good looks can accommodate a few wrinkles and we are assured that flecks of grey lends dignity, but women are provided endless expensive and time consuming ways both surgical and non to maintain the desired freshly pubescent look for as long as possible. Men, therefore, are deemed sexually desirable decades after their female contemporaries have ceased to be so considered. Though not exempt from ageism or ableism, men face lighter consequences, since their worth is not tied as strongly to the *look* of their bodies. Because constructions of gender, age, and ability are systems of representation that privilege some (male, young, able) bodies over others (female, old, disabled) and characterize these perceived deficiencies as “problem[s] to be

²⁸⁴ Daniel Kreps, “Madonna Accuses BBC Radio of ‘Ageism’ After Song Ban,” *Rolling Stone*, March 14, 2015, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/madonna-accuses-bbc-radio-of-ageism-after-song-ban-20150314>.

addressed by normalization procedures.”²⁸⁵ Women face increased risk as age and incapacity compound the affects of an already stigmatized position.²⁸⁶ Consequently, visible signs of age, illness, or disability are permitted for men far more than for women, who are asked to hide the effects of age or incapacity.

Thus ageing female popular musicians must publicly perform their age or illness in different ways from men, and which do not fit all that well within the framework of late style as I have formulate here. There is another book to be written about “survivors”: women who have fallen ill, but who do *not* sound illness or disability and do not manifest an untimely subjectivity. For these women, it is about resilience, strength, and perseverance in the face of physical changes, grounded in the present. Gloria Estefan recovered from a broken back with little fuss; Sharon Jones made some of the most powerful and cohesive music of her career after her diagnosis of cancer; Karen Carpenter and Amy Winehouse sounded fantastic on record even as they lost battles with anorexia, addiction, and depression; and “tough” women like Melissa Etheridge and Sheryl Crowe performed while ill, in order to make statements about resilience in the face of breast cancer. Other women, especially those situated in genres that are aligned with aesthetic alternatives to the pop mainstream such as punk or folk, are freer to show their age: Joni Mitchell, Joan Baez, and Patti Smith, who are allowed to embody the wise crone persona. For many women, especially those who are publicly sexualized figures, ageing is a battle to maintain a specific body image fought using weapons of costume and modification. These women, exemplified by Cher and Dolly Parton, not only utilize extreme methods such as plastic surgery to appear more youthful than they are, but also incorporate that into their performance as

²⁸⁵ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Feminist Disability Studies,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30, no. 2 (January 1, 2005): 1559.

²⁸⁶ Thomas J Gerschick, “Toward a Theory of Disability and Gender,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 25, no. 4 (2000): 1263–68.

a sort of camp aspect—following pioneers like comedians Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers in making themselves the butt of the joke for an audience “in the know.” The role of the “diva: allows critics and fans space to let pop performers such as Cher and Dolly Parton to continue performing as they age.²⁸⁷ (There are a few pop divas older than Madonna: Cher, Dolly Parton, Diana Ross, Aretha Franklin...and the list peters out.) Mitchell Morris explains that a diva is “a woman who struggles to overcome ineradicable marks of a stigmatized identity . . . To become a goddess, she must first appear as a victim.”²⁸⁸ Age is always a condition of the diva as it marks the timespan of her career, thus showing her persistence in spite of increasing age. Diva-dom²⁸⁹ is a deliberate calculated performance, at times self-deprecating but always highlighting the struggle for success and the persistence required to triumph. In this way, divas are simultaneously reinforcing constructions of female value associated with youth, beauty, and fertility, and conforming to societal demands that older women acknowledge that they are old.

While a thorough investigation of this important gendered distinction is beyond the scope of the present study, this chapter will consider the situation of Madonna, specifically because she is not decaying, she is not singing about mortality or changing genres to one that is less youth-centric. Madonna, undeniably works to maintain a specific image, and differs from the other

²⁸⁷ See Abigail Garner’s “Grit, Glitter and Glamour: Tracing Authenticity in the Aging Artifice of Dolly Parton,” in *Aging Femininities: Troubling Representations* edited by Josephine Mary Dolan and Estella Tincknell, (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012). for further description of the balancing act that Dolly Parton performs between age authenticity and artifice.

²⁸⁸ Mitchell Morris. *The Persistence of Sentiment: Display and Feeling in popular Music of the 1970s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 170.

²⁸⁹ The while the terms diva/divo has been used to describe singers of both genders at the height of their powers and cultural influence, typically within operatic traditions, this differs from the construction within popular music where the term is applied at a time when the vocal organ has already been affected by age. For an impassioned and empathetic account of a tenor’s career from student to unknown hopeful to exploited cash cow to sublime deity at the height of his powers to celebrity and headliner to the final, graceful performance in spite of contracted range and vocal decline, see Hector Berlioz and Jacques Barzun, “How a Tenor Revolves Around the Public,” in *Evenings with the Orchestra* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

above-mentioned women in that she neither performs resilience in the face of physical tolls; nor does she turn her performance of self into an exercise in camp. If a female artist wants to continue performing after youth, the public is comfortable with either maintaining a youthful presentation with a camp aspect, performing a typical resilience narrative, or a “crone” persona—all of which acknowledge the effects of age. Madonna (so far) does none of these and her later style is, therefore, one of resistance. She labors to maintain her body in ways that not only keep up the appearance of youth, but also mitigate her embodied experience of age. But this comes at a cost as audiences and critics find her to be uncanny and untimely.

Madonna devotes an impressive amount of time, labor, and money to exercise, vocal training, and beauty regimens that have allowed her to keep fulfilling pop’s standards of youthful performance and appearance, but she does not invite the audience into her struggle.²⁹⁰ Madonna instead demands that her audiences relate to her precisely as they did when she was young, appraising her music and performance without regard to her age. This demand confronts cultural assumptions about what it is to age appropriately as a woman and creates a feeling in the audience that what Madonna is doing is untimely and inappropriate. Diane Railton and Paul Watson discuss this in “Madonna and the Drag of Aging,” and call on Mary Russo’s work to explain this discomfort:

Madonna “drags out” the performance of aging precisely by being out of, or against, time; that is to say, behaving in ways Mary Russo identifies as “deemed to be a mistake in a normative systemization of time” (Russo 199, 21). This is what Russo has also called “the scandal of anachronism” insofar as “not acting one’s age” is not only seen as inappropriate and embarrassing, but more interestingly, “dangerous” in the sense that it leaves the female subject open to “ridicule, contempt, pity and scorn” (Russo 199,21).²⁹¹

5/30/17 4:17 PM²⁹⁰ There is plentiful speculation about whether or not Madonna has had plastic surgery. Madonna has never made any public statements to confirm or deny these claims.

²⁹¹ Abigail Gardner, *Rock On’: Women, Ageing and Popular Music* (Routledge, 2016), 198.

I include Madonna in this study specifically because she is *not* decaying, nor is she singing about mortality or switching to a less youth-focused genre; consequently, she is dismissed as a “hag” who should just...go away. The very fact that Madonna must work hard to perform as Madonna, the Queen of Pop, but does not allow that work to become part of her narrative is an assertion of personal identity outside of age.

Measure her persona against two seemingly incompatible standards: how a pop singer should look, sound, or behave, and how a 57-year-old white woman should conduct herself while ageing appropriately. These contradictory demands raise important questions, addressed in this chapter, about western popular culture’s relationship to its aging icons, particularly women over 35, and how they manage to negotiate its norms more or less successfully. After all, despite the constant call from critics that she retire, Madonna has persisted and continues to persist, and this persisting itself, not the sexual provocations of her youth, may represent her greatest challenge to the genre of pop and its culture.

Madonna’s current career denies and problematizes the prevailing cultural ageist narrative of decline that frames middle-aged women as sexual non-starters. Through the continued performance of an empowered and commodifiable sexuality into middle age, she has destabilized and disrupted the expectations put on a female pop music performer. As a dancer and singer, she puts an extraordinary amount of labor into being Madonna—a pop star with the fitness, stamina, and voice to perform an athletically demanding show nightly. Yet critics often denigrate this professionally necessary labor in gendered terms as an aging woman’s desperate attempt to maintain youthfulness. The double-binds Madonna once faced, as discussed by Susan McClary in *Feminine Endings* (1991) have now, as she ages, become triple-binds. Perhaps even more than rock, pop is a genre associated with the bubbly vitality of youth and youthful

sexuality, particularly for female performers. One can thus argue that the public nature of Madonna's aging and her continued performance of sexuality and athleticism beyond youth subvert the genre's social norms in ways that align her artistry with theories of queer time (Edelman 2004; Halberstam 2007; Freeman 2010; McCallum 2011; Dinshaw 2012) that affix to aging. Her self-regulation, meant to facilitate her art and align her image with pop norms, exposes both the performative nature of aging publicly in pop and the way that such aging is regulated by gendered discourses of normative embodiment, vocality, and conduct.

This chapter takes a fresh look at Madonna as a case study of (1) the way structures of power and value regulate women's labor and artistry in contemporary popular music, and (2) the way this valuation and regulation affects female artists' ability to deploy a distinct late style. Madonna is a controversial and difficult person who both enrages and inspires feminists. She has built a career on provoking conversations around sex and sexuality, problematizing the normative ideals of heterosexual relationships and bringing elements of gay culture to the mainstream while simultaneously using that sexuality to sell albums, tickets, and merchandise. Litanies of books, dissertations, articles, and essays have been devoted to analyzing, critiquing, vilifying, and commending her. The aim of this chapter, then, is not to go over her career as a whole, nor to engage with long-standing controversies over her perceived appropriations of homosexual, black, Latino, and Asian cultures. Rather, my intention is to examine Madonna—her music, voice, and performances—with an eye and ear towards the following key questions: How does Madonna, still performing—and performing *sexually*—inform, change, or reject the ways age is conceived in the broader Western culture? What might these negotiations mean for feminist and musicological discourses around intersectionality, beauty, desire, performance, and voice?

“What it Feels Like for a Girl”: How Discourses of Misogyny, Sexism, and Ageism Frame Madonna

Time and time again, Madonna has been dismissed by scholars, critics, and fellow artists alike as someone who “can’t sing and can’t dance” (Greer, 2006), a “boring, lazy, slut” (Kane, 2012), “vile, hideous, horrible human being with no redeeming qualities” (George, 2006), “a pop slut and diva of degradation” (Peyser, 2016), “a fucking idiot” (Deadmau5, 2012), and “closer to organized prostitution than anything else” (Morrissey, 1986). Elton John has gone as far as publicly calling Madonna “a cunt” who “looks like a fucking fairground stripper.”²⁹² The opinions voiced in these quotations are expressed with a vehemence informed by pervasive, virulent misogyny. While to dislike Madonna or her work is not alone evidence of misogyny, analysis of the broader discourse surrounding female public figures reveals these statements to be based in prejudice, especially when compared to critiques of their male counterparts.

Women’s behavior is more regulated and judged more harshly, which is consistent across gender and sexuality, and is often manifested as unconscious bias in women.²⁹³ Even now in 2017 women’s lives are so utterly devalued that these nasty slurs inundate the press and social media without anyone flagging the presence of hate speech, so pervasive is woman-hating in our culture. This bias is not confined to casual commentary, but affects every aspect of the way that Madonna is viewed, from motivation to business choices to her use of sexuality in her performances.

The intensified criticism and attempts at regulation to which women are exposed can be seen in a simple comparison of the discourse around Madonna and her male contemporary Billy

²⁹² Elton John. “An Interview with Elton John” Interview by Molly Meldrum. *Sunday Night*. 2012.

²⁹³ This is a wider phenomenon that affects women across industries, not just in entertainment. Studies have shown that women are judged more rigidly than men in situations such as in evaluating female applicants for jobs, where studies show women (or those who do not correct for it) evaluating women applicants lower than men, pretty much at the same rate that men (or those who do not correct for it) do.

Idol. Both Madonna and Idol adorned the cover of *Rolling Stone* in 1985, Idol looking like a male version of 1983 Madonna but wearing even less, while Madonna’s cover that year—and all the rest of the covers she did over the next 25 years—focused on her face. (Earlier in 1985 she posed for a now infamous *Penthouse* cover, which may have been an inspiration for the Idol *Rolling Stone* cover.)



Figure 4.1: The cover images showing the various displays of skin between Idol and Madonna and the large number of crucifixes worn by Idol who was not criticized for this act at all.

Berated by everyone from the Roman Catholic Church to the music press in the 1980s, Madonna was constantly critiqued for wearing crucifixes and showing off her navel, but the Billy Idol cover received mass praise and no outcries from the Vatican.²⁹⁴

²⁹⁴ In 1989 her video for the song “Like a Prayer” received attention from The Vatican calling the video heresy and blasphemy, and demanding that it be banned with a statement that came directly from the Pope, who wanted Madonna banned from appearing in Italy. Pepsi, which had entered into a \$5 million endorsement deal with Madonna, backed out of the contract and pulled the commercial in which she debuted the song after played only one time. See Joanna Katherine Love-Tulloch, “‘The Choice of a New Generation’: ‘Pop’ Music, Advertising, and Meaning in the MTV Era and Beyond” 2012, <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/241200h2>.

The discourse in response to young male performances and bodies differs from the discussion of female ones in a way that may seem stark, but the reception gap becomes a chasm when dealing with aging public figures. In such cases, sexism and ageism intersect to create intensified scrutiny and regulation. Billy Idol still gets headlines like “Billy Idol, 57, defies his age as he performs topless in surprise show at small bar” and “at a fit 58, he still looks pretty much like the bad boy rocker you watched on MTV.”²⁹⁵ Idol, on tour to support his latest record *Kings and Queens of the Underground*, removed his shirt each night to perform his 1983 hit “Rebel Yell,” and at the 2014 concert I attended both men and women cheered this burlesque moment. Idol’s strip tease aligns with his past shows and was interpreted as an appropriate continuation of his performance, despite his age. In contrast, when Madonna sings and dances, rearranging old numbers as well as performing new songs, her very right to appear on stage is questioned through media accounts such as, “Falling off the stage, Madonna, is God's way of telling you you're too old to cavort like a hooker.”²⁹⁶

Prince, another of Madonna’s contemporaries, also received public acclaim for his endurance, sexual displays, and virility. About the physical aspect of what turned out to be his last tour, it was noted, “At 56, Prince can dance better than you ever will, so why even try.”²⁹⁷ His body in motion was valued as something extraordinary; as one critic hyperventilated:

²⁹⁵ Sarah Fitzmaurice, “Billy Idol, 57, Defies His Age as He Performs Topless on Stage,” *Daily Mail Online*, accessed May 4, 2017, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2295748/Billy-Idol-57-defies-age-performs-topless-stage.html>; CBS News October 5, 2014, and 10:04 Am, “Billy Idol Still Has the Swagger,” accessed January 4, 2017, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/billy-idol-still-has-the-swagger/>.

²⁹⁶ Piers Morgan, “Madonna’s Brits Awards Fall,” *Daily Mail Online*, accessed May 4, 2017, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2970792/PIERS-MORGAN-Falling-stage-Madonna-God-s-way-telling-old-cavort-like-hooker.html>.

²⁹⁷ Garin Pirnia and 2015, “11 Things That Happen at a Surprise Prince Show,” *Esquire*, March 17, 2015, <http://www.esquire.com/entertainment/music/reviews/a33721/prince-hit-n-run-tour-review/>.

During "Kiss," he repeatedly juttied his posterior toward the crowd. Was he saying, "Kiss my ass"? For God's sake, Prince even perspires sexily. . . It made one realize what he must look like when he orgasms; then again, Prince is probably into tantric sex and never orgasms. He constantly teased the audience with wanton looks (not too dissimilar from the Grammys appearance), fluttering eyelashes, and sideways come-hither glances.²⁹⁸

This is certainly hypersexualization of a black male body, but it does allow a 57-year-old artist to be overtly and impressively sexual.²⁹⁹ Critics and journalists sometimes acknowledge Madonna's extraordinary dancing, but her physical fitness is used against her, to downplay her musical talents. As with Madonna, Prince was supported by a backing group of dancers who were all younger than him, but unlike Madonna's controversial displays of control over young male (and female) bodies, Prince provided a gender-normative staging of the male musical genius surrounded by young women. The same people who dismiss Madonna for her dancing ability praised Prince for his and for the fact that he "still bounces around the stage like a man half his age."³⁰⁰ (The sad irony—after his death, we discovered that Prince was addicted to prescription painkillers, because his youthful-seeming body was actually wearing out, and in constant pain—only makes the contrast more extreme.)

Audiences, journalists, and critics not only sanction, but celebrate the performance of middle-aged, masculine sexuality; men are deemed "sexy" for it, while their stage athleticism is praised as heroic. The 52-year-old Anthony Kiedis, who performed shirtless at age 51 during the 2014 Super Bowl, received many reports along the lines of the following, along with headlines

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

²⁹⁹ Thematically, Prince had staked his claim to a kind of sexual polymorphism that, as Robert Walser argues, resisted patriarchal gender roles (Walser 1994). Prince always had a fraught relationship with masculinity and blackness.

³⁰⁰ Stuart Wiseman, "Live Review: Prince at Montreal's Bell Centre," *Consequence of Sound*, May 25, 2015, <https://consequenceofsound.net/2015/05/live-review-prince-at-montreals-bell-centre-523/>.

such as, “Anthony Kiedis and his Abs Steal the Halftime Show”³⁰¹:

Watching Kiedis on the 2014 Super Bowl halftime show jump around with the Red Hot Chili Peppers shirtless ... makes me want to go do ab crunches. No matter what anyone might say, there is absolutely no reason for Kiedis to put his shirt back on. At all. I should be so lucky to look as half as good as him when I’m 51. Heck, I should look half that good *right now!*³⁰²

When Kiedis dates women more than half his age, such as 20-year-old model Helena Vestegaard and 22-year-old Wanessa Milhomem, no one bats an eye, and the commentary is about how he enjoys “beautiful, young, leggy women.”³⁰³

May-December couplings are so normalized in our culture as to rarely warrant comment, provided it is an older man with a younger woman. This is true of representations in entertainment where decades older men are routinely presented as credible romantic partners for younger women with no need to explain the age gap as part of the narrative, as opposed to the explanations provided in the rare instances where an older woman is coupled with a younger man, and in the press. There was little public outcry expressed when Paul McCartney married Heather Mills, who is 26 years his junior, and only comparatively mild responses when Michael Douglass married Catherine Zeta-Jones, 25 years younger than he. There has likewise been little backlash against Madonna’s ex-husband, Guy Ritchie, who wed a model 13 years his junior, Jacqui Ainsley, in 2015. And both Mariah Carey and Beyoncé likewise married men who are

³⁰¹ “Anthony Kiedis’ Abs Steal Super Bowl Half-Time Show,” *The Huffington Post*, accessed May 4, 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2014/02/02/anthony-kiedis-super-bowl_n_4714629.html.

³⁰² Michael Peckerar, “Anthony Kiedis Makes Us All Jealous In Super Bowl Performance,” *Rant Lifestyle*, 2014, <http://www.rantlifestyle.com/2014/02/03/anthony-kiedis-makes-us-jealous-super-bowl-performance/amp/>.

³⁰³ Heather Waugh, “Anthony Kiedis Seen on Lunch Date with Mystery Blonde,” *Daily Mail Online*, May 20, 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-3088756/Anthony-Kiedis-52-sparks-rumours-split-22-year-old-girlfriend-Wanessa-Milhomem-cozies-mystery-young-blonde.html>.

significantly older than them without commentary. But reversing the field will inevitably reverse the reaction, as well.

Thus, none of these marriages incited the kind of sexist, ageist vitriol that Madonna received when she merely kissed Drake onstage at the 2015 Coachella Music Festival for three seconds. The public quickly decried Madonna, deeming her a succubus who was attempting to extract the youth and talent out of Drake for her own evil use. *The Daily Mail*'s headline that day read, "It wasn't good for him! Madonna, 56, makes out with Drake, 28"; later in the article the author wrote, "She is exactly twice his age. And he is used to dating younger women like Rihanna."³⁰⁴ The corporate burger chain Umami Burger joined the age-bashing with a tweet, "Because nothing gets the taste of old lady out like Umami."



Figure 4.2: Screen capture of the tweet from the Los Angeles chain Umami Burger.

³⁰⁴ Heidi Parker, <http://www.dailymails.xyz/tvshowbiz/article-3036560/Madonna-56-makes-Drake-28-onstage-Coachella-doesn-t-notice-look-horror-walks-off.html>. Accessed October 31, 2015

This exemplifies a larger pattern, whereby Madonna has been the object of a deeply malicious form of sexualized online trolling and body shaming. Though Madonna does not have any grandchildren, 50-year-old Piers Morgan thought it appropriate to tweet “50 Shades of Granny” in reaction to the kiss. She took to Twitter herself responding to the negative comments, “If you don’t like me and still watch everything I do. Bitch, you’re a fan.”³⁰⁵ Outraged that Madonna dare defend herself against these ageist attacks, one blogger wrote, “It’s not that people are making fun of you for being 56; they’re laughing because it’s pathetic for a middle aged woman to be writhing around half-naked and singing teenybopper stuff. Like A Virgin? More like pre-menopausal.”³⁰⁶ Because Madonna refuses to stop performing sexual songs in a sexy way from her back catalog and current albums, her body becomes a battleground for competing regulatory standards.

Battleground Madonna

"Poor is the man whose pleasures depend on the permission of another."³⁰⁷
– Madonna

The discourse surrounding Madonna and her artistic output is informed by competing discourses surrounding aging, specifically feminine aging. For my purposes, I am concerned with how these constructions inform the production and reception of popular music created by women who are no longer young. External appraisals of a subject’s success at comportment are constructed by

³⁰⁵ Madonna, Twitter post, April 13, 2015, 3:11 a.m., <https://twitter.com/madonnatribe/status/587558618104475648>

³⁰⁶ Brian Anderson, “Old Lady Madonna Compares Ageism To Racism,” *Downtrend*, February 25, 2015, <https://downtrend.com/71superb/old-lady-madonna-compares-ageism-to-racism>.

³⁰⁷ “Justify My Love” from *Erotica* (1990).

culturally constituted ideals. This judgment is subject to intersecting standards for multiple categories of identity. Four of the main categories of identity informing discourse on Madonna are those concerning age, gender, race, and pop stardom. Furthermore, following Black and WOC feminist writers such as Kimberle Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins, I contend that Madonna's musical performances, her image, and even the sound of her voice can make present and problematize aging at its intersection with other categories of identity including gender, race, and sexuality.³⁰⁸ It is Madonna's ability to make aging present by through the public performance of aging femininity that turns it into a physical stage where codes of conduct compete for primacy.

For the majority of people, aging draws attention the divide between self and other in that how one is perceived may not always match how they feel. An important insight is to understand the multiple consciousness involved in the "complex truth of old age," and the struggle to come to terms with its numerous elements. For women of a certain age, one of the most difficult factors to grapple with is the way in which they are doubly othered.

Yet a plethora of recent research suggests that signs such as grey hair and wrinkles do not actually translate with any degree of accuracy to objective standards of chronological age. Ten years and twenty million dollars worth of research funded by the American National Institute on Aging have not delivered the hoped-for determination of the biomarkers of age—those objective

³⁰⁸ In her now famous 1991 article "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color," Crenshaw introduced the concept of intersectionality as a means of conveying how diverse social categories; race, gender, class, etc. combine, causing the marginalization of, and violence towards black women in the United States. Intersectional scholarly practices use analytical approaches that view the multiplicity of categories of identity as imbricating forces that function simultaneously to construct an individual's experiences and identity. Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99, doi:10.2307/1229039..Also see Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2015..

biological features by which we might classify people into age groups and categorically define the ‘old’ and the ‘young.’³⁰⁹ Biological aging is one thing; social aging is another—whether we understand it as patterns of intergenerational relationships, as a sequence of age statuses, or as age-based normative expectations.

In recent years, social gerontologists have been swift to assert that age cannot be taken for granted as a biologically grounded *given*; rather it should be understood as one of the key bases for the production of social identity.³¹⁰ Like any sort of identity construction, aging does not operate in a vacuum, but as part of the complex web of beliefs, assumptions, and power structures that make up the foundational tenets of a culture. One’s aged identity is intersectional and discursive, constructed by ubiquitous modes of power.

A prevalent and traditional understanding of aging is connected to the narrative of decline, which views growing older as a linear process of chronological and biological deterioration with no possibility of benefit or mitigation. Broadly speaking, the master narrative of decline is that invisible but dominant cultural ‘message’ which encourages men and women to experience and articulate growing older essentially in terms of loss, isolation, and diminished physical mental and material resources.³¹¹ Through this process the aging subject becomes deindividualized, with previous identities made irrelevant by new, age-related identities such as

³⁰⁹ National Institute on Aging, “National Institute on Aging Home,” Text, *National Institute on Aging*, accessed May 4, 2017, <https://www.nia.nih.gov/home>.

³¹⁰ See these examples for the history and present state of these social gerontological theories, Elaine Cumming and William Earl Henry, *Growing Old* (New York: Arno Press, 1979). ; Robert J Havighurst, *The Sociologic Meaning of Aging* (Lancet Publications, 1958).; Beth B Hess and Elizabeth Warren Markson, *Growing Old in America: New Perspectives on Old Age* (New Brunswick (U.S.A.): Transaction Books, 1985).; Jan Baars, “Concepts of Time in Age and Aging,” 2016.; Suzanne R Kunkel et al., *Aging, Society, and the Life Course, Fifth Edition.*, 2015..

³¹¹ Michael Mangan, *Staging Ageing: Theatre, Performance, and the Narrative of Decline*, 2013, 8.

septuagenarian, retiree, or grandparent. This eradication of previous identity is “inherently triangular, involving the gaze of others as well as two images of oneself.”³¹² This triangulation becomes even more important when the listening and visual gaze is constituted by the ears and eyes of a mass audience, towards a musical performer, where only the image or specific, fixed sound is the thing that has ever been known by the onlooker or hearer. It has to do with having a concept of yourself that doesn’t match what others perceive, and the triangulation that takes place is between you, the mirror you, and the aural attention and gaze of others, meaning others who have concepts of appropriate aging and who will either judge or laud the artist based on how successfully this is managed.

In *Undoing Gender* (2004), Judith Butler acknowledges her indebtedness to Foucauldian scholarship, whose influence “seems to consist in the insight that regulatory power has certain broad historical characteristics, and that it operates on gender as well as on other kinds of social and cultural norms . . . but . . . gender requires and institutes its own distinctive regulatory and disciplinary regime.”³¹³ Butler further observes that as we make alterations in our self-governing, responding to a desire for a particular recognition, those changes affect us at all intersections of our identity and the community in which we exist. However, these changes act not only in relation to our local community and the claims we make in order to be recognized there or to allow for a more livable existence, but also to refute and reposition others who were previously aligned with other forms of identity that those changes may refute, dismiss, or otherwise reconsider. If gender norms constitute “a form of social power that produces the intelligible field

³¹² Kathleen M Woodward, *Aging and Its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 69.

³¹³ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York; London: Routledge, 2004), 41.

of subjects,”³¹⁴ I go a step further in connecting gender’s normative power with the norms of appropriate aging for a particular gender. Thus when connecting gender and aging, the subjects created forcibly undergo multiple levels of government with regard to comportment. Butler defines gender as “a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint.”³¹⁵ If we are willing to accept Butler’s idea of gender as performance, then it is not a far stretch to understand that age is similarly indicated through socially interpreted signals, so that our performance of aging is informed by socialized understandings of age as it intersects with gender, race, and sexuality—gendered aging is thus a scene of multiple constraints.

Women are deemed to be aging appropriately when they age “gracefully.” Women are, therefore, asked to exert immense effort through diet, exercise, subtle and “natural” looking makeup and hair regimes, and chic but not overtly sexy clothing. For an aging woman, expressions of femininity require work to maintain as youthful an appearance as possible, while notions of decorum demand she behave appropriately for her age, which includes making concessions in light of it. Ideally executed, a “woman should confess her real age precisely in order to solicit surprise and praise for not looking it.”³¹⁶ Crucially, and specific to Madonna, older women are expected to maintain their sex appeal by caring for their fitness and presentation in a way that seems effortless, while not acting in a sexual way.

Recent scholarship in gerontology and cultural studies interrogates this ageist universalizing narrative by revealing the decline narrative as a cultural assumption that has no basis in the reality of the individualized experience of aging. Explaining what she designates as

³¹⁴ Ibid., 48.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 1.

³¹⁶ Josephine Mary Dolan and Estella Tincknell, *Aging Femininities: Troubling Representations* (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 200.

“aging-in-culture,” Margaret Morganroth Gullette aptly argues that “we are aged more by culture than by chromosomes.”³¹⁷ She further details the deleterious staying power of the normative narrative of decline, writing that it is “as hard to contain as dye. Once it has tinged our expectations of the future (sensations, rewards, status, power, voice) with peril, it tends to stain our experiences, our views of others, our explanatory systems, and then our retrospective judgments.”³¹⁸ This narrative shapes our understanding of aging subjectivity.

That notwithstanding, Gullette and Mangan both suggest the power of resistance that lies within the aging population.³¹⁹ Speaking of the challenges inherent in a society that embraces this decline narrative, Gullette writes that “there is a way out if one recognizes that decline is an ideology, learns more about its techniques, and invents resistances.”³²⁰ Mangan likewise points out that “resistance and transgressiveness are most easily and frequently associated with adolescence and young adulthood,” which are life stages notably categorized by Victor Turner as occupying a liminal space relative to society. Yet Mangan troubles these categorical norms, wondering how such liminality could also be “reappropriated for the in-between-ness of old age.”³²¹

³¹⁷ Gullette, *Aged by Culture*, 101.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

³¹⁹ This possibility of expanding and altering definitions of aging subjectivity can be achieved in many ways and many agents. The aim of Margaret Morganroth Gullette’s scholarship has this very action in mind. She summarizes her work as “I saw that the narrative of decline involved unconscious habits of thought and affected every sub-identity, ways of seeing bodies and holding one’s own, explanations of history; that it distorted visual culture, was supported by institutions and dollar signs.” *Aged by Culture*, p. 28.

³²⁰ Gullette, *Aged by Culture*, 135.

³²¹ Mangan, *Staging Ageing*, 73.

Many find standard pop music practices such as wearing revealing costumes, dancing or gesturing suggestively, or even just singing about sexual pleasure to be unseemly behavior for artists over the age of 50 (even 40 for women). Though one strain of popular music has always fetishized the “inappropriate,” transgression has been reserved for the young and the male. To be rebellious and wild in youth is one thing, but to continue that way as one ages risks social criticism, at the very least, especially for women. The ways in which Madonna’s performances of her gender, her age, and her sexuality are regulated and monitored as part of an essentialist and biologically deterministic notion of aging and womanhood.

Considering Madonna can help explicate the way female performers in popular music are valued as they refute or submit to cultural stereotypes of aging, and reveal, in the end, that there is no stable fixed identity for her (or us), regarding age, gender, race, sexuality, or class, which are each in constant flux as she/we move around socially and engage with different types of audiences.

You Better Work: Value and the Labor of Being Madonna

In popular music, a key regime of practice is the bestowal of authenticity upon an artist. In pop music, more than other popular music genres, claims of authenticity and the resulting value placement are acts that are charged with issues of sexism and, as I have discussed thus far in this chapter, the ageism linked to sexism. Ageism, specifically within the white Western neoliberal culture of the United States, in and of itself is both a systemic and an interpersonal act of discrimination whereby all older people are stereotyped and then lumped together. Ageism generalizes the individual subject into a socially constructed group that is seen as a burden, of no societal value, and resistant to change. Ageism is a powerful and dangerous prejudice that,

beyond affective injuries, can destroy one's livelihood.³²² Madonna, in addition to the egregious sexism she has endured for most of her career, now has to deal with virulent ageism that most certainly affects her bottom line. *Rebel Heart* (2015), her most critically acclaimed album in a decade, is underperforming in no small part due to the fact that mostly male program directors are refusing to put her singles in rotation. The emotional strain is one thing, and Madonna is known as someone hardened from a lifetime in the public eye, but ageist actions such as BBC 1's refusal to play her new music not only hurts the sales of her current record, but also prevents her from possibly acquiring new fans, a long-term financial issue. It is highly unlikely that Madonna will end up in poverty in her old age due to this intersection of sexism and ageism in her workplace; however, critiques of the pop star that denigrate her in ageist or sexist terms should not be left unexamined.

Age aside, Madonna is a working pop star. She makes choices that allow her to continue to comport herself in way that is aligned with pop norms, norms that she helped create. The real issue is not that her success as a pop star has been limited due to her age, but the discomfort people have with Madonna stemming from her refusal to conform to the normative narrative of aging and decline. Madonna is fully capable of performing in recordings and during live performances as a entertaining, energetic, and sexual pop star, but her unwillingness to tone down the sexuality and wear her age or make camp reference to it transgresses society's expectations. This transgression is construed as a moral failing. In discourse surrounding Madonna currently it is her age that trumps, and makes invisible, all the other intersecting parts of her identity. The idea is that Madonna is old and should look and act like it—whatever that means. Since she does not, discursive and financial punishment ensues. The cultural conception

³²² Margaret Morganroth Gullette in her 2011 book *Agewise* remarks that “After age forty-five almost half the unemployed have been out of work long term—more than six months.”

of aging as overwriting any previous identity outside of a person's aging subjecthood and Madonna's refusal to relinquish other aspects of her identity creates a point of tension.³²³

Madonna puts an enormous amount of labor into being Madonna, "The Queen of Pop." Why is that labor not valued? Madonna's music is created to be sold and, especially in the case of live performances, Madonna's laboring body allows for the creation of the commodity that is for sale. Yet, she is not valued for this labor, for her athleticism, for her fitness, her voice, or her musical skills. Rather, due to her age, she is often mocked. One potential reason for this is that historically women's labor has been hidden and undervalued, and to demand recognition for labor that was seen as simply part of a woman's role is perceived as unladylike. To show effort is perceived as admirable in a man, but is detrimental to a woman's position and valuation; consequently, women who put work in are required to do the extra work of masking that labor to make it seem like a natural outpouring of innate ability. She is one of the hardest working women in show business.

Discussions have often dealt with Madonna as if she emerged unpracticed or unplanned and just appeared on stage, and the same goes for discourse surrounding her more recent work. A notable exception is bell hooks, who points out, "Certainly no one, not even die-hard Madonna fans, ever insists that her beauty is not attained by skillful artifice. And indeed, a major point of her documentary film *Madonna: Truth or Dare* (1991) is to demonstrate the amount of work that goes into the construction of her image."³²⁴ hooks acknowledges the labor required to create the Madonna we recognize on stage and screen. Though exceptionally rigorous, Madonna the pop star and her unseen daily regimen is simply an extreme version of a social norm in industrialized

³²³ See Ann V Murphy, *Violence and the Philosophical Imaginary* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012). in which identity and violence are intertwined.

³²⁴ Gail Dines, Jean McMahan Humez, and bell hooks, eds., "Madonna: Plantation Mistress or Soul Sister?," in *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Critical Reader*, 2015, 29.

patriarchal societies; to create a look that registers as noticeably feminine requires significant investment of both time and money.³²⁵ This investment is meant to be invisible, but the result is certainly noticed, as women who do not wear makeup can face discrimination for breaking normative understandings of expressed femininity.³²⁶ Making the image that is Madonna is simply an amplification of a process that many women perform. Debbie Harry once said of Madonna, “She is so totally career-orientated and showbiz-minded. I missed the boat on that one. If I had thought more I would probably have been Madonna before she was.” In addition to being a catty backhand by a less “mainstream” artist, this quotation is a nod to the fact that Madonna has put a great deal of thought and labor into “being” Madonna. It is problematic that this fact—that Madonna has always worked to construct a clear and consistent offering—has been virtually ignored when scholars discuss her career.

Madonna’s latest record is about moving forward rather than looking back. She is not trying to stop time or perform a version of ‘80s or ‘90s Madonna. She has continued to grow as an artist and her music has reflected these changes, as has her performance. I attended her *Rebel Heart* concert at the Los Angeles Forum October 26, 2015 and her voice was better than ever—rich, with a broader range and depth than in the past—and she showed a great sense of control over it. Her voice is mature and practiced; musically, her songs are more complex and layered.

³²⁵ For an examination of the social control exerted over women by the perpetuation of myths of ideal feminine beauty, see Gail Dines, Jean McMahon Humez, and bell hooks, eds., “Madonna: Plantation Mistress or Soul Sister?,” in *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Critical Reader*, 2015, 29.

³²⁶ One example of this hidden labor found in many women’s daily lives is called the “makeup tax,” which refers to the fact that women who wear at least a moderate amount of makeup have been shown to earn more and be more frequently promoted than their non-make up wearing female counterparts. The investment in time has been estimated to range from 48 hours a year to as much as two weeks a year and the average woman will spend approximately \$15,000 on cosmetics over the course of her adult life. Olga Khazan, “Hillary Clinton and the ‘Makeup Tax’ That Hurts All Women,” *The Atlantic*, August 5, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/08/the-makeup-tax/400478/>. Accessed February 4, 2015.

Madonna has lost none of her swagger or ability to mesmerize, enrapture, and excite her audience.

One of the most striking moments I saw during the *Rebel Heart Tour* I was when Madonna strutted down the runway to strap on a Flying V guitar and launched into a guitar driven version of one of her earliest dance-floor hits, “Burning Up,” off her eponymous debut album. Madonna has always had a knack for embodying, performing, and reconfiguring the iconic, both religious and cultural. She does so in a musical way here by taking the hyper-masculine symbol of the rock guitar (and specifically a Flying V that clearly references the 1980s era of male driven metal) and pairing it with a song where the lyrics have her as supplicant. Her use of this symbol of mastery and masculinity completely flips the musical and visual performance from the original, and turns the song into a different kind of forceful claim for unapologetic female desire.³²⁷

³²⁷ This was not the first time Madonna thought to bring a guitar on stage with her for this song as she did so during the show I witnessed in Las Vegas in 2004 as part of her *Re-Invention Tour*. On this instance it was a Les Paul wrapped around her and her military garb. Images flashed in and out of war and sex in a seeming commentary on the American abuses at Abu Ghraib. It is possible she remembered James Williamson playing the flying V during the Iggy and the Stooges version of the song played during her induction to the Rock and Roll Hall of of fame in 2008.



Figure 4.3: Dave Mustaine ,guitar and lead vocals Megadeath, cir.1985



Figure 4.4: James Hetfield guitar and lead vocals, Metallica, cir. 1983



Figure 4.5: Madonna performing “Burning Up” on the Rebel Heart Tour, 2015.

The staging of “Burning Up” for during the *Rebel Heart Tour* is markedly different than what Madonna had done previously. In both the music video and live performances of the song

during the '80s, Madonna acted the part of the desperate, love (or lust) struck devotee, crawling on the ground and pulling at her clothes. Beverly Skeggs, talking about the way Madonna represents men in her videos, stated that in “ ‘Burning Up’ they become irrelevant. She plays with and destabilizes the fixing and categorization of male sexuality in much the same way as she does with female sexuality.”³²⁸ While I tend to agree with this, the choreography used in the video and in contemporaneous performances is deliberately provocative in a way that is both unabashedly sexual and hyper-feminine. During the 1985 *Virgin Tour*, she writhed on the floor, similar to the choreography in the original music video. Towards the end of the song during this live performance, she decided that the answer to the question “Do you want to see me down on my knees?” was yes, and she ended up on her knees in front of the male guitar player, repeating that she’s “burning up.”³²⁹



Figure 4.6: Madonna performing “Burning Up” on the *Virgin Tour*, 1985.

³²⁸ Bev Skeggs, “A Good Time for Women Only,” in *Deconstructing Madonna*, ed. Fran Lloyd (Batsford Press, 1993), 273, <http://research.gold.ac.uk/13697/>.

³²⁹ *Madonna* (Madrid: WEA, 1985).

In contrast, the choreography for her 2015 tour has her enacting a very different, but equally sexual role. In this performance, it is Madonna who is playing the guitar. She still teases her audience, but does so by taking on typical male guitar rock god poses throughout the song. By doing so Madonna is appropriating a role that is traditionally male and connotes a different amount of control. “However, for a man to enact his sexuality is not the same for a woman: throughout Western history, women musicians have usually been assumed to be publicly available, have had to fight hard against pressures to yield, or have accepted the granting of sexual favors as one of the prices of having a career.”³³⁰ Madonna’s staging changes the choreographic message from a plea to attract attention to a command: I am here, I am in control, and you are noticing, as I demand. In the end, Madonna does come to her knees, but it is as part of a guitar solo, playing with the classic rock guitar-god trope.



Figure 4.7: Madonna performing “Burning Up” on the *Rebel Heart Tour*, 2015.

³³⁰ Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis, NM: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 151.

Musically, the song has changed also. The original 1982 track is sparse, comprising only a drum machine, bass, synthesizer, and single guitar. While earlier live performances often incorporated a live guitar, when Madonna plays the instrument for the “Rebel Heart” performance, it has a much harder sound and plays with rock metal riffs. The simple chord progression of Bm–Bm–A–E is punchier and powerful from the thicker sound of the guitar, but is still as danceable as the original. The instrumentation and staging mingle to provide the same message, connecting the song to traditionally male-dominated genres. Madonna’s voice, which in the past was so often described as thin and overly girly or cupie-doll like, is thick, deep, and resonant. Her voice is no longer nasal, but comes from her chest, low, rich, and demanding. As Madonna gives the line, “I’ll do anything, I’m not the same, I have no shame” her best rock snarl all these years later, the words take on a greater and different meaning. She is still driven, and nothing is going to stop her from getting what she wants—full arenas of adoring fans.

Far from diminishing since her youth, her ability to sing well while performing feats of demanding athleticism has improved and rivals many other younger pop stars I’ve seen such as Lady Gaga or Pink, or her male contemporaries such as Prince. The 2015 tour had her singing while running up stairs, climbing and twirling on stripper poles, and running from end to end of the massive show stage, without ever sounding winded. The comfort she has with and in her body shows her years of dance training. Madonna doesn’t try to hide the work she puts into her live performances and admits that she “rehearses and rehearses” so that when her fans finally get to see her live performance it appears “effortless.”³³¹ Madonna’s practice of constant rehearsing gives the impression when she hits the stage that what she is doing isn’t what it actually is: difficult, strenuous, and at times even risky. Her own discipline works to make her labor

³³¹ Madonna and Jonathan Ross, Madonna interviewed about her fall at Brits 2015, March 14, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U9ZUwoO37PU>.

invisible. The public doesn't see the time and effort she puts into writing, recording, vocal exercises, and the all-around musical preparation needed for recording albums; indeed, the standard pop construction is that female pop stars are little involved in writing, or producing. Madonna does the expected labor to maintain her status and keep her "job" secure while at the same time pushing against norms of aging appropriately, queering her position in the marketplace, subverting the stereotype of an aging female pop artist. Other aging female performers have either semi-retired or have shifted their performance and musical styles, but Madonna has continuously put out hit records and mounted record-breaking world tours.³³² Madonna refuses to concede her position or to align with the normative narrative of decline, but the backlash is significant and affects how she is perceived by marketers, bookers, and programmers, which in turn affects her visibility.

Madonna's labor, though undervalued in discourse, has not gone unrewarded. She has sold out multiple nights at Yankee Stadium, a venue where a woman had never headlined until she came along (helping her beat her own record for the top selling solo tour of all time). Her 2015 Grammy performance was the most watched (and tweeted about) performance of the night. Her latest single, "Ghosttown" became her 45th number one hit and gave her the distinction of having more number one songs on a single chart than any other artist in history.³³³ All of the accomplishments I just named occurred following her 50th birthday.

³³² In 2015 Annie Lennox release a nostalgia record of cover songs, a move that is common between both older male and female pop singers. Rod Stewart, Bruce Springsteen, and Bonnie Raitt have all made such a move in recent years. Janet Jackson, out of the spotlight for some years is launching her first tour in over two-decades and Cyndi Lauper mainly writes and produces for others, rather than continuing to perform.

³³³ Hugh McIntyre, "Madonna Has Now Charted More Number One Singles Than Any Other Artist," *Forbes*, May 17, 2015, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/hughmcintyre/2015/05/17/madonna-now-has-charted-45-number-one-singles/>.

One of the ways that Madonna is disparaged is by presenting her as fame hungry, with that drive figured as a negative. This ambition for stardom is problematized further when it is enacted by a woman at a life stage the prevailing mentality figures as a time when a person should be withdrawing into increasingly personal spaces of influence. Katherine O'Brien in her essay, "Madonna, Like a Crone," lays her own claims of value and what people should or shouldn't be doing at a certain age when she writes, "For Madonna the commercial considerations of global stardom have always taken precedence. But as she ages this sets up an impossible dichotomy between the private, mature woman—well read, politically motivated, culturally curious—and the two-dimensional pop image."³³⁴ This assertion of an "impossible dichotomy" relies on assumptions about pop music as unserious, frivolous, and containing only social, rather than aesthetic, value.³³⁵ These assumptions, which demean the genre, do further harm to those creating pop music, especially women.

So how is value created from the embodied practice of music making? Music is a mode of production that requires human and technological labor, but the value is not part of what is produced. Value is something that is granted after the labor produces the musical object (an album, a performance, a music video). This value is not fixed, rather it circulates and involves a human judgment, be it of a critic, a fan, or an institution such as the Grammys, and it also may change over time. Most importantly (especially for Madonna), the valuation of the musical object is completely out of the control of the person who has done the work to create it. As people age in our society they are valued less and less, and society is predisposed to view them

³³⁴ Lucy O'Brien, "Madonna: Like a Crone," in *'Rock On': Women, Ageing and Popular Music*, ed. Abigail Gardner and Ros Jennings (Routledge, 2016), 23.

³³⁵ Simon Frith. "Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music." *Taking Popular Music Seriously*. (Aldershot: Ashgate; 2007), 133.

as a burden. Elderly people are valued less because society sees them as no longer contributing as producers and reproducers (of children, products, income, etc.), functioning instead as a drain on resources.³³⁶ Popular musicians operate within the framework of broader cultural expectations of aging, which affects the valuation of their output.

Simon Frith analyzes notions of authenticity in rock culture, focusing on how certain tenets of instrumentation and production are valued more than others.³³⁷ As he notes, pop music is understood as pure entertainment, to be consumed rather than to be deeply considered, because it is fixed to commercialism rather than to the seriousness of intellectual endeavors. Ultimately, there has been a predisposition to figure male rockers as individual geniuses and true artists and to value them and their work above female artists and their work, with the latter figures often portrayed as being talentless, famous only for their sexual provocation, and their image manufactured by some man behind the scenes.

A constant negotiation between artist and audience, authenticity is a relational act. Furthermore, the pressures of new technologies and the constant feed of image and performance through these practices, forces a kind of selfhood where, authority, and knowledge have been radically altered from the postmodern philosophies of meaning and knowledge. The nature of the artist, audience, and texts has shifted to intimate but staged processions of identities and selfhood—think Beyoncé’s *Instagram*. As of March 2017 Beyoncé has sent only one tweet in almost four years, and now engages with her fans almost exclusively through image. Fans get a highly curated look into her daily life through *Instagram*, providing a sense, however contrived,

³³⁶ In her three books and many articles, Margaret Morganroth Gullette reveals how ageism saturates our culture while pointing out the very real consequences of the ageist society we live in. She exposes the ways in which the modern figuring of old age helps to support the neoliberal agenda that frames growing older as a drain on resources and a burden, in what she terms as “violence by budget.” Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Agewise: Fighting the New Ageism in America*, 2013, 37.

³³⁷ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 164.

of the intimacy they crave. Authenticity debates and postmodernism have been discussed for some time (Barker, 2007; Peterson, 1999; Leppart, 2003; Looseley, 2003, Till, 2010) but now everything is more highly mediated and constantly shifting with assertions or denials of authenticity figured through these technologies. Some would say that hierarchies of value have been collapsed by the democratization of the Internet, and social networking platforms such as *Instagram*, *Twitter*, and *Facebook*, but I argue that the advent of these technologies has only heightened the claims and search for “authenticity.” The digital landscape offers an ever-changing fluidity that prompts a more fervent desire for authentic artistry, or a kind of faithfulness to a particular public self. When change comes, it is often evaluated in terms of authenticity and, when it doesn’t come, the same kind of assessment occurs.

Popular music is laden with claims of authenticity from James Brown to Bob Dylan, Kurt Cobain to Kanye West (Frith 1981, 1987; Leppard and Pauly 1988; Mazulo, 2000; DeNora 2000; Graycyk 2001; Barker and Taylor 2007; Murray 2015; Taylor 1997; Williams 2011, Wald 2012). Posited by artists, listeners, and the media, these claims are always situated within genre cultures, structures of social identification, and other cultural and historical contexts. Consequently, authenticity is bestowed, rather than an actual state of being (though it can be thoughtfully constructed), depending upon how the artist is perceived to have satisfied or subverted these expectations. This all involves an endless negotiation of relationships, and claims of authenticity are then equated with cultural value. Therefore, authenticity claims and constructions are essential to the always-morphing genre boundaries that ultimately lead to the creation of musical canons, hierarchies of value, and connection to vastly different audiences.

The perception or discourse around a particular artist’s authenticity can shift, and over time such an artist over the course of a career may go from being perceived or discussed as

authentic to being read as inauthentic or vice versa. As an aside, it's worth noting that the *audience* for pop music is also dismissed as inauthentic. At least some of those 300 million purchasers of Madonna's records are figured within the discourse of music criticism and journalism as being less than, or inadequate consumers of music as compared to fans of Bob Dylan, The Rolling Stones, Radiohead, King Crimson, or the White Stripes. Furthermore, all popular music audiences are figured as "youths," and the young can be easily dismissed as too immature to know "good" music when they hear it. As scholars have started to notice, pop's "youth" market is not the only, or even the most lucrative one, and as artists such as Madonna and Cher (and Bruce Springsteen and Bon Jovi) continue to sell out large venues worldwide at ticket prices in the three and even four figures, scholarship must reconsider how the pop music audience is conceived.³³⁸

Perceived authenticity creates value in popular music, but authenticity is an ideological construction, and considering how notions of authenticity are constructed is critical in understanding the issues around aging women within popular music. Female artists whose output is categorized as pop music are commonly disparaged and diminished in the media. Even their own fans sometimes accept the promulgated trope of pop stars as inauthentic, lacking creativity or the skills to write their own songs, and, at worst, as pretty but vacant puppets controlled by a

³³⁸ Both Andy Bennett and Jody Taylor have done extensive work on aging popular music audiences, considering the ways in which growing older is conceived of differently within non-musical circles of fans. Andy Bennett and Jody Taylor, "Popular Music and the Aesthetics of Ageing," *Popular Music* 31, no. 2 (2012): 231–43. Also see Andy Bennett, *Music, Style, and Aging: Growing Old Disgracefully?* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 2013). For a number of essays on aging musical fan circles see Andy Bennett and Paul Hodkinson, *Ageing and Youth Cultures: Music, Style and Identity* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013). Murray Forman also deals with the aging of hip-hop fans and creators in M Forman, "Visualizing Place, Representing Age in Hip-Hop: Converging Themes in Scarface's 'My Block'," *Continuum*. 28, no. 3 (2014): 300–313.

male producer or collaborator.³³⁹ Often female pop artists such as Madonna are put in binary opposition to their male counterparts; the men with guitars are figured as authentic and the pop and dance artists as inauthentic (i.e. Beck vs Beyoncé). Even when men such as Prince or Billy Idol make sonically similar pop music, they are elevated out of the pop milieu or praised for their songwriting, looks, and sexual virility, as discussed earlier.

Value is not determined only by critical reception, but also entails considerations of marketability, since the market place is often a concern for artists. But aesthetic and economic value sometimes have a reciprocal relationship. Aesthetic value can affect economic value and economic concerns can influence aesthetic choices. The confluence of the biological process of aging, cultural narratives of decline, and economic concerns create fertile ground for a specific type of self-fashioning and subject formation enacted by artists who are growing old. In the West, expectations around aging are part of an individualist tradition of autonomy—valuing the idea of individuals being “free” to make their own life decisions. Value is thus placed on self-determination, relegating others or relationships to a secondary status and severing the self from both family and community. This works to assert a false construction of a lived life as non-relational, which becomes problematic as one ages in two ways. As we age we become vulnerable to illness and disability; our capacity to be independent is compromised or we may no longer be economically self-sufficient, becoming what is viewed as an imposition on others. Those who remain healthy and economically solvent may attempt to preserve individuality and

³³⁹ As an example of this I am including here a discussion from *Digital Spy's* message board: “She [Madonna] clearly can't write a decent song by herself and is clever enough to change a few words to get a credit on her hits. When Madonna releases a song it's been written and produced by half a dozen people. The only reason Madonna has a career is because of luck and the talent of other people. Come back to me when Madonna actually writes and produces an album by herself and proves that she's the musical genius her fans claim she is. It's not like she sits down and writes her hits by herself. 99.9% of her back catalogue exists because of the other people involved.”
<http://forums.digitalspy.co.uk/showthread.php?p=81181849> Accessed January 3, 2016.

avoid being a burden by remaining alone and far from family. Both scenarios can leave one devalued and isolated. The emphasis placed on the autonomy and self-determination of the individual under this recent model of aging manifests in varying ways, influencing personal conduct.

When a music journalist listens to an album and assesses the aesthetic or commercial value of a singer's voice, sound is figured and refigured by prevailing value structures. The critic gauges not only what the voice "means," but also if it is worthwhile artistically, and, to a certain extent, commercially. In response, artists manage themselves, keeping in shape and presenting the self in a savvy way, composing songs that exemplify "resilience discourse,"³⁴⁰ brand building, or, in the case of singers who have extended careers, by staying true to their brand legacy across their careers while also being perceived as current and relevant. If you are not taking care of your body, managing aging or presenting the aging body in a way that retains value and makes that body commercially valuable, you are failing.³⁴¹ This failure could be, dialectically, either a failure to decline or declining too much, that is, a failure to age appropriately. The value structures that put the burden to remain relevant, active, and vital on the individual also require one to manage aging in specific ways. The discourse surrounding Madonna's voice aims at total negation —of her talent, her labor, and her narrative of herself. As Nick Couldry has pointed out, the desire for narrating and voicing one's life and world view is so embedded in human experience that "to deny value to another's capacity for narrative—to deny her potential for voice—is to deny a basic dimension of human life."³⁴² Indeed, as we know from

³⁴⁰ James, *Resilience & Melancholy*.

³⁴¹ Gullette, *Agewise*, 2013.

³⁴² Nick Couldry, *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics After Neoliberalism* (Sage Publications, 2010), 7.

multitudes of feminist literature, not to have a voice is not just to be inaudible, but invisible.

BBC 1's stance on Madonna and her single, "Living for Love" (2015), mentioned at the start of this chapter, had nothing to do with her creativity, voice, quality of the song, but was based solely on her age, an example of obvious ageism. But it is also exemplary of persistent attitudes about Madonna, since there are few aging female artists who polarize public opinion as much as Madonna. Her value is determined according to her successful performance as a "pop star" as well an aging female public figure. In this way, Madonna is being measured against two sets of standards: by what a pop singer "should" look, sound, or behave like, which connects to ideals of beauty; and how a 57-year-old-woman should behave. In many ways these two criteria are incompatible, as the very acts and qualities that qualify an artist to be a pop star disrupt common ideas of appropriate behavior for middle-aged women, and there are even those who would suggest, as did those at BBC 1, that by appealing to the over 30 audience, Madonna disqualifies herself from participation in the "youth" pop market.

Madonna's performances of sexuality have always been central to her cultural significance. When she was younger, her use of sexually explicit imagery and lyrics were often construed as a cheat, or her only selling point ("sleeping her way to the top"); now that she has aged, discourse surrounding her manifestations of sexuality are characterized by discomfort, disdain, and even disgust. Reactions toward Madonna's expressions of sexuality shows clearly that even non-normative displays of sexuality are permitted while young, and can advance a career (even if they are not perceived as an affirmation of talent or artistry, and even if they ruffle a few feathers), while a relatively benign act like a kiss as an older performer is seen as inappropriate. The governance and disciplining of Madonna in this instance is both systemic within the social structure of pop music and a subjective expression of self. Within popular

music there are certain expectations about how a performer should perform, what they should look like, and what they should sing about. Yet, given that Madonna broke and, through her success, reformulated many of the rules that actually govern this genre in the late 20th and early 21st century, it should not be surprising that she is now one of the most visible women in the field pushing the boundaries of the acceptability around aging and sexuality for women.

Scholars writing about Madonna's earlier career have focused a great deal on her displays of sexuality and religion, but, as I have pointed out, leave out the labor that brings those things to life as it relates to her music and her performance. In the same way that Madonna's utilization of staged and overt sexuality is used to dismiss her performances, her age is also now employed to discredit her. She is accused of performing youthfulness as a disguise, rather than acknowledging that she works hard and maintains discipline to maintain an aspect of her identity, to look, sound, and dance like the pop star Madonna, at age 57. Lucy O'Brien takes precisely this approach in a recent essay: "Madonna is a past mistress at masquerade, and by her 2006 *Confessions* tour she was adopting a kind of disguise—coloring her greying hair, disciplining loose muscles and presenting the image of a woman 20 years younger."³⁴³ Each element in this critique is far off base. Madonna has been dyeing her hair since her twenties, as many in the entertainment industry (or in your neighborhood) do, in order to play with their appearance and keep their look fresh. And Madonna's continued fitness regimen is not an attempt to hide her age; as a professional dancer, she has since her teenage years never wavered in her commitment to body conditioning. Celebrity fitness trainer Gunnar Peterson says that for Madonna to sing and dance as she does takes "a level of commitment that most people can't even

³⁴³ O'Brien, "Madonna: Like a Crone," 24.

imagine. It takes dedication to exercise and dedication to nutrition, and a dedication to sleep.”³⁴⁴ Discipline is manifested in the ways that she maintains her body and voice through diet, skin regimen, working out, yoga, cardio, and vocal exercises. She has the benefit of time and money to make these things happen, but they still take a great deal of work to achieve the end result that is Madonna.

O’Brien reinforces the traditional narrative of decline, suggesting that to be as fit as Madonna is at her age means not that a woman over the age of 50 can be strong and active, but that such a woman is unnatural and deceptive, as if taut, strong muscles were like plastic surgery or hair dye. O’Brien’s observations ignore both the context and continuity of Madonna’s long career as an entertainer and a professional athlete. In other words, it appears O’Brien wants Madonna to let herself go, since that is what is expected of aging women. Failing that, all the hard work to stay good at one’s profession—would one snipe at an experienced quarterback or a long-successful ballet dancer who “disciplined loose muscles”?—can be dismissed as pathological, a desperate clinging to youth.

These impulses to apply societal governance to Madonna’s aging body also extend to her vocal sound. As Susan McClary observed in her classic essay on that, "A great deal of ink has been spilled in the debate over pop star Madonna's visual image and the narratives she has enacted for music video. [...] What most reactions to Madonna share, however, is an automatic dismissal of her music as irrelevant."³⁴⁵ The key musical component to Madonna’s songs is her voice; when we are not seeing her image in a music video or on stage, the voice is what we the (literal) audience have of her. So what does it mean that Madonna’s voice has been dismissed as

³⁴⁴ Kathleen Doheny, “Madonna at 53: What It Takes to Be That Fit,” *WebMD*, accessed May 5, 2017, <http://www.webmd.com/fitness-exercise/features/madonna-fitness-super-bowl>.

³⁴⁵ McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 148.

irrelevant or, when anyone in the rock world decides to take notice, attacked as *sounding too young*, viz *Rolling Stone* in 1987 complaining that her singing was “so girlie it makes one cringe.”³⁴⁶ Madonna’s voice has certainly changed since the 1980s, showing the signs of age, vocal coaching, and rigorous vocal exercises. Unlike some famous female pop singers of the 1980s (Kate Bush, Pat Benatar) Madonna was not born with an operatic voice, and was not a trained singer when she began her career. Yet, her determination and desire to play Eva Perón in Alan Parker’s *Evita* (1996) led her to undergo intense vocal training once she got the role. In the end, the extent to which she pushed herself vocally earned her a Golden Globe that year for Best Actress in a Comedy or Musical. However, this accolade was quickly repressed; the “Madonna can’t sing” meme re-appeared and refuses to fade. On the *Rebel Heart* tour, no matter how well she delivers unplugged numbers such as “La Vie en Rose” or “True Blue,” numbers that feature her voice supported by only a ukulele or two, critics and detractors continue to claim Madonna can’t sing. Though this isn’t a complete shutting down of her voice, it is a dismissal. The abject discourse surrounding Madonna’s voice aims at negating her talent, labor, and her narrative of herself.

Aging Queerly with Madonna

The notion of “queer temporality” is not new. Still, as I stated in my Introduction, one aim of this work is to demonstrate how popular music performance—as well as the kind of musical time and community it constructs—relates to this new perspective on queer time as it, in turn, relates to aging.

Heteronormative temporalities dominate thinking about time *tout court*, operating on the assumption that an acceptable, recognizable life course is conducted in a linear, chronological

³⁴⁶ Jean Rosenbluth, *Madonna, the Rolling Stone Files: The Ultimate Compendium of Interviews, Articles, Facts, and Opinions from the Files of Rolling Stone* (New York: Hyperion, 1997), 89.

progression (Freeman, 2010; Boellstorff, 2007; Halberstam, 2005): birth, childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, marriage, reproduction, child rearing, retirement, old age, death. With the exception of the final chapter of J. Halberstam's book *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005), there has been little criticism considering notions of music and musical performances in relation to queer temporality.

Queer theories in and of themselves have, at this point, infiltrated most disciplines, including musicology (Morris, 2015; Peraino, 2005; Brett, 2006; Cusick, 1994). In musicology and in books such as Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2005), Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005), and José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer* (2009), queer theories intersect with other forms of identity and temporal constructions, reaching far beyond simple conceptions of temporality, gender, or sexuality. While there are important distinctions between queer sexuality and old age as embodied subjectivities and categories of identity, one must agree with Cynthia Port when she hypothesizes that “these new approaches to queer temporality suggest intriguing possibilities for reconsidering the temporalities of old age.”³⁴⁷

Drawing on these authors, I use “queer” as a term that signifies a break from and rejection of the binary fixation of heteronormative culture, including social constructions of sex, gender, race, and age. Binaries like male/female, homosexual/heterosexual, black/white, and—most importantly for my study—young/old are all complicated by the political action of queering. “If we reimagine “queer” as a set of possibilities produced out of temporal and historical difference, or see the manipulation of time as a way to produce both bodies and relationalities,” these theories can be expanded to engage with and destabilize cultural

³⁴⁷ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

constructions of aging.³⁴⁸ Queering time can then be perceived as an intervention in, or at least an alteration to, the rhetoric, restrictions, and grim *telos* of hetero-normative aging-and-death. If, as Judith Peraino argues, “music demarcates a space and time wherein gender and sexuality lose clear definition,”³⁴⁹ when it comes to growing older, music can blur the borders of age in the same way.

Queerness has long been pathologized for its unconventional relating of desire and temporality, and for its lack of “reproductive futurity.”³⁵⁰ Queer time unfolds within the same kind of social structures and markers as heteronormative temporalities, with a sequence of markers/events (birth, childhood, adolescence, sexual exploration, reproduction, aging, death). Yet, queer temporality can reach across or even collapse time. Because of the historic fact that community building in the gay world was mediated by “social” pursuits outside of traditional coupling and child-rearing (staying out late, going to special clubs, attending parties, dancing), queerness values a youthful freedom of action that allows for activities that privilege group bonding over the nuclear family. Gay marriage was not a possibility until recently and is quite often delayed until later in life; there are few accidental pregnancies among gay couples. Systems like adoption agencies, sperm banks, and surrogate agencies allow for procreation, which has led to a certain normalizing of the gay community as it increasingly signs on to the “general project” of reproductive futurity. Still, queer community markers, queer time, and queer subjectivity remain. Subjectivity evolves over time; for queer subjects there is a process of coming out, or coming to terms with being outside the heteronormative mainstream that affects

³⁴⁸ Freeman, “Introduction” 159.

³⁴⁹ Judith Ann Peraino, “Listening to the Sirens: Music As Queer Ethical Practice,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 9, no. 4 (October 1, 2003): 434, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/47155>.

³⁵⁰ Edelman, *No Future*, 4.

one's life course and the timing of it in a way similar to aging. In both cases there is an involuntary shift in how one is perceived by others and how one perceives oneself. This idea of aging is well described by Simone de Beauvoir in her book *Coming of Age* (1973):

Old age is particularly difficult to assume because we have always regarded it as something alien, a foreign species: "Can I have become a different being while I still remain myself?" "False dilemma," people have said to me. "So long as you feel young, you are young." This shows a complete misunderstanding of the complex truth to old age: for the outsider it is a dialectic relationship between my being as he defines it objectively and the awareness of myself that I acquire by means of him. Within me it is the Other—that is to say the person I am for the outsider—who is old: and that Other is myself.³⁵¹

The meaning behind her use of "Other" corresponds to the way in which Beauvoir depicted Woman as "Other" in *The Second Sex*, connoting abjection and antagonism. Yet Madonna has always refused abjection of her own aging womanhood along with social hostility towards the bodies of powerful women, homosexuals, and people of color, escaping systematic "alienation" by consistently promoting the emancipation and empowerment of marginalized bodies.

In this dissertation, the queering of time and queer time itself are notions that shift aging and performing bodies out of the normative symbolic economies found in popular music. Queering time then becomes both deviation and tactical resistance to the normative narrative of aging (especially for women) in Western society.³⁵² Gullette suggests there is a potential of resistance that lies within the aging population; she writes that, "there is a way out if one recognizes that decline is an ideology, learns more about its techniques, and invents

³⁵¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, 1972, 283–84.

³⁵² I am borrowing the idea of queering as a *tactic* from Nicholas De Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

resistances.”³⁵³ Resistance and transgression are most often associated with youth, but Madonna’s work belies this. She has consistently taken subcultural practices into the mainstream, meeting with equal amounts of success and failure. Like her or not, it is undeniable that her battles have blazed a trail for female pop artists who have come after her. Madonna’s tactics of appropriation and transformation are rooted in the queer idea that a woman can still perform pop music filled with play, sex, and romance, while portraying the kind of strength, self-assuredness, and depth that come with growing older. As a musical object, her latest record, *Rebel Heart*, is “positively luxurious and downright intellectual...where introspection and abandon engage in erotic acts of self-actualization.”³⁵⁴

On the album, and during her performances on the accompanying tour, Madonna, true to form, inhabits a plurality of performing personalities that are at once iconic and relatable. As she performs Good Girl, Bad Girl, Saint, Martyr, Sad Woman, Rock Guitar God, Classic Hollywood Actress, even Matador and Nun, all with different takes on sexual identities (gay, lesbian, bisexual, sadist, masochist, virgin, and cougar to name but a few) she reveals “the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence.”³⁵⁵ The performances she concatenates on this tour work collectively to disrupt “woman” as a reliable and stable identity or group of identities, refusing to reify “gender regulations” and thus providing her audience with an exceptional feminist performance of control and self-governance.³⁵⁶ Halberstam laments that “because we experience

³⁵³ Gullette, 135.

³⁵⁴ Joe Levy, “Album Review: Madonna’s ‘Rebel Heart’ Blends Inventive Beats and Maximalist Pop,” *Billboard*, March 5, 2015, <http://www.billboard.com/articles/review/6487805/album-review-madonna-rebel-heart>.

³⁵⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 137.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 9.

time as some form of natural progression, we fail to realize or notice its construction,” but it appears that Madonna has discerned this fact, and as with everything else in her career, she is taking control of the temporal constructions that might disempower her aging, but still formidable self.³⁵⁷

What could be more queer? Madonna Louise Ciccone is still making and performing pop and being Madonna, the pop star, at the advanced age of 57. There has never been a female pop music star who has continued to perform at such a high level so long.³⁵⁸ In so doing, she is queering time. This is not a woman who is chasing after the fountain of youth; rather, she is re-defining what aging as a woman in popular music can look, sound, and feel like. Madonna is “declining to decline” as cultural age critic Margaret Morganroth Gullette has termed the acts of resisting and challenging the West’s cultural construction of old age as nothing more than inevitable decline and decay.³⁵⁹ Madonna’s refusal to allow the Western mentality of aging to unduly influence her behavior and identity is a type of counter-conduct, that is, conduct that counters prevailing mentalities so as “not to overthrow but to influence the society of which they

³⁵⁷ Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2005), 7.

³⁵⁸ Though there have been records, comeback tours, and other performances by aging female pop stars such as Tina Turner, Debbie Harry, Grace Jones, Dolly Parton, Cher, and Patti Smith, none of these women have consistently, year after year, been producing music that is part of the current of mainstream music, and maintained their positions as artists who consistently reside at the top of the charts and whose tours have continued to be successful at the same scale as in the height of their popularity. [I might challenge you on Dolly Parton; she has consistently been a force in the world of country music, and done things even Madonna did not, like successfully found and maintain a theme park devoted to her image. Can you imagine Madonnaland? I want to go there!]

³⁵⁹ Gullette, *Aged by Culture*. 2.

are a part.”³⁶⁰ In discussing the ageist resistance to her brand in a recent interview with *Rolling Stone* Madonna proclaims:

They’re judging me by my age. I don’t understand. I’m trying to get my head around it. Because women, generally, when they reach a certain age, have accepted that they’re not allowed to behave a certain way. But I don’t follow the rules. I never did, and I’m not going to start.³⁶¹

However, Madonna does follow some rules, and this and other such statements from Madonna are always calculated. Her work to maintain her identity as pop star is an act of resistance, but it is important to remember that the very identity she is maintaining was formulated to satisfy appetites for popular music. Given her position as a pioneering female pop figure, she may have herself made some of the very pop star rules that she follows—but they are rules nonetheless. Madonna clearly believes that while a body does not have to be young to be publically presented, it does have to conform to rules about what looks good. “I’m in good shape,” Madonna told the *New York Daily News* in an interview. “I can show my ass when I’m 56, or 66, or 76. Who’s to say when I can show my ass? It’s sexism. It’s ageism. And it’s a kind of discrimination.”³⁶² Madonna, then, is self-governing in ways aligned with mentalities related to pop star subjectivity; her counter-conduct is not rejecting sex roles or the cultural definition of a sexual object; it is a lesser rebellion that decides to privilege those pop mentalities—her “rebel heart”—over societal governance related to aging subjectivity.

³⁶⁰ Mitchell Dean, *Governmentality Power and Rule in Modern Society* (Los Angeles, Calif. [u.a.: Sage, 2014), 21.

³⁶¹ Madonna, *Rolling Stone*, February 2015.

³⁶² Aimee Cliff. “Why Ageism in Pop Hurts Females of All Ages.” *Fader*. April 28, 2015. <http://www.thefader.com/2015/04/28/popping-off-ageism-madonna-ariana-grande>. Accessed February 9, 2016.

Madonna is a pop music “icon” and has striven to be one since she first appeared on the NY club scene.³⁶³ There has always been an element of outsider status to her displays of sexuality; at times they toyed explicitly with breaking taboos, but—more importantly—they were always gynocentric and actively focused on place female desire front and center, the way her heavy metal counterparts in the 1980s did for male desire. Madonna has always engaged sex in her work, but it always stood at a calculated distance from the standard heteronormative structure.³⁶⁴ With “Like a Virgin” she flipped the “good girl gone bad” story to the “bad girl made good,” completely changing the function—and the timing—of sexual experience in a woman’s romantic narrative. In her book *Sex*, she took control of the male gaze, actively objectifying herself with both images and language, but on her own terms.

Madonna put the fantasies found in the pages of her *Sex* book into action through the music video for “Justify My Love” that was immediately banned by MTV for displaying two women kissing amidst S&M imagery and overtones. Objections today center around the social boundaries that govern age, specifically an aging woman, that are subject to transgression. In response to BBC1 and many other critics demanding she “give it up,” Madonna defiantly refused. (This text accompanied her 2015 cover spread for the 50th Anniversary of *Cosmopolitan* magazine.)

³⁶³ In Judith Ann Peraino's, *Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Hedwig* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 143 she discusses Madonna as a queer icon. As Peraino points out Madonna was already a queer icon for the 1980s and '90s, so her aging queerly is not all that surprising.

³⁶⁴ Most heterosexual men would not deny that Madonna is physically attractive, but straight white men do not buy her records and see her shows. She makes them uncomfortable by transgressing the norms of a patriarchal society. She is outspoken and portrays a dominant persona. Her work is often infused with an element of camp that can be lost on many straight men. Madonna’s core following is made up of people on the margins or those who have been minoritized in society including homosexuals, Blacks, Latinas, transsexuals, and of course women (which, taken together, account for a large section of the population). There is an awareness within these groups of her tongue in cheek displays of heteronormative desire that is lost on the stereotypical white male.

Don't be fooled, not much has changed — certainly not for women. We still live in a very sexist society that wants to limit people. Since I started, I've had people giving me a hard time because they didn't think you could be sexual or have sexuality or sensuality in your work and be intelligent at the same time. People still like to put women in categories—good girl, bad girl, virgin, whore. When I was starting my career, people tried to put me in a category and diminish me. Now I'm being discriminated against because I'm 56 years old, and people don't think I have the right to continue to be successful, to be sexual, to have fun. That is a kind of sexism and discrimination. No man ever gets criticized for his behavior because of his age. It's only women. So for me, the fight has never ended.³⁶⁵

Madonna's refusal to relinquish her power, her sexuality, and her entitlement to that for which she has worked hard is of great value to women in all age groups—a fact she consciously highlights.

So if I have to be the person who opens the door for women to believe and understand and embrace the idea that they can be sexual and look good and be as relevant in their fifties or their sixties or whatever as they were in their twenties, then so be it.³⁶⁶

Madonna is modeling behavior in line with what she has always done, but, trail-blazing as ever, is demonstrating how to do it as a 57-year-old has met a newly determined resistance.

Madonna is not trying to stop time. Nor is she stuck in times past, performing a freeze-dried version of 80s or 90s Madonna. She has continued to grow as an artist and her music reflects these changes, as does her performance. Madonna is too restless to lip sync to old records, and routinely rearranges her past hits to support contemporary performances. As I mentioned earlier, her voice is mature and practiced. Musically her songs are more complex and layered. During her live shows she now plays a several instruments—guitar, both acoustic and electric, as well as the ukulele. The lyrics on *Rebel Heart* are some of the most intimate and

³⁶⁵ *Cosmopolitan*, May 2015, p. 171-172.

³⁶⁶ Madonna. *Rolling Stone*. February, 2015.

reflexive she has ever penned. She is not performing eternal youth; she is performing Madonna at this age. The point of friction comes from her refusal to accept that, as a woman ages, *aging* necessarily takes primacy over all other elements of her identity. By refusing to allow age to erase the sexual Madonna, the publicly active Madonna, or the musically creative Madonna, by continuing to build on the identity she has constructed over the course of her career, Madonna is performing an act of “counter-conduct” and a form of hyper-ableism that may expand our notions of both the popular musician and aging female subjectivity.

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