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BEAUTY AS A MODE OF BEING: ENACTING QUEER LISTENING TO PARSE THE CULTURAL AND AFFECTIVE RESONANCE OF SAD GIRL POP

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Abstract

This thesis has two goals. The first is to extend Andrew Brooks' concept of "a queer listening practice" which he conceptualizes as a way of tuning "into the sound of relations" and "thinking through relations of power; it is a mode of listening attuned to the production, transmission, and mutation of the affective tonalities of dominant neoliberal capitalist cultures." Brooks focuses his research on experimental music; I wish to complicate his scholarship by adapting his theory to a popular music space long overlooked in scholarship: sad girl pop. The second aim is explaining how queer listening can be used to understand and appreciate the beauty of sad girl pop and more specifically its affective and cultural resonance with listeners of two of contemporary music's most prescient and alluring figures: Lana Del Rey and Ethel Cain.

I argue that sad girl pop is built on subversion, complicating notions of genre and gender within the discursive domain of performance and beyond. It is music that embodies liminality, both sonically and affectively. By foregrounding case studies of Lana Del Rey and Ethel Cain, I assert that the figure of the sad girl challenges the "girlboss" pop that proliferated in the noughties and 2010s. Because of its divergence from convention, I argue that sad girl pop demands a different kind of listening pedagogy than mainstream pop - i.e. queer listening. In Chapter One, I posit that queer listening is a teachable, heuristic tool that helps the listener move beyond normative structures of time, space, gender, and genre. In this moving beyond, the queer listener becomes acquainted with the unknown, which is synonymous with the emotional experience of beauty per Thomas Armstrong and Brian Detweiler-Bedell's theory. I draw on Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* to examine the role of affect in concretizing identity.

Moving into Chapter Two, I place the work of Lana Del Rey and Ethel Cain in conversation through the framework of queer listening. I posit that these artists are themselves glitches, rupturing the notions of genre and gender through their respective personas and music catalogs. Brooks uses the word "glitch" to primarily describe auditory anomalies. My application of the term stretches beyond describing sound and takes up Legacy Russell's definition which imagines the glitch as something productive, generative, and liberating. I also draw on Anton Blackburn's concept of the voice as an identity, arguing that the sad girl persona is delivered through a voice that is notably lower, breathier, and darker than that which defines mainstream girlboss pop.

Finally, in Chapter Three, I explore the ubiquity of sad girl pop in contemporary culture, paying mind to questions regarding late-stage capitalism and post-feminism. Here, I argue that the girlboss and the sad girl are both manifestations of neoliberalism in the sense that they reflect the impossibility of stability and happiness in a normative world. In doing so, I articulate the importance of queer listening in deconstructing the limitations set by normative structures and reiterate the necessity of beauty in catalyzing a richer understanding of the self and more broadly, our changing world.

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments…………………………………………………………………… ii

Preface…………………………………………………………………………………1

Introduction...2

Chapter One | Towards a Taxonomy of Queer Listening 15

Chapter Two | "I'm Pretty When I Cry:" Affect, Aesthetics, and the Voice of the Sad Girl…………………………………………………………………………………35

Chapter Three | Beauty and Authenticity in a Changing World…………………………63

Works Cited 83

Preface

Writing about music is like dancing about architecture.

- Variously attributed to the likes of Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, Martin Mull, Elvis Costello and several other musicians/entertainers

I would like to begin by pondering the above epigraph. This thesis, no less any other attempt to write about music, runs head on into an implacable obstacle; I have tried to describe an auditory, beyond-body experience using the written word. This has proven challenging. Indeed, to write about music is to attempt an impossibility: to capture the kinetic, multidimensional experience of seeping in sound within a medium that can only attempt to describe such a thing. I say this not as a warning to readers, but as an acknowledgement that the page can only do so much in communicating the sensory dynamism of music and its affective resonance. This thesis is sprawling, and intentionally so. It takes on a patchwork approach, fusing elements of close reading (of songs and music videos), music criticism, and theoretical pondering. This project is an exercise in horizontal thinking in the sense that it culls from a variety of disciplinary approaches and works to collapse the boundary between academic writing and popular cultural criticism. My hope is that I have cultivated a compelling - and at the very least - interesting way of reimaging how we might listen to sad girl pop and think about the figures that populate this sphere.

Introduction

Beauty is not caused. It is.

- Emily Dickinson

This thesis has two goals. The first is to exact a meaning of "queer listening." Andrew Brooks conceptualizes "a queer listening practice" as one that "tunes in to the sound of relations" and "uses the ear as a way of thinking through relations of power; it is a mode of listening attuned to the production, transmission, and mutation of the affective tonalities of dominant neoliberal capitalist cultures" (40). Specifically, Brooks focuses his research on experimental music and the use of "glitch" within such music. I wish to extend and complicate Brooks' thinking on queer listening by adapting it to a popular music space long overlooked in scholarship. The second venture is explaining how queer listening can be used to understand and appreciate the beauty of "sad girl pop"[1] and more specifically its affective and cultural resonance with listeners of two of contemporary music's most prescient and alluring figures: Lana Del Rey (LDR) and Ethel Cain. (EC).[2]

In this thesis, I posit that artists like LDR and EC are themselves glitches, rupturing the notions of genre and gender through their personal presentations and music catalogs; they themselves are queer listeners. Brooks uses the word "glitch" to primarily describe

[1] In this thesis, I make the distinction between sad girl pop and mainstream "girlboss" pop. Sad girl pop is atmospheric music – it foregrounds beauty as its core affect. Adapting the tools found in mainstream pop, sad girl pop challenges normative genre and gender limitations. There are many sad girl pop artists I chose not to write about in this thesis such as Billie Eilish, Marina, FKA Twigs, Phoebe Bridgers, Mitski, etc. This is not to say that these artists are not worth examining in more depth. I chose to focus primarily on Lana Del Rey and Ethel Cain because I see these artists as a part of the same lineage of sad girls. They both situate their self-mythologizing within their respective visions of America, placing them in conversation with one another.

[2] Ethel Cain is a character enacted and performed by Hayden Anhedönia. Throughout this work, I will be switching between referring to Cain and Anhedönia because I see them as two separate beings; Cain is the persona, Anhedönia is the person. More on persona, personage, and person in Chapter Two.

auditory anomalies. My use of the word stretches beyond sound and takes up Legacy Russell's definition which imagines the glitch as something productive, generative, and liberating. Sad girl pop – and its artists – are a glitch, branching off from the mainstream to challenge the "girlboss pop" that proliferated in the noughties and 2010s.[3] Because of its divergence from convention, I argue that sad girl pop demands a different kind of listening pedagogy than radio-ready pop music, i.e. queer listening.

Queer listeners are attuned to and embody the glitch. I take up what Brooks calls "a queer reading of failure" by reimagining failure as generative.[4] The queer listener's "failure" to seamlessly acquiesce to normative structures only underscores their ability to create meaning beyond the constructions of time, space, genre, and gender. Moving beyond normativity, the queer listener not only accounts for the musical elements within a song but observes the extramusical materials that exist outside of a performance.

Performances are innately social spaces where individual listeners congregate to observe musical beauty as delivered by a persona. A persona – per Philip Auslander's theory – is a social construction, created in tandem by the performer and the audience (101). When we observe a performance, we are often interfacing with the persona of the artist rather than the "real" person. Normative listening[5] evaluates the delivery of a persona in

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[3] Here, I am adapting Heather Mooney's argument that the sad girl is an antithesis to "the can-do girl" by constructing the category of "girlboss pop." I believe "girlbosses" are within the umbrella of "can-do girls" because they are both empowered figures who relentlessly work to overcome obstacles created by a patriarchal, hegemonic society. Mooney posits that "sadness performs a form of protest to the can-do girl" (178). I take this argument a step further by positing that the figure of the sad girl within pop challenges the affective and aesthetic norms of the girlboss pop genre. See "Sad Girls and Carefree Black Girls" by Heather Mooney.

[4] Brooks writes "A queer reading of failure - that is a failure to adhere to the drive toward heteronormative infrastructures that define the 'good life' - points to a kind of radical questioning and a making-fluid of norms, identities, and goals" (38).

[5] The key variable that distinguishes queer listening from normative listening is intent: the queer listener understands that pleasure is elusive, and that beauty is layered in a plethora of emotions – some harmonious, others contradictory. What makes this sort of listening queer is that it situates the listener

terms of authenticity. I echo Anton Blackburn's assertion that "defining an 'authentic' self […] is an impossibility" because the self that exists within the discursive domain of performance is always performing; evaluations of genuineness within this domain are "rendered moot" by this very fact (98). I argue that queer listening allows one to move beyond assessments of authenticity and account not only for an artist's persona as performed in the music, but for their personage and person.[6]

The queer listener, by straddling the social and private, the real and the imagined, is attuned to the nuances of the self, acquiring a rich understanding of the world around and within them. Through the act of queer listening, bodies are not only liberated from their anatomical limitations; they become archives of beauty – musical and otherwise. In a normative world. beauty is not often trusted, perhaps because of its association with emotions. This thesis seeks to assert beauty's importance as a catalyst of identity formation.

Queer listening is the tool deployed to excavate this beauty; it is a *beyond-body* experience.[7] My thinking about queer listening not only blossoms from Brooks' work, but partly stems from Steph Ceraso's characterization of listening as a "multisensory act" that goes well beyond our auditory capacity and works to forge deeper understandings of our internal and external world. By theorizing what she calls "multimodal listening," Ceraso conceptualizes what is thought as a primarily auditory event to be a practicable, teachable, "full-bodied act" (103). Though Ceraso's listening pedagogy is situated within the field of

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outside the confines of predictability, subsequently causing the listener to construct a terrain upon which the unexpected and unknown is observed in the ongoing production of beauty.

[6] More on these concepts in Chapter Two.

[7] I make the distinction here between out-of-body and beyond-body experience. Queer listening enables the listener to remain present in their body, actually moving deeper by *turning inward.* In the act of queer listening, the body is reimagined as an archive of affective resonance, moving beyond its anatomical and somatic purposes.

rhetoric and composition studies – and more specifically as a classroom practice – her work is generative here insofar that she aptly captures how listening impacts us not only on a bodily, organic level, but also emotionally.

The central function of queer listening is that it allows the listener – through engagement with the glitch – to access their rich inner worlds and experience the emotion of beauty. Though emotions have long been viewed as “beneath the faculties of thought and reason,” (Ahmed 3) I argue that it is the individual’s affective experience of listening to music – specifically sad girl pop – that catalyzes the formation of the self, shaping and concretizing identities through engagement with beauty. By focusing this research specifically in the realm of sad girl pop, my hope is to dismantle the association of “negative” emotions as stagnating or undesirable. Sara Ahmed points out that “Emotions are associated with women” who are thought to be “less able to transcend the body through thought, will and judgement” (3). In exacting a taxonomy of queer listening, my goal is to demonstrate how emotions are the material of transcendence, of the ‘moving beyond’ that constitutes a queer listening experience – especially for female and female-identifying listeners.

In Chapter One, I follow Ceraso in attempting to articulate a listening pedagogy. Further developing this concept of queer listening can help us arrive at an understanding of why specific sounds move certain people. It is not a novel endeavor to parse music’s affective power; it is a territory well-trodden by a slew of theorists, musicologists, and critics alike. My unique intervention is to examine the functionality of queer listening in constructing a liminal location wherein the listener comes in contact with the self through engagement with beauty.

Music possesses the kinetic and emotional influence to resonate with us, both physically and emotionally, as an ongoing, endless process. Multiple scholars have theorized the resonant implications of music's affective power, including Barry Shank, Hannah Ewens, and Kelefa Sanneh, who will all be central to this work. Despite the saturation of scholarship in this area, we can and should continue to articulate examination of pop music's political force, since most of the scholarship centers on the normative genres of rock, classical music, and opera.

This is perhaps due to the internalized rockism of many critical thinkers in the music space. Rockism is an ideological stance that rock is superior to other genres – namely pop (Sanneh 412). Rockism entered the lexicon during a time when the genre was being classicized, defined by the figure of the sweaty, thrusting male with an electric guitar.[8] Conversely, pop has long been stereotyped as the "inauthentic feminine" (Blackburn 94) populated by the image of the manufactured, plastic female pop star who is media trained, rehearsed, and has her music written for her. In their efforts to cement rock as the normative genre, rockists have cast pop as unintellectual, kitschy, and above all else "feminine," insinuating that pop music and its makers are not important or serious enough to study.

Though my hope is that the ideas presented throughout this thesis will be applicable beyond the scope of a singular genre, my goal in exploring the pop space is to push back against the notion of pop music as the "inauthentic feminine" and to underscore sad girl pop's ability to challenge notions of what meaningful music is. I position the figure of the sad girl pop artist as antithetical to previous iterations of the expected female pop archetype

[8] The term "rockism" came about in 1981 (Sanneh 410). During this era, rockers like Steven Tyler, Iggy Pop and Eddie Van Halen dominated the rock space. During the late 1960s and 70s, the image of the lusting, angsty male rock star was concretized by the likes of Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, Mick Jagger, Robert Plant, etc., figures who cemented the rock space as a masculine one.

or what I am calling the "girlboss pop star" because of her existence as an "anti-pop star" – embodying a femininity that disrupts conventional notions of genre and gender.

Zoe Alderton defines a sad girl as "a young woman who is unashamed of her emotional life and who fearlessly acts out her pain for others to see" (qtd. in Thelandersson 157). I would push back to suggest Alderton's definition is ironic in the sense that it attributes a lack of shame and fear to the sad girl whose entire ethos is welcoming and steeping in such emotions (Thelanderrson 157). Rather, I posit that a 'sad girl' is someone who exists in the liminality of shame, fear, and other "negative" emotions without exercising the impulse to resolve them. In this way, the sad girl challenges the girlboss figure who works tirelessly to own her emotions and make them productive.[9]

What has moved me towards this work is the ubiquity of sad girl culture which I will cover extensively in the third and final chapter of this work. Though sad girls in music have existed long before this current moment – think Alanis Morrisette and Fiona Apple – the arrival of Lana Del Rey in 2011 signaled an affective and sonic shift in the pop space, announcing a new iteration of sad girl music altogether. Despite its origins in 1990s Chicana culture, sad girl culture is dominated today by white female artists. Questions of appropriation have been raised in regard to specific artists – particularly Lana Del Rey – and their deployment of cultural symbols. Heather Mooney explores the way sad girl culture – through the vehicle of the white body – delimits emotional expression as

[9] I contrast the girlboss and the sad girl because they represent different manifestations of neoliberal, late-capitalist femininities. The girlboss is motivated by the prospect of failure, working relentlessly to avert the stagnation of "negative" emotions by commodifying her struggle, thereby acquiescing to normative expectations of a hegemonic heteronormativity: seeing happiness and self-improvement as the ultimate tenets of a fulfilling life and an empowered femininity. The sad girl does not observe these tenets as foundational to her experience; rather, through engagement with the unknown, the unresolved, the sad girl suspends expectations of productivity and self-improvement, lingering in liminal affective states without the prospect of overcoming her emotions or motivation to act. More on this idea in Chapter Three.

inherently racialized. Though race is not the primary lens of this thesis, I will be taking up issues in my discussions of sad girl culture – particularly in the final chapter – that center on how emotions are not only gendered but intersect with race as a way of determining how different groups are able to embody and express various emotions.

Though there is a gender component to the label, sad girl pop is a refusal to delineate aesthetics, emotions, pathologies through the narrow scope of normative gender. Ilana Kaplan defines sad girl pop as "the specific aesthetic of artists who write songs through a dreamy, yet raw lens of rage, pining, heartbreak, or rejection." I take issue with Kaplan's definition because it essentially renders sad girl pop nothing more than an aesthetic layer added atop mainstream pop instead of recognizing that it is its own entity. It has its own sound; its own texture and goes well beyond the limited emotional palette Kaplan describes.[10]

Contrary to what the label suggests, sad girl pop is not just *sad* pop music. Rather it is music enacted and delivered through the sad girl persona. The sad girl is a prominent figure in contemporary culture, populating internet spaces with various visual signifiers. Fredrika Thelandersson and Zoe Alderton have done much work on the sad girl in recent years. I disagree with their shared definition of the sad girl for two reasons. First, they argue that the figure is a "young woman," thereby delimiting emotional expression to a specific gender and age identity, reaffirming historical connotations of emotions as innately male and female. Second, they argue the sad girl is meant to use sadness as a way of "releasing

[10] Kaplan's article "The Psychology of 'Sad Girl' Pop: Why Music By Billie Eilish, Gracie Abrams, Olivia Rodrigo & More Is Resonating So Widely" received major backlash after Kaplan seemingly disregarded Lana Del Rey's contribution to the sad girl pop genre and credited its latest manifestation to Billie Eilish. In response to the article, Günseli Yaicinyaka aptly points out that "sadness is a universal trope" that is not confined to a single artist or type of music.

negative affect" "rather than wallowing in non-action" when in fact the sad girl is often complacent, finding the liminality of unresolved emotions to be generative and meaningful without exercising the impulse to be liberated from such states or seek catharsis.[11]

In this thesis, I argue that the sad girl embodies an aesthetic and affective philosophy that sees the unresolved, uncomfortable, historically pathologized emotions as organic, something to embrace. In pop music, the sad girl is not simply interested in expressing sadness through music but pushes against the idea that pop is meant to be pleasurable or even profitable, thereby subverting conventional genre and gender expectations and challenging the girlboss pop star archetype. In this way, the sad girl challenges late capitalist and post-feminist impulses that demand constant self-improvement and emotional conquering on behalf of the individual to the end of accumulating more capital.

Central to this work is the exploration of Lana Del Rey's artistry and mythology as well as the lineage of sad girl artists she has helped birth – in particular Ethel Cain – by deploying the tool of queer listening. Though at face value these two artists have considerable overlap thematically and tonally, they express vastly different visions of America. By enacting queer listening, my hope is to parse the differences between these two artists to highlight the nuances of sad girl pop music and its artists. I position Del Rey and Cain as queer listeners because of how they explode and challenge gender and genre expectations through their vocal identities.

Through both my formal training as a student and my experiences as a dedicated music fan, I have become increasingly curious about the way beauty serves to form and concretize our identities, both as part of a group and as individuals. I am not a musicologist,

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[11] See page 158-159 of Thelanderrson's *21st Century Media and Female Mental Health: Profitable Vulnerability and Sad Girl Culture.* More on catharsis on page 33.

but I believe a conversation about music should not be dominated by those formally trained in the academy. Though I do not possess the tools of a trained musician or the benefit of experience upon the stage, I have acquired a language to describe how music for certain listeners has the ability to shape and hone one's understanding of the self. I began listening to sad girl pop music when I was an adolescent – particularly the work of Lana Del Rey. Enraptured by her siren-like voice, I felt propelled into an ethereal space suspended above my own material reality, transported to an unfamiliar world.

This experience was akin to the make believe that children engage in in the early stages of their development – imagining worlds unbounded by the structures and expectations of their material reality. Tamar Kushnir argues that imagination, "our ability to imagine possible alternatives to reality – our ability to think of what could have happened, what should have happened, what can happen, what must or might happen and conversely what can't, shouldn't, mustn't, mightn't, or won't" is directly tied to the "effectiveness of human social cognition" (2). I did not know it then, but when listening to sad girl pop, I was enacting queer listening – imagining and accessing an alternative, adjacent space where one is not bound by normative structures.[12] In this space, the listener meets the self by unearthing the beauty within.

Entering graduate school, I knew I wanted to formally study Del Rey. She has been a compelling, albeit frustrating artist to study due to her ongoing courtship with

[12] Time, space, gender, and genre are the four normative structures that I will focus on in this thesis, arguing that these structures constrain our ability to access the identity-forming power of beauty. In a normative world, we are *observers* of beauty, meaning there is distance between us and what we are perceiving as beautiful. A central assertion of this thesis is that beauty is not something bound in visual aesthetics or observed from a distance. Rather, beauty – as argued by Armstrong and Detweiler-Bedell – is an emotion that is unearthed from within; queer listeners are archives of beauty.

controversy.[13] In researching her work for this thesis, I draw on concepts learned in the academy with the lived experiences of a fan – taking on the role of an "aca-fan" if you will.[14] Undertaking an independent study, I found myself moved by the ideas Barry Shank articulates in his seminal work *The Political Force of Musical Beauty* and soon developed the desire to adapt and apply his language to the pop space – a space that has long held significant meaning to me as a listener and young scholar.

The mode of writing in this thesis is designed to align with outlets like *The New York Times, Pitchfork, Stereogum* and the like whose critics are collapsing the academic and popular culture border. Though it is inevitable that I will draw on fields such as affect theory, performance theory, queer theory, sound studies, and ethnomusicology, this is not primarily a theoretical thesis. In other words, I am not trying to intervene in theoretical discourses so much as I am applying theory to a fairly common human experience, and to articulate sad girl pop's cultural resonance at both the level of the self and that of a broader community of listeners. Queer listening may be a speculative character in this work, but my hope is that it allows us to understand how we can make sense of sad girl pop's resonance and beauty's impact as a tool of identity formation more broadly.

Recently, universities have acknowledged the cultural resonance of sad girl pop, signaling its growing importance in present day media studies. This past fall, journalist Kathy Iandoli taught a course at NYU's Clive Davis Institute titled "Topics in Recorded

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[13] See footnote on page 63.

[14] An "aca-fan" is a term coined by Dr. Henry Jenkins. It describes "a hybrid creature which is part fan and part academic" (cited in Michailowsky 71).

Music: Lana Del Rey." In an interview with *Vanity Fair*, Iandoli explains the exigency of the course:

> In so many ways, I feel like Lana Del Rey is both a blueprint and a cautionary tale, a complicated pop star who resonates so much with her fans, not because of how she makes them feel about her, but rather how she makes them feel about themselves. She has changed the parameters of baroque pop and now more specifically 'sad girl pop' through her music, by expanding the subject matter which at times is controversial and challenging. (Kirkpatrick)

Not only does the course being taught by a music journalist (someone from outside the academy) signal the collapsing boundaries between academia and the popular culture space, but a course centering Lana Del Rey's active and ongoing legacy underscores the ground-shifting impact of her work and sad girl pop more broadly.

Though it is tempting to solely focus on Lana Del Rey in this work for the sake of cogency and concision, I find it necessary and urgent to recognize the wider cultural landscape that LDR has helped shape and the characters that populate it – hence my writing about sad girl pop's latest star, Ethel Cain. Opening a conversation around sad girl pop within the academy can help challenge notions of genre and gender. It is necessary to rethink the genre conversation and how it is entwined with our expectations of gender presentation. Though pop has been cast by rockists as the "inauthentic feminine" genre, marked by a lack of nuance and meaning, I argue that its various subgenres, namely sad girl pop, offer complex affective experiences that result in identity formation at both the micro and macro level. Extending Shank's argument that musical beauty can articulate a "shared political longing" among a polis of listeners, I assert that sad girl pop – specifically the work of Lana Del Rey and Ethel Cain – works to put listeners in contact with their rich inner worlds, resulting in a residual and ongoing production of the self.

By enacting queer listening, one constructs a new space, a place where the inward psychosomatic experience of excavating the beauty of the self dovetails with the shared, felt experience of the common. The observation of beauty acts as a liberating tool, a sort of crowbar that wedges open the door solidified by the constraints of social expectation and creates ample space for the tactile emotional and physical experience of listening as a member of a group. Shank explains this well, writing "The affective power of musico-cultural figures can change the relationship of the ethnos to the demos, shifting the relations of those who are legitimately included inside the political community" (16).

Queer listening moves beyond pleasure seeking and establishes a critical lens through which disruption becomes fluid, fracture becomes unity, and the distance between the real and the imagined begins to collapse. Essentially, queer listening is the painful bliss of being just outside of the party. The simultaneous relief and longing. A moment of turning away from the normative and towards the inner self. And it is here where the queer listener ascends above the ephemerality of a performance and lives permanently in the ongoing excavation of beauty; musical and otherwise. It is the process by which the "sinking feeling" where a "seamless space" (Ahmed 148) opens up becomes accessible to the listener, resulting in a temporary suspension from the constraints of normative, repetitive life.

In Chapter One, my aim is to describe queer listening so that it can be applied as a critical framework in the subsequent chapters. I discuss concepts the four normative structures that queer listening moves beyond, with particular focus on the latter two: time, space, genre, and gender. In Chapter Two, I will apply queer listening to parse Del Rey and Cain's complex mythologies. There, I will carefully extract meaning from several of

Del Rey's songs, music videos, and other art pieces to put her in direct conversation with Cain, whose art is consciously or not a byproduct of Del Rey's cultural influence. The objective of Chapter Two is multipronged. I wish to demonstrate queer listening through the examination of specific artists' work, provide a close reading of said work, and parse how the mythological personas and associated worlds of these artists impact their listeners' lived experience. In Chapter Three, I explore queer listening's utility in context to the broader cultural moment and examine the sad girl's position within the zeitgeist. Here, I also raise lingering questions for further study.

The essential questions of this thesis are as follows: What is queer listening and how can it be applied to the sad girl pop space? To what end? How does the art and artistry of Lana Del Rey and Ethel Cain challenge/complicate normativity and what is the significance of this complication? Over the course of the following chapters, my aim is to articulate meaningful responses to these questions while leaving the door open for further inquiry in an effort to generate curiosity about pop music within the academy, and more specifically, the space where English Literature, cultural studies, and aesthetic philosophy intersect. By adapting concepts from theoretical influences such as Ahmed and Shank, I hope to demonstrate how queer listening can serve as critical framework through which we can understand beauty's necessity in our world beyond aesthetic pleasure. I argue that it is beauty – more than any emotion – that allows one to meet the self.

CHAPTER ONE

Towards a Taxonomy of Queer Listening

...what is relegated to the margins is often,
as we know from deconstruction, right at the centre of thought itself.

- Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*

To begin, I want to propose a working definition of queer listening that moves beyond the one proposed by Brooks. In doing so, I wish to strip queer of its sexual connotation for a moment and instead apply bell hooks' take on queerness as being not about "who you're having sex with (that can be a dimension of it); but 'queer' as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and that has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live."[15] This "place" is constructed by the queer listener as an adjacent space to the normative structures that govern daily life. This adjacent space can be created anywhere – in a social setting like a concert or privately in one's home. Here, the queer listener thinks "through relations of power" (Brooks 40) and challenges normativity by moving beyond the constraints of time, space, genre, and gender.

Queer listening moves the listener beyond the expected temporal flow and spatial constraints of daily life to observe what is not obviously there, considering the extramusical elements like persona. It is a heuristic device, meant to aid in the excavation of beauty – musical and otherwise. The queer listener is not so much interested in beauty that is contoured by hegemonic conceptions of what is "pretty" or appealing. Rather, they are attuned to the glitch, the rupture within a liminal space where affective beauty lives.[16]

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[15] From *Are You Still a Slave? Liberating the Black Female Body,* a lecture given at Eugene Lang College where hooks was a panelist.

[16] Affective beauty refers to beauty not as something that is observed but something that is experienced as an emotion. See "Beauty as an Emotion: The Exhilarating Prospect of Mastering a Challenging World" by Armstrong and Detweiler-Bedell.

Essentially, queer listening is a tool of identity formation that enables the individual listener to gain a deeper understanding of the self.

I'd like to draw on Steph Ceraso's work – specifically her conception of "multimodal listening" – to ground this theory. Though working primarily in the field of rhetoric and pedagogy, Ceraso formulates a convincing conception of listening as a "multisensory act" that goes well beyond auditory stimulation (102). Ceraso's central claim is that listening is a teachable skill that is best thought of "in terms of sensory possibilities rather than organ-specific binaries" (120). Multimodal listening gets at the "embodied, sensory aspects of listening" positioning the whole body as a receptor of sound (104).[17] Like multimodal listening, queer listening demands a certain positionality of the listener.

Allow me to ground this theory in a tactile lived experience:

Recently, I attended Ethel Cain's sold-out show at Higher Ground Ballroom in Burlington, Vermont, a general admission venue whose capacity is around 900 people. I was there not just as a fan, but as a young researcher testing my theory of queer listening. I intentionally stood on the second tier towards the back of the room, avoiding the condensed clutter of people towards the stage. This in and of itself – the intentional removal from the mass – is an act of queer listening because (if we consider hooks' definition) – the listener (me in this case) has to "invent and create and find a place" to thrive outside of normative formations. The expected – and often desired – bodily position at a GA show is near and towards the stage; it is where the most kinetic energy is stored. To apply my theory

[17] See Steph Ceraso's "(Re)Educating the Senses: Multimodal Listening, Bodily Learning, and the Composition of Sonic Experiences."

of queer listening, I stood at a distance from the nucleus, maintaining an awareness of the action while occupying space away from it.[18]

In this section of the venue, I stood among other queer listeners who I was able to quickly identify based on the bodily stance they took. As the show wound on, I noticed my fellow queer listeners closing their eyes, arms folded, swaying silently to the sound. Some even hummed to the tune in an almost hypnotic state. Interviewing a fellow concertgoer – a 20-year-old female college student and suspected queer listener – I asked how she felt during the show:

> I was totally lost in the sound. I don't recall the order of events, like which song was played when or anything like that. But I know I felt outside of myself and also completely folded within myself. It almost felt like I was split in half – one part of me was living in the real world and another completely within the world of her [Ethel Cain's] music.[19]

This is a remarkable description of how queer listening functions. It doesn't totally suspend the listener outside of their material reality but allows them to simultaneously occupy two different hemispheres: the external, "lived" reality and the internal world constructed by the music.

By immersing in "the world of her music" this queer listener was able to sink into herself, forgetting time ("I don't recall the order of events") and becoming "lost in the sound." Here, the queer listener destabilizes normative structures by collapsing spatial boundaries (feeling "outside" of and folded into the "self") and transcending bodily limitations ("I was split in half"). By engaging in a deeply introspective experience whilst

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[18] I do not want to suggest that *queering* an experience is synonymous with creating distance from it. Rather, I wish to articulate how this sort of listening situates one in a space of complication, moving beyond the immediacy of a performance and into a realm of prolonged, ongoing excavation of beauty: a realm of affect.

[19] This is from a personal interview conducted on October 17h, 2023. The subject of the interview has chosen to remain anonymous.

maintaining a position within a social collective of other listeners, the queer listener deconstructs structural limitations; existing in two places at once: the material known and the affective unknown.

There's a certain interiority to queer listening that causes the listener to physically fold inward while still being present among the crowd, not wholly removed. This is because different emotional states orient bodies differently. While pleasure helps open bodies to one another (Ahmed 13) the emotional experience of beauty can be a deeply introspective, insular venture. Let's move beyond the concert space for a moment to develop this practice of queer listening in a different context. Imagine you are riding on a New York City subway during Monday morning rush hour. There are dozens, perhaps hundreds of commuters wedged into the claustrophobic compartments. I'd venture a guess that most – not all – of these passengers are attuned to and governed by the expected temporal flow of everyday life. Caught in a cycle of Pavlovian responses to the pings and dings of various sounds – from the unwelcome abruptness of an alarm to the unrelenting vibration of a cellphone – the average person is suspended in a space of repetition, the expected, the known.

Among this crowd, there are those that carve a space to listen to what is not obviously there, to release themselves – even temporarily – from the ongoing redundancy of routine life. These folks are the toe-tappers, the ones humming to themselves, the ones with headphones clamped on, eyes closed, indulging in the nostalgic foray into an episodic memory.[20] These memories jolt the listener out of the present moment and return them to a time that has since gone, resulting in total disorientation, and causing a positioning away from the ongoing action towards a former self. Because the episodic memory is activated,

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[20] Episodic memories can be induced by hearing certain music associated with a specific place and/or time (Julsin and Västfjäll cited in Robinson and Hatten 83).

the listener has a difficult time parsing what is currently happening around them and what's imagined, leading to a substantial lapse in recalling the unfolding of the performance. Therefore, enacting queer listening can lead to a complete glitching of the temporal flow; events rearrange and collate to produce highly overwhelming somatic experiences.[21]

In her book *Glitch Feminism*, Legacy Russell defines "glitch" as "an error, a mistake, a failure to function" (7). However, this failure is generative because glitches "gesture toward the artifice of social and cultural systems, revealing the fissures in a reality we assume to be seamless" (92). Glitches help destabilize normative structures, in turn liberating bodies. Russell's book is a sprawling post-humanist manifesto that sees these "glitches," these abstractions as "a vehicle of refusal, a strategy of nonperformance" that can "make abstract again that which has been forced into an uncomfortable and ill-defined material: the body" (8).

Another Ethel Cain concert attendee – a 25-year-old woman – described the event as "an out-of-body experience," further noting "I found myself crying and not knowing how the tears got there. It was like my body was crying without me knowing."[22] I might revise this concertgoer's description of the event as "out-of-body" and instead suggest that queer listening creates a "beyond-body" experience. In becoming attuned to the glitch, the bodies

[21] This can be observed in the case study of Taylor Swift whose historic Eras Tour has left fans with what several psychologists are dubbing "post-concert amnesia." I would suggest that those experiencing this sort of emotional overwhelm are queer listeners because they are operating on a wholly separate plane than normative listeners. It would not be a normative experience to black out at a concert from emotional overwhelm. In this moment of 'post-show amnesia', it is confirmed that the queer listener is capable of warping time internally to experience an emotional and psychological response that normative listeners are incapable of accessing. See "Taylor Swift fans report 'amnesia' following Eras show" by Fiona Nimoni.
[22] This is from a personal interview conducted on October 4th, 2023. The subject of the interview has chosen to remain anonymous.

of queer listeners are reimagined as receptors of sound and archives of beauty's affective resonance – stripped of all anatomical limitations.

Engaging with the beauty that queer listening excavates actually forces the listener to become more internal as they come in contact with the self that exists in the glitch. In sifting through episodic memories, the listener must revisit concealed parts of themselves and engage with the unknown. Queer listening then is not so much about being able to observe musical beauty delivered by a performer but is about excavating the beauty of the inner self. As embodied archives, queer listeners move beyond the constraints of time as the performance ripples through them long after the conclusion, catalyzing a bone-deep, internal experience. It is here where beauty lives.[23]

While the normative listener primarily seeks somatic pleasure in the sound they are receiving – listening with their ears – the queer listener understands that pleasure is elusive because it is a "denizen of the body" and therefore ephemeral (Gergen 97). Unlike the normative listener, the queer listener does not simply listen with their physical being. Rather, they listen with their emotional selves, opening up to the "exhilarating emotional experience" of encountering beauty from within (Armstrong and Detweiler-Bedell 306). Beauty in this context is synonymous with the unknown; it is in itself the glitch where the queer listener reaches beyond material reality to meet the self that is not tethered to the language of norms.

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[23] I synonymize beauty and the unknown in this work per Armstrong and Detweiler-Bedell's assertion that beauty is predicated on encountering the novel (306). This is not to be confused with the "sublime" whose affective resonance is partly contingent upon the perceiver recognizing their limitations relative to the experience they are observing. Rather, the emotional experience of beauty - becoming acquainted with the unknown – catalyzes an inside-out experience of self-discovery, leading to the formation of identity as an individual and as a member of a broader collective. See "Beauty as an Emotion: The Exhilarating Prospect of Mastering a Challenging World" (2008).

Sara Ahmed describes the surfaces of bodies as surfaces of norms and explains that "through repeating some gestures and not others" these norms shape, enable, and twist bodies, positioning them in a specific way within certain social contexts (145). The queer listener rewrites these norms, prepared to excavate beauty both within the musical performance and the self. In regard to concerts specifically, it may appear that each audience member arrives to the event with the same goal in mind – to find pleasure in the performance being delivered. These events open up a field of difference because they cull together listeners of all persuasions.

Within this field of difference, listeners come together to forge a collective – a "common" that is constructed in the moment of listening (Shank 14). Shank reasons that music is a tool of articulation, used to express a "shared political longing" within a field of difference (227). In his view, music is not merely a reiterative device, but an agentic one that reveals the nuances of a political community in terms of communal affective responses to the reception of musical beauty. This beauty is not derived primarily from music's sonic components, but rather its affective implications, in turn producing a "connection that generates new experiences of subjectivity" within a singular polis (15). In essence, Shank imagines musical beauty as a vehicle through which singularity arises from multiplicity, driven by the distribution of the performance ("the sensible") to the common (the audience).

Musical beauty – in Shank's view – is not synonymous with "prettiness or quickly achieved consonance" or "musical advance" (4). Rather, musical beauty can result from the obfuscation of refinement, and often does. If musical beauty is largely predicated on a lack of perfection, we can reason that it is abundant within the glitch because it is a space

of "failure" where norms are subverted. Shank takes for granted that being in proximity to a performance is enough to experience musical beauty and its affect.[24] I'd like to argue that queer listening is *the process* – one can only recognize and ingest affective beauty – musical and otherwise – by enacting this type of listening. This is because queer listening moves beyond the constraints of normativity to open up a boundless terrain of self-exploration that only exists within the glitch.

John Dewey writes: "Experience has a meaning not only in that objects are connected with each other, but also as it is connected with ourselves. Experience is feeling, therefore, as well as knowledge; for feeling, in ultimate definition, is simply this intimate connection with self" (19). Excavating and encountering beauty helps one expand the knowledge of the self, of one's place in the world. Beauty is best described then as an epistemological venture because it serves to "reshape and expand knowledge" (305). Put simply, beauty is a tool of identity formation because it reveals to us what we have yet to uncover.

Queer Listening and Identity Formation

The queer listener does not simply seek a closer connection with the self, but a sense of belonging within a broader community (Shank 22; Ewens 47). In a time defined by hyper-individualism and increasing disconnectedness, the formation of sustainable social bonds is especially complex. Sheila Liming – echoing numerous mental health experts – declares this moment in history one wrought with loneliness. She argues that self-preservation is prioritized while community formation is deprioritized, leading to a plethora of adverse impacts on individuals and society more generally (172). The

[24] I'd also like to expand the definition of "performance." A performance is simply any means of communicating a song. This performance can take place at a live show, through the airwaves of a car radio, on a streaming platform, etc. One does not have to be physically present at a concert or live show to witness a performance and queer listen; it can happen anywhere.

internet/intimacy paradox creates a mirage of connectedness that when closely examined dissipates to reveal the widening chasms between individuals.

Despite this, music culture remains a space where individuals congregate to embark on their personal journeys to unearth beauty alongside one another. While the concept of beauty is innately subjective, the polis of queer listeners operates in such a way as to collate individual experiences to produce harmony among the common. The basis of this belonging is the shared understanding that each member of the polis recognizes the performance – and oftentimes the performer – as something wholly, and unquestionably beautiful (Shank 17). Whether in attendance at a live show or in the privacy of listening through headphones, music fans – particularly queer listeners – share in the experience of meeting the self through engagement with art.

Hannah Ewens defines fandom as screaming "alone together;" (5) in other words, belonging to a contingency of queer listeners is to experience subjective affect within a group. Shank posits that "…linking the relationship between the political and the musical through identity often solidifies that identity," (14) and therefore, the journey of the individual is highly consequential in articulating and authenticating the political longings of the group. Not only that, but there is an aesthetic to belonging to a political community. Think about any concert you've been to recently; there's a specific attire, body language, dialect among the audience that serves to articulate – subtly and not so – the shared desires of the group. Emotions are a part of this aesthetic toolkit, deployed to signal one's membership within a polis of listeners.

Emotions serve to authenticate one's experience within the polis and signal to other queer listeners "… I was there, at this time, at this place, for this artist and I was involved"

(Ewens 19). Shank imagines the musical performance as a "field of production" (145) that reproduces the sociopolitical conditions of the outside world. Through the vehicle of musical beauty, the performance distorts the real which is rendered to a specific emotional experience – in turn constructing a "symbolic economy" in which emotions are the currency (Duffett 154).[25] This concept is particularly interesting when paired with Ahmed's thesis that emotions are not wholly psychological, but rather a cultural phenomenon that buttresses normative structures. She writes "it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made; the 'I' and the 'we' are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others" (10). In Ahmed's view, emotions "circulate" to "produce the surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects" (10). In this sense, emotions act as a currency that flows through the polis, connecting individual listeners and shaping the social.

We can think of a performance as a knowing field wherein "intimate publics" arise.[26] These intimate publics are supported by the exchange of affects that serve to authenticate both collective and individual experiences of feeling. Enacting queer listening to extract beauty in the moment of a performance – that of the music and that of the self – allows for the articulation of "shared political longings" that help shape a group identity (Shank 27). Not only this, but the collective experience of witnessing musical beauty

[25] This symbolic economy entails "the perceived movement of power between individuals that can be seen only in its manifestations" within the "knowing field" of a concert (Duffett 152). This "knowing field" is "an inner space of intense emotional conviction that fans collectively enter into when they notice engrossing aspects of a performance" (Duffett 154).

[26] Shank, citing Lauren Berlant, explains that intimate publics are groups of people "already share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience'" (5).

authenticates the subjective emotions of individual audience members (Shank 28). Through the excavation of musical beauty, there can sprout a cohesive social real from a field of difference, underscoring music's emotional and political power. This is not to suggest the idealistic mode of thinking that musical beauty can smooth the striations inherent within a social collective; rather, it can serve as a mechanism of distributing "the sensible" to all, in turn transforming "the experience of the common" to the end that difference is a force of connection rather than separation (Shank 28).

Beyond forming a political community, queer listening helps shape "emotional communities" which are defined as "groups in which people adhere to the same norms of emotional expression and value – or devalue – the same or related emotions'" (Rosenwein qtd. in Boquet and Lett 15). This is because queer listening creates space for a multitude of affective expressions. Take for example the Ethel Cain concert described earlier. Those that I identified as queer listeners were turned inward, removed from the kinetic energy of the crowd, resonating on their own vibrational plane.

In a normative view, one might read this bodily stance as connoting a negative emotion. If we consider pleasure to be about the "opening up of bodies" (Ahmed 13) we might see displeasure as the turning inward of bodies. However, emotions within a community of queer listeners are coded differently because the norms that are typically inscribed upon bodies are erased in the moment of constructing an adjacent space that challenges these normative structures. In doing so, the "turning inward" can be read as the bodily stance of someone experiencing the emotion of beauty. A community of queer listeners turns inward and toward each other – maybe not always physically, but certainly affectively.

Ahmed notes that certain emotional experiences are delimited on the lines of "legitimate" and "illegitimate" as a way of constructing marginalized groups (191).[27] By categorizing affects within this dialectical framework, "others" emerge as a complication to normative ways of feeling. A community of queer listeners within the sad girl pop space dismantles this dialectic by considering all emotions organic and therefore "legitimate." At the Ethel Cain show, there were a wide range of emotional expressions being shared amongst the polis; some people swayed gently, others squealed with excitement, several cried quietly to themselves. There is no expected mode of being at a sad girl pop show the way there is at say a punk rock show.[28] There is no proving oneself to the other listeners; all emotional expressions are welcome. By dismantling the hierarchy of legitimate and illegitimate emotions, queer listeners within the sad girl pop sphere reorganize affects, destabilizing normative expectations of expression.

Ahmed argues that emotions are culturally performed to organize a polis; norms are inscribed on the surface of the body, "impressed upon" by a "world made up of others" (145). Because queer listening is a beyond-body experience, the norms etched on the surfaces of bodies dissipate in the moment of queer listening. The queer listener – whose position is innately "outside" normativity – erases these norms in the moment of "sinking"

[27] Important to note is the context within which Ahmed uses these terms. She is primarily researching sociopolitical boundaries and the ways in which emotions serve to mold social connections within various political contexts. Ahmed's work can be useful in explaining the community that arises from a performance because a group of listeners is organized much like a nation-state, a polis like Shank asserts.
[28] Shank – through his exploration of various subgenres within rock – explains the differing norms within these spaces. For instance, he describes punk shows as being founded on an understanding of "being with those with whom" one differs (182). These differences among members of the polis produce a tension that snaps and unfurls in the form of violent mosh pits. It is commonplace at hardcore shows to see this sort of interaction among the audience. By asserting oneself in the mosh, an individual signals to the polis their legitimacy. Genres determine various emotional languages that are used to communicate one's positionality within the group.

into the glitch (145). Entering this space, the queer listener not only moves beyond time and space, but they also challenge notions of gender and genre.

Genre and Gender/Mood and Affect

Genre and gender come from the same Latin root "genus" meaning kind/type/origin (Oxford English Dictionary). They are tools of categorization, used to frame expectations and set norms within social contexts. Genre and gender are uniquely entwined, specifically in regard to the rock vs. pop debate that has been ongoing in criticism circles since the latter half of the twentieth century. Anton Blackburn writes "…pop is seen as the inauthentic feminine, whilst rock is the authentic masculine" (91). The connotation of masculine as inherently "authentic" and feminine as innately "inauthentic" stems from a historical dialectic wherein masculine and feminine are positioned as opposites, incapable of sharing qualities, and therefore, positioned as "good" and "bad," respectively (Stone as cited in Blackburn 90).

What emerges from these associations is a solidification of rock as the normative genre – the standard of what good music should be. This ideology actually has a name: rockism (Sanneh 411). Popularized by musician Pete Wiley, it has come to mean many things, but at its core, it refers to one's tendency to favor rock and its conventions over other genres, namely pop (Sanneh 412). Placing rock and pop against each other concretizes them as antinomies that are immovable and static; pop is designated as the inferior genre while rock is deemed superior. Kelefa Sanneh defines rockism as "idolizing the authentic old legend (or underground hero) while mocking the latest pop star; lionizing

punk while barely tolerating disco; loving the live show and hating the music video; extolling the growling performer while hating the lip-syncher."[29]

Characterizing pop as inauthentic – and linking such inauthenticity to femininity – not only signals rockists' limited understanding of what pop music actually is but underscores the misogynistic bent of those shaping our cultural biases. At its core, genre is not only an organizational tool used to categorize our listening, but a device deployed to capture segments of the population and position them towards a specific artist. Charlie Harding and Nate Sloan argue that "…pop isn't a genre; it's a marketing category that encompasses everything that is commercially successful, regardless of sound" (146).

There are two key issues with Harding and Sloan's argument. For one, it appears that they are conflating pop music with what's popular (i.e. "everything that is commercially successful"). Their position also implies that pop does not generate a specific audience – that it is too ambiguous, broad, and loosely-defined to identify a certain sound. This, however, is simply not true. Any type of music – regardless of genre – can become "popular" if it flows into the mainstream. As I write, three country songs sit atop the *Billboard* Hot 100. Though these songs are undeniably "popular" because of their streaming numbers and radio play, they are not pop songs.[30]

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[29] The oppositional stance to rockism is "poptimism" which asks listeners to open their minds to pop's affective and sonic possibilities (Sanneh 415). In response to the "rock snobbery" that percolated throughout the industry during the latter half of the twentieth century, the aim of 2000s and early 2010s "new pop was that it encouraged listeners to stop worrying about 'credibility' in order to focus intently on pleasure" (Sanneh 418-419). At this time artists like Katy Perry, Ariana Grande, Demi Lovato, and Carly Rae Jepsen dominated the charts with sparkling, sticky pop bops. Though the music was commercially successful, it solidified rockists' positions that pop is not necessarily an organic, intellectual genre, but one of redundancy. In the time since, a profusion of subgenres has occurred to splinter mainstream pop and create new spaces for people to situate and make sense of their listening.

[30] As of this writing, "I Remember Everything" by Zach Bryan and Kacey Musgraves – a song categorized within the country genre – sits at the number four spot on the *Billboard* Hot 100. Though this indicates the song's popularity, it does not make it a pop song. In other words, a song can be popular without being a pop song.

I firmly disagree with Harding and Sloan because pop and its many subgenres has its own sound and feel, constructing varying audiences. Sanneh examines how genre helps create audiences through a shared understanding of musical qualities. Though it is certainly true that genres can be defined by musical components – rock music relies on similar sounds like the electric guitar and drums; jazz saxophone, trombone, piano, etc. – it is limiting to think of genre solely in terms of its instrumentation. More than common musical elements, genre is defined by the mood it sets and communicates. Emotions are what creates the community around a specific type of music. Therefore, genre is not only built on musical components, but the audience it draws.

Just as gender has historically been used as a "heuristic tool" used to construct identity, "…genre appeals to a specific sensibility within a certain listener" producing audiences that take up certain characteristics (Boquet and Lett 13). This is because genre is a frame; that is, genre provides context by constructing social conventions and standards.[31] For instance, it is not unusual to encounter an aggressive mosh pit at a hardcore punk show. In fact, it is this symbolic exchange of energy and emotion amongst the crowd that solidifies the polis and authenticates the space as hardcore (Shank 185). Witnessing a mosh at a pop show would be odd – out of place – because the genre conventions do not align with this sort of emotional expression.

[31] Frames are "Socially defined 'principles of organization which govern events' that individuals internalize as cognitive structures" (Goffman cited in Auslander 104). There are two categories of frames – natural and social – music being a social frame in Auslander's view because it is "a product of human agency" (104). Sanneh asserts that genre is the space created by listeners; it is both a sonic and affective aesthetic that gives shape to a particular community. See *Major Labels* by Kelefa Sanneh.

It would be an oversight to not notice how gender helps construct these standards of affect.[32] The hardcore rock space is associated with masculinity in part because emotions such as anger and rage are laced through and evoked by the music, emotions connoted as "male" (Boquet and Lett 7). This permits the "intense physicality" (Shank 190) that often occurs in this space to be deemed appropriate because it reflects an expected mode of being in the social real, where violence is normalized as a signifier of embodied and enacted masculinity.[33] Because these expressions of emotion are situated within the rock space, they are innately coded as authentic.

Conversely, emotional expressions in the pop space are cast as inauthentic and therefore, not emotionally rich. Defining pop in terms of femininity reinforces affective limitations and systemic determinations of expressions. Just as genre determines – or at least attempts to determine – musical boundaries, gender governs bodies and dictates how and where those bodies can exist. Just like we ascribe a certain sonic palette to a genre, we assign specific emotional palettes to define gender norms.[34] Russell explains that "… gender circumscribes the body, 'protects' it from becoming limitless, from claiming the

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[32] Even within a broader genre, subgenres differ "… the indie scene seeks the authentic in the ability to feel fully and articulate as clearly as possible the contradictions that collaborate in the production of feeling" whereas hardcore relies on "unambiguous affective relations" communicated through "intense physicality" so as to create the illusion of purity (Shank 192, 189). Hardcore concerns itself with what happens within the field of production, an "embodied immediacy"; indie foregrounds "emotional honesty" and moves beyond immediacy to acknowledge contradiction outside of the immediate performance (Shank 189-190).

[33] Shank writes that there is an "… expressive connection between the social real of an ethnos and the songs that both move and solidify the identity of that group" (12) meaning that musical performances are microcosms of the broader sociopolitical realm, reflecting back to us the power structures and dynamics of material life.

[34] Boquet and Lett describe "hot, dry emotions" like anger, audacity, rage, and hate as historically "masculine" while "cool, wet emotions" like "fear, shyness, compassion, languor" are connoted as feminine (8). See "Emotions and the Concept of Gender."

infinite vast, from realizing its true potential" (8). This constrains affective possibilities and further, impedes our understanding of pop's influence on identity-formation.

Broadening the Pop Frame

There has long been a narrow understanding in music criticism that mainstream pop – the music we are familiar with hearing on the radio and played in shopping malls – is the music that defines the genre. Images of weeping teen girls at a Taylor Swift concert contour the public's misunderstanding of who pop mainly appeals to and obfuscates the nuanced narratives unfolding in pop spaces. Mainstream pop only captures a sliver of what pop music is and can be. "What we mean by 'pop' or 'jazz' or 'country' changes regularly; genre is not a static, immovable idea but a reflection of an audience's assumptions and wants at a certain point in time" (Petrusich). We must therefore broaden the pop frame.

Emery Schubert explains that pop music can be defined in two ways: in musicological terms and psychologically. By taking up the psychological definition, we center the listener's emotional experience instead of focusing solely on how pop is defined in musical terms. The listener, in Schubert's view, is the one who defines what pop is based on the meaning they extract from a song. In this view, pop is constantly in flux, subjective to a listener's perspective. In Schubert's words, "Chopin and Samuel Barber are as much popular music creators as Lady Gaga and Radiohead." Schubert's argument is centrally that exposure to music is what makes it "popular" to the individual listener and that enjoyment of that music is not predicated on the emotions expressed in the music, but rather the emotions *felt* by the listener. This listener-centered approach pairs well with queer listening because it deconstructs arbitrary limitations set by critics and label executives by foregrounding the human experience of listening. The queer listener refuses to categorize a song solely by its musical elements; genre is reimagined as affect.

By foregrounding affect, the queer listener destabilizes the hierarchical debate as to which genre is most authentic and meaningful. By proxy, the question of gender is seemingly rendered futile because by moving beyond genre, the queer listener dismantles the dialectic construction of "authentic masculine" vs. "inauthentic feminine." In doing so, the queer listener reimagines genre as mood and gender as affect. Music is not so much about the constructed sound, but rather, the mood the sound evokes and the affect the character of the voice communicates. By challenging these normative structures, the queer listener calls into question the market mechanism by which music is defined, organized, and sold, thereby undermining "dominant neoliberal capitalist cultures" (Brooks 40) that seek to limit the affective scope of a singular genre.

In the context of sad girl pop, the queer listener thinks critically about the multiple layers of the performer's self, namely persona, personage, and person.[35] The adjacent space created by the queer listener is the terrain upon which they access the imagined world constructed by the musical persona. The queer listener does not distinguish between reality and what's imagined; the emotions evoked – and often the traumatic storylines

[35] Auslander's extensive work on musical persona is helpful here and provides a framework for this chapter. Persona, in his view, is a social construction, meaning it is built in tandem by the performer and the audience (114). Personage refers to the person that we perceive performing the music; it accounts for the character being played and the real person who is playing the character (Graver cited in Auslander 101). For instance, Lana Del Rey performs a persona in her music (the sad girl); it is a character that exists as a construct of her world-building. The queer listener – by archiving the affective resonance of this music – sustains this persona, but not without holding space for the personage and person. Personage is a "liminal phenomenon" that mediates the "real person and the character" (Graver cited in Auslander 102). David Graver explains that "Personage status is not a foundational reality but simply another way of representing oneself […] within a particular discursive domain" (qtd. in Auslander 101). The distinction between persona and personage is subtle, but important. Persona refers to the character that is portrayed through the art – aka the "role" the real person plays within the music (101). Personage refers to the person perceived by the public outside of the music.

communicated in the music – leave a residue in the body of the listener that helps sustain the mythological universe of the persona.

Persona is in part built by the collective desires of a group, encoded with the language and expectations of normativity. Personage is a bit more subjective and flimsier; it is our individual perception of who we see delivering the persona (the celebrity). Identifying the "real" person beneath the persona and the personage is seemingly impossible; it is an inaccessible domain that is ill-defined at best because we as the listener never get to witness the performer in the privacy of their everyday life. We may only ever gain such access to this discursive domain through the lens of interviews, social media posts, and behind-the-scenes footage, all of which are still mediated by the personage. Queer listening gets us as close to meeting the "real" person as possible; the queer listener maintains an awareness of the personage while parsing the distance between the persona and the person, making for a rich listening experience that is not immediately accessed when passively engaging with the music.

The queer listener is always moving beyond – beyond the ear, beyond the body, beyond normativity. In this "moving beyond" the queer listener reimagines what pop music can be and questions the power dynamics that construct genre as static and gender as limiting. Queer listening is uniquely capable of parsing the layers of the self that exist within various discursive domains because such a practice simultaneously positions the listener in the empirical, lived world and the mythological universe of the persona. In the following chapter, I discuss the work of Ethel Cain and Lana Del Rey by moving beyond assessments of normative constructions of gender and genre. In examining the work of these artists, I

will reveal them to be queer listeners in the sense that they actively work against normativity in crafting their music and mythologies.

CHAPTER TWO

"I'm Pretty When I Cry": Affect, Aesthetics, and the Voice of the Sad Girl

Often when we listen to music, we are attuned to aspects like repetition and timbre (the character of the sound) because these elements are "emotionally satisfying to our brains and make the listening experience as pleasurable as it is" (Robinson and Hatten 79; Levitin 167). Especially in pop music, smooth timbres and repetitive elements (parallel choruses, repeated phrases, etc.) create a somatically enjoyable listening experience. Mainstream pop is designed for the passive ear; it relies on catchiness and predictability to appeal to broad audiences of normative listeners.[36] It is music that directly addresses the ear, constructed by auditory elements that are proven to be neurologically satisfying.[37] Sad girl pop is quite different in the sense that it diverges from mainstream pop's impulse to evoke pleasure in the listener, and instead submerges them in a beyond-body experience that often challenges them emotionally.

More than the structural elements of a sad girl pop song, the affect evoked is consequential in determining its resonance with a listener. Emery Schubert explains that these emotions do not have to be "positive" to be pleasurable. In fact, his research found that a considerable swath of listeners find satisfaction in experiencing the negative emotions generated by certain pop songs. This is due to a state of "disassociation" that protects the listener from experiencing the emotion in real life – affording them comfortable distance from the implications of such affective states. Though Schubert's theorizing of disassociation is convincing insofar that it provides a partial explanation as

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[36] Charlie Harding and Nate Sloan, cohosts of the "Switched on Pop" podcast and co-authors of the titular book, explain that the anatomy of a typical pop song builds on a specific timbre, laying catchy hooks, booming choruses, and engaging bridges over synthetic productions (15).
[37] See *This Is Your Brain On Music* by Daniel Levitin.

to why "negative" emotions might be pleasurable to the listener, it only tells part of the story.

Queer listening helps tell the rest of the story, particularly when applied to the sad girl pop space. It is a type of music that reimagines sadness and its associated emotions as generative, liberating, and beautiful. It is music that is built on subversion, dealing in the unexpected, suspending sonic and affective expectations.[38] Though sad girl pop surely builds on elements found in mainstream pop music, it is not fundamentally invested in evoking pleasure in the listener. Rather, it works to underscore the innate beauty of unresolved emotions within sprawling soundscapes. Therefore, to parse this genre's cultural and affective resonance, we cannot simply listen normatively as we might with a mainstream pop song. Rather, queer listening must be enacted because it enables listeners to come in contact with the unknown in a way that makes the ephemeral permanent and tactile**,** and foregrounds beauty as its core affective experience.

To truly experience the beauty inherent within a sad girl pop song, one must abandon normative structures like time, space, gender, and genre, even the anatomical body, in order to be fully immersed. This is where Schubert's concept of "disassociation" comes into play. By detaching from the material reality contoured by normativity, the queer listener is able to move into a realm of affect. Artists in the sad girl pop realm are not simply making music; they are constructing complex mythological universes that communicate very real traumas through the various layers of the self: persona, personage, and person.

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[38] Sad girl pop is tethered to the broader 'sad girl culture' that has become seemingly ubiquitous in the 21st century. See Fredrika Thelanderrson's *21st Century Media and Female Mental Health: Profitable Vulnerability and Sad Girl Culture* for a thorough explanation of sad girl culture and its origins.

Auslander posits that "to be a musician is to perform an identity in a social realm" and that persona is never autonomously created by the artist but is a co-venture with the socially constructed audience (101). Pairing this idea with Fred Vermorel's blank screen theory, we can understand the relationship between the performer and the queer listener more concretely.[39] The performer steps upon the stage, delivers the materials of the performance both musical and extramusical, tangible and intangible (the music, the persona, the mythology, the allure). The queer listener takes these materials and uses them to mine their own internal world, the emotional experience of beauty a catalyst to a deeper personal understanding of the self. This is a key distinction between the ethos of mainstream pop music and sad girl pop; the former catalyzes an external emotional expression from the listener (pleasure, joy) while the latter induces a deeply introspective, oftentimes complex affective experience (beauty).

Sad girl pop artists are not pop stars in the typical sense and cannot be evaluated within the conventional pop frame. Pop stars are usually assessed in terms of likability, which is largely predicated on the music's accessibility and the artist's success at fashioning an endearing, palatable persona. Sad girl pop has a much higher threshold to clear, however, because the music and its makers are not centrally invested in being marketable or pleasing. Catherine Vigier writes "…in some ways, popular music can challenge the established ways of seeing, feeling and thinking about life" (3).

Extending this position, I would like to propose that sad girl pop is an innately *queer* genre in the sense that its music and creators work to disrupt and challenge our

[39] Fred Vermorel describes the concept of the blank screen in which fans project their wants/desires upon the performer (the blank screen), almost living vicariously through these projections (88). In doing so, the mythology of the performer (the persona) and the felt emotions of the listener are authenticated.

conceptions of genre and gender. Therefore, the definition of a "pop" star within this sphere needs to be reimagined. It is not the artist who embodies the "popular" – it is the artist who embodies the 'other,' who strategically places themselves outside the expected while compellingly reinventing convention. In this sense, sad girl pop artists can be thought of as innately "queer" regardless of their sexual orientation because they operate just outside the mainstream, constructing personas that challenge the female pop star archetype.

Two of the most enrapturing figures in the sad girl sphere are Lana Del Rey and Ethel Cain. Their work has shifted the cultural politics of pop music. These artists resemble the "cult star" archetype because of how they garner a worship-like following and dedication among their fans. Interestingly, both fanbases refer to LDR and Cain as "Mother" – signaling a maternal admiration for them felt deeply by their fans.[40] The personas they enact – though quite different – communicate an alluring, seductive sadness that is at once powerfully feminine and ironically submissive.

Though both LDR and EC's music is undeniably "popular" at the moment – both artists have received critical acclaim, amassing millions of listeners on streaming platforms – they are adamantly opposed to being categorized as pop stars. Anhedönia has stated "I'm not a f*cking pop artist. I reject that wholeheartedly" (Maicki).[41] In a similar vein, Del Rey has said that her work is "not meant to be popular… It's not pop music" (Hiatt). On her latest album she sings "I'm folk, I'm jazz, I'm blues," describing herself as a genre-bending

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[40] 'Mother' is a colloquial term used to describe someone who is "an iconic feminine figure" (Cramer). The term is "most often used to refer to pop stars, actresses, or other celebrities" and can be used to describe "someone of any gender" despite its feminine connotation. The term was made popular within the queer community in reference to pop stars. Anhedönia's social media handle is Mother Cain and LDR is often referred to as "Queen Mother" by her fans.

[41] In an interview with *The Fader,* Anhedönia extensively detailed her opposition to and distrust of "pop gimmicks." See Maicki.

artist whilst avoiding altogether any suggestion that she's a pop girl.[42] It could be that Del Rey and Anhedönia are suffering from their own internalized rockism – believing pop lacks nuance and complexity. This is why they fashion themselves as anti-pop stars, subverting genre and gender expectations in their performance of voice.

Pop's Affective Turn: Enter the Queen of the Sad Girls

Seated at the proverbial throne of sad girl pop is Del Rey**,** whose arrival in 2011 ruptured the monoculture and signaled an affective turn in pop. Brittany Spanos explains that though Del Rey came to pop from outside the genre – originally starting her career as a singer-songwriter – she ultimately "reinvented it" through her "moodier presentation" and darker cadence (4:47-6:00).[43] What Spanos gets at by describing Del Rey's voice as a tool of reinvention links well with Anton Blackburn's central argument that voice is an identity unto itself, deployed to articulate a persona that cultivates certain emotions and influences how an artist is perceived (88). Through careful analysis of the first half of Del Rey's career, Blackburn demonstrates how Del Rey's adoption of a lower register, breathier delivery, and darker cadence constructs a persona that directly contrasts the girlboss persona embodied by many of her peers (92).[44]

With "Video Games," her debut single, Del Rey signaled a downshift into a slower, lower gear, both sonically and thematically. She's described the track as her "in song form"

[42] From the song, "Grandfather please stand on the shoulders of my father while he's deep-sea fishing" off of LDR's album, *Did You Know There's A Tunnel Under Ocean Blvd.?* (Polydor/Interscope 2023).

[43] Del Rey began her music career by playing mostly folk and jazz. This was in the early 2000s. During this time, Del Rey went by her legal birth name, Elizabeth "Lizzy" Grant, before toying with stage names that did not stick, including Sparkle Jumprope Queen and May Jailer.

[44] Ilana Kaplan argues that though artists like Alanis Morrisette and Fiona Apple were making sad girl pop in the 1990s, the current "iteration" of "sad girl pop" did not take off until the arrival of Lana Del Rey in 2011. Though I agree with Kaplan's assertion, I'd like to echo her many opponents who take issue with the idea that "'sad girl' pop didn't truly begin to form its own sort of subgenre until Billie Eilish and her whispery, gloomy music emerged in 2016" because it dismisses the cultural significance of Del Rey and the lineage of artists she ushered into the mainstream.

emphasizing its position as the microcosm of the broader LDR universe.[45] Presenting a pouty-lipped, damsel-in-distress-with-an-edge image made more jarring by the surprising languidness of her voice, Del Rey's homemade music video served as a particularly compelling opening statement. It was an anachronism. Compared to the highly produced, up-tempo breakout singles of her peers in the mainstream pop space, Del Rey's pace was remarkably slower, literally shifting the temporal flow of pop music by presenting a balladic debut single as her introduction to a popular audience.

At the time of her emergence, artists like Katy Perry, Ariana Grande, Demi Lovato, Selena Gomez, Carly Rae Jepsen, and Miley Cyrus dominated the charts with fast-paced, mass-manufactured hits, many of them made in collaboration with the same producer.[46] These songs built on a similar structure defined by catchy hooks, repeated choruses, and synthetic productions (Harding and Sloan 15). Beyond the sonic composition, the lyrical narrative of these songs communicates female empowerment and unabashed desire. Whether it's Katy Perry singing about experimenting with her sexuality on "I Kissed A Girl" or Demi Lovato asserting "This is real, this is me" or Carly Rae Jepsen passionately pursuing a love interest on "Call Me Maybe" – the upbeat, lively musical components of the production are paralleled by the positive emotionality of the lyrics.

"Video Games" marks a stark contrast, detailing Del Rey's love affair with an apathetic World of Warcraft playing boyfriend who can't be bothered to pay her any mind. The character on display is a doe-eyed Del Rey who sings "It's you, it's you, it's all for you, everything I do," taking a much different tone than her peers who fashion themselves strong

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[45] Interview originally conducted in *Q Magazine* – quote published by Genius.

[46] Ariana Grande, Katy Perry, Demi Lovato, Selena Gomez, and Carly Rae Jepsen have all collaborated with Max Martin who is considered one of modern pop's super producers.

independent girlbosses.[47] The song began a decades-long tension between Del Rey and her detractors who have accused her of being a disingenuous, antifeminist industry plant.[48] What's perhaps most fascinating about this criticism of Del Rey is its contradiction; she is at once scrutinized for not fitting the expected girlboss pop mode and decried for "being a product of corporate, commercial pop" (Vigier 3). Blackburn points out that these criticisms, especially those aimed at Del Rey in the early stages of her career, are "gendered" and that "sexism engenders notions of authenticity and voice" (88).

When we listen to music, we passively attend to voice, observing it as something inherent within and inextricable from the singer, when in actuality the voice is intentionally deployed to formulate a persona; it exists outside the artist. Voice is a way of "reimagining the self," (Blackburn 94) used to construct and deliver a persona through music. In Del Rey's case, critics have taken issue with how she enacts the voice, altering and shaping it to communicate various affective tonalities. She's been described as "emotionless" and "awkward" in her vocal delivery, leading to assessments of her work as disingenuous (Blackburn 92).

Blackburn points out that "Del Rey's art is being evaluated in terms of her ability to cultivate it from within herself, to produce what she 'really feels' – which is as difficult for the artist to prove as it is for the critic" (95). Within this narrow critical framework, we

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[47] Girlboss arrived in the lexicon in 2014 when Sophia Amoruso, founder of women's fashion retailer Nasty Gal, used the term as the title of her book about founding her business. Defined by Merriam-Webster, it refers to "an ambitious and successful woman (especially a businesswoman or entrepreneur)." I go beyond this meaning of the term to describe the girlboss attitude – one of overcoming challenges – emotional, financial, and social – with immediate action. The girlboss capitalizes on her struggle to build an empire out of her obstacles.

[48] Blackburn notes the extensive criticism of Del Rey throughout his article, particularly the fallout of her 2012 *SNL* performance. In a recent interview with *The Sunday Times*, LDR detailed the backlash she received early in her career, stating: "I had books thrown at me in San Francisco by liberal female groups. I've been punched in the face in Brooklyn" (Dean).

reduce "authenticity" to an artist's ability to externalize their innermost thoughts and feelings without accounting for the requisite mediating aspect of persona. It is the impossible paradox of the female pop star; she is expected to convince the audience of her organic felt emotions while being required to play a character as necessitated by existing in the performative domain. Del Rey's divergence from the norm in her vocal delivery, personal presentation, and general attitude towards fame destabilizes conventional understandings of what makes an artist palatable and likable. This likability factor is what sells within the pop genre and Del Rey's refusal to adopt a cookie cutter persona positions her on a distant axis from her contemporaries.

Del Rey's vocal identity establishes her as embodying a deviant femininity that pushes against the expected attitude and aesthetic of a female pop star in the twenty first century.[49] How the voice – and therefore a performed identity, a persona – is received is largely determined by genre context (Auslander 105). Just as our expectations of a rock star paint the image of the rough, rowdy, gruff singer, we have expectations of what a pop artist – particularly a woman singer – should sound like. "Vocal timbre, the sound of an artist's voice, is the most immediate way we can discern a pop star" (Sloan and Harding 23) because it cues us into the character one performs.

For example, a listener can immediately distinguish between a Taylor Swift song and an Ariana Grande song because their voices *sound* different; and by extension their

[49] To Blackburn, the voice is an ongoing production of the identity of the artist; it is linked to notions of authenticity. Drawing on Judith Butler's concept of performance as a "ritualized production," he extends Butler's theory by positing that not only is performativity a frame through which one can view the self as an ontogenesis as opposed to a "fixed ontology," but that vocality "can be understood as part of the continual construction of identity and the self" (98). Blackburn evaluates Del Rey's persona by considering voice an active identity that is performed and stitched into the larger fabric of an artist's aesthetic, concluding that the voice is the conduit through which the persona is delivered and defined.

personas take on varying shapes despite relying on similar production elements. Swift fashions herself as the girl-next-door with a knack for revenge while Grande molds herself after her diva predecessors. Though Swift and Grande are distinct in their voices and aesthetics, the narratives communicated by their personas center on shared themes of finding oneself through various trials and tribulations. These narratives work to dissolve the discomfort of messy emotions and assert one's control over their own affective terrain.

Take for instance Taylor Swift's chart-topping "Shake It Off," a song that remained on the *Billboard* Hot 100 for nearly a year in 2014 (Trust). Driven by a thumping drum cadence, the song finds Swift singing about self-love and acceptance, encouraging the listener to ignore the "haters" and "get down to this sick beat." Similarly, Ariana Grande's single "Break Free," released the same year as "Shake It Off," locates her liberated from a toxic love, communicating a narrative of self-discovery as she repeatedly asserts "I'm stronger than I've been before." Though these artists' voices are quite different - Grande takes after highly technical singers like Mariah Carey while Swift has a humbler, more limited range – they both attempt to evoke a sense of inspiration and empowerment in the listener. Grande's stacked vocals in the chorus give "Break Free" a particularly emphatic quality that certainly enlivens the listener. The repetition and parallel structure of the chorus throughout "Shake It Off" provides a playful levity that mirrors the central message: to move from the darkness, all one has to do is quite literally "shake it off."

It is not simply the lyrics that help tell this story, but the character of the voice. In the case of Swift and Grande, that character is that of the girlboss who works tirelessly to overcome struggles inflicted by the patriarchy. Be it personal heartbreak, hateful comments from the media, or a malicious music manager buying their master recordings, these artists

– primarily through the tool of their voice – assure the listener that they will not be deterred or surrender to negativity.[50] The voice of the girlboss is front and center. It announces, "No more hiding who I'm supposed to be/This is me."[51] It is a voice that evokes a sense of hope in the listener. It provides a shoulder to cry on, but only for a moment, as you are inevitably persuaded that you too can conquer your emotions.

Like their mainstream pop contemporaries, those in the sad girl pop space deploy the voice as an extension of the persona. The vocal timbre of the sad girl constructs a character that challenges the girlboss. Let's focus on the two artists at the center of this thesis: Lana Del Rey and Ethel Cain. In both of their enactments of voice, there is a distant, haunting quality amplified by the use of vocal distortion and timbral invention.[52] A common recording tool of LDR's is situating a piece of paper between her mouth and the microphone to create a thin barrier between where her voice tumbles out and where it is received. Consequently, the quality of sound on a majority of her songs is slightly muffled, emphasizing the spectral aspect of the LDR character. She explains "I like to play with distance and buffers around the mic for every song depending on what the mood is" (Geffen). LDR employs this paper technique on "Beautiful People Beautiful Problems."[53]

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[50] Taylor Swift has been engaged in an ongoing feud with music manager, Scooter Braun, who bought Swift's master recordings. In true girlboss style, Swift has begun re-recording her songs, releasing *Taylor's Versions* of her albums. Her song, "Karma" from her latest record, *Midnights*, takes a shot at Braun directly. The track reached #1 on *Billboard's* Pop Airplay Chart and #2 on US *Billboard* Top 100. Swift has raked in millions from the re-recording projects, exemplifying the girlboss mentality in real time, capitalizing on her own pain and loss.

[51] From Demi Lovato's 2008 song "This Is Me."

[52] Harding and Sloan argue "Timbral invention is the new normal, one of the key aspects of modern pop. Unimaginable sounds are unveiled every day" (135). By playing with timbre, artists are able to present something novel to the listener, catalyzing an encounter with the unknown. Zachary Wallmark argues that timbre is not only about how a sound is received by the ear but is a feeling that the listener experiences (3). It is this quality in music that allows "two sounds similarly presented and having the same loudness and pitch" to appear "dissimilar" (American National Standards Institute qtd. in Wallmark 1).

[53] LDR uploaded behind-the-scenes footage of her recording sessions. She can be observed holding a sheet of paper between her mouth and microphone. The video was first uploaded to LDR's personal Instagram

In creating this distance and muffling the voice, Del Rey takes on the role of an omniscient narrator floating above and around the listener in a dazzling rapture. The lyrics underscore Del Rey's positionality as she sings: "Blue is the color of the planet from the view above," "Green is the plant from the eyes of a turtle dove."

In Del Rey's performance of the sad girl, she takes on a psychic, all-knowing quality. Fashioning herself as a mystical, esoteric presence, Del Rey's purported connection with the metaphysical intensifies her persona as a sad girl.[54] By creating distance in the vocal, Del Rey positions herself simultaneously above and all around the listener, making the music inescapable, all-consuming. This is the function of the sad girl; her emotionality is like a parasite burrowing into the listener. Brooks actually uses this metaphor to describe glitch, writing "The parasite is understood as both interference and, in a metaphysical sense, the infinite: the background noise or chaos from which all being originates" (37). By creating distance within the voice, the sad girl enters the metaphysical dimension, positioned outside and above normativity. Here, she unsettles the listener by plunging them into the abyss of emotional liminality, offering no escape route. In this way, sad girl pop challenges the notion that music is cathartic; it does not offer "relief from […] strong or repressed emotions" (Oxford Languages).[55] Rather, it traps the listener in those

account and can be viewed here: https://www.thefader.com/2017/12/28/lana-del-rey-lust-for-life-behind-the-scenes-instagram-videos.

[54] Del Rey has detailed her relationship with mysticism throughout her career. In several interviews, she's mentioned that she sees a psychic and even studied metaphysics at Fordham University (Ewens "'My Goal'"). Mysticism, historically, has been practiced by women "who attain the same status as 'men of God', thanks precisely to their excess of emotion" (Boquet and Lett 13).

[55] The Oxford English Dictionary defines catharsis as "The purification of the emotions by vicarious experience, esp. through the drama." Similarly, Merriam Webster defines catharsis as "a purification or purgation that brings about spiritual renewal or release from tension." Both definitions place an emphasis on the "purification" of emotions – implying that there are emotions that are messy and impure. Sad girl pop pushes against this by recognizing all emotions – especially those connoted as negative or undesirable – as organic conditions of the human experience and therefore beautiful. It is interesting to note that catharsis was the defining purpose of theater for the ancient Greeks as described by Aristotle who reasoned

"strong or repressed emotions," forcing them to turn inward and linger without any expectation of resolution.

The queer listener understands the parasite as "the infinite," the unknown, not at all a disruption. Here, the queer listener is driven further inward, towards beauty that concretizes the self. Mainstream pop creates an outward listening experience; it enthuses the listener to get up and dance, to shout along, to exult in the knowing that they are not alone. There is release, a near-spiritual purgation that enables the listener to feel lighter, freer, seen, a part of something.[56] In contrast, the queer listener of sad girl pop, by turning inward, accesses a liminal space and finds beauty. Here, they are not required to negotiate their sadness or discomfort like the girlboss who works tirelessly to quickly patch up her wounds and purify her emotions. Useful here is Ahmed's explanation of emotions within a normative cultural conception:

> If good emotions are cultivated, and are worked on and towards, then they remain defined against uncultivated or unruly emotions, which frustrate the formation of the competent self. (3)

In this view, "Good emotions" are the source of the self's competency, one's worth. The girlboss adopts this perspective by bifurcating emotions along the lines of "resolved" and "unresolved." It is only in the resolving of negative emotions that the girlboss is able to move toward "good emotions" and consequently become competent. Consequently,

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that the "purpose of tragedy is to arouse 'terror and pity' and thereby effect the catharsis of these emotions" (*Britannica*).

[56] This can be easily observed by standing amongst the crowd at a mainstream pop concert. Video footage from Taylor Swift's Eras tour shows thousands of fans – spanning a range of ages – weeping joyfully as Swift graces the stage. There is a collective exultation among this polis, exhibited primarily in the body. Arms outreached, mouths agape, eyes glazed with fresh tears of joy, these fans take on a bodily stance that mirrors their object of affection who reaches out to them and sheds her own tears, forging a pseudo-reciprocal relationship between performer and audience.

girlboss pop is shaped around resolution, following an arc both in terms of how the sound builds and how the narrative unfolds. There is a clear beginning, middle, and end to a girlboss pop song that provides the listener a sense of growth and progress.

In contrast, the voice of the sad girl embodies the in-between of contradiction; it is guttural, raw, dreamy, ethereal, feather-light, and heavy with the weight of unresolved emotions. The voice, in this context, reflects the ethos of sad girl pop insofar as it captures the beauty inherent within affective ambiguity, thereby challenging the impulse of 'feel-good' girlboss pop songs that narrate stories of overcoming and resolution. Listening to this music, the queer listener is plunged deeper into the depths of the self, where they become acquainted with the nuances of their own inner worlds while parsing the persona of the sad girl.

The voice serves to authenticate the mythological trauma detailed within these artists' discographies because it does more than simply add to the quality of the sound. It activates an intimate experience with the listener, shaking deep emotion through their bones. Unlike mainstream pop that is built to be chant-along worthy and easily played for a group, sad girl pop is not social or externalized music. Rather, it is music that demands interiority on the part of the listener, so much so that it can feel like you are closing the door to the outside world and stepping through a portal to a wholly different universe.

Take for instance LDR's "Pretty When You Cry," a track dripping with Del Rey's vocal whine and a weeping guitar. The song is an alma mater for the sad girls, as Del Rey repeatedly asserts "I'm pretty when I cry" – quite literally finding beauty in sadness. Descending into a blistering instrumental bridge led by a searing electric guitar, the last 45 seconds finds Del Rey's voice reaching its apex before dissipating in a thick haze. One is

left suspended in the danger suggested by the urgency of the thrashing guitar and the plea-like intonation of Del Rey's voice as she sings "I'm stronger than all my men/except for you." Here, she embodies what Ann Powers describes as a combination of "conventional feminine submissiveness and post-feminist self-possession" articulated through both the lyrical composition of her music as well as her vocal delivery. There is no exuberant rush of hope suggested in the lyrics or the sound to undercut the intensity of her sadness. Not to mention the song is a freestyle that captures the organic emotionality of the moment. Interestingly, "Pretty When You Cry" is wedged between the aptly titled "Sad Girl" and "Money Power Glory" on Del Rey's critically acclaimed record *Ultraviolence.*

This three-song stretch locates Del Rey contemplating her role as the other woman, weeping upon the realization that she cannot overcome the distance she feels in said position, and finally ditching the romance to take her lover's "money, power, and glory." The core affect is captured in the first twenty seconds of "Pretty When You Cry." The ominous creep of the guitar gives way to a thin, nasally, on-the-edge-of-tears vocal. But Del Rey never goes over that edge, never fully breaks her lousy lover's taut hold. The closest we get to a release is the guitar solo in the last minute, but even then, there is no sense of relief, only a deeper plunge into more inner turmoil.

The arc of the three aforementioned songs underscores the sad girl narrative quite well in the sense that Del Rey narrates a forlorn story while maintaining a level of cutting unbotheredness. While she temporarily grieves the idea of a secure and stable love ("Sad Girl") she swiftly finds beauty in her despondency ("Pretty When You Cry") before gathering the gusto to go after the man that made her feel vulnerable in the first place ("Money Power Glory"). But desire is never fulfilled on these songs or on the entirety of

the record**.** There is no narrative of overcoming, of healing the pain, as she sings "My life, it comprises, / of losses and wins and fails/ and falls." We never see her obtain the "money, power, and glory" she seeks. Rather, the track concludes with Del Rey promising "Hallelujah, I'm gonna take/them for all that they got" – indicating that she has not yet reached the peak of her own power; she can only imagine getting there. By abstaining from resolution, in both a lyrical and sonic sense, Del Rey asks the listener to dawdle in the grey. This is precisely where the beauty lies. Further, sad girl pop is not so much a genre working to create balance and harmony, but rather to obfuscate our normative conceptions of such concepts by highlighting how apparent dichotomies live within each other.

A Lineage of Sad Girls: The Arrival of Ethel Cain

Ethel Cain is the project of Hayden Anhedönia.[57] She is a figment of the imagination, a construction, a performed being whose narrative is a work of fiction. We can read Ethel Cain as the persona and Anhedönia as the person. Conjured by the mind of Anhedönia, the Cain character exists in real, grounded spaces: a house in Nebraska, the thoroughfares of Texas, the deep backwoods of Alabama and Florida. Her story is one of American tragedy; she is abducted, held captive, and ultimately cannibalized. Her trauma, though palpable, disturbing, and visceral, is mythologized – a hyperbolic "'cautionary tale'" (Anhedönia qtd. in Van Meter). Though "Ethel is dead – end of the line…" as Anhedönia says (Maicki), her mythology lives, archived by the queer listener.

[57] Anhedönia is a 25-year-old transwoman from the American deep south. She explains that an "Ethel Cain song is female rage, it's female passion, it's female love… It's just female. I want it to be the entire scope of what it's like to be a woman scorned, especially as a trans woman" (Jocelyn).

A quick shuffle through the Cain discography reveals a rapturous lyrical darkness and extraordinarily alluring voice not dissimilar to Del Rey's. Anhedönia's first EP, under the moniker White Silas, is titled *Sad Music For Sad People,* featuring tracks that center on heartache, violent revenge, and the haunting nature of pastoral spaces. Subsequently, Anhedönia has evolved the Cain character, a strikingly convincing persona whose narrative is enthralling, albeit disturbing. Listening to Anhedönia's music, there's a charged, magnetic cloud lingering in an ocean of sound. When entering these choppy waters, one is immediately unmoored and strangely lifted.

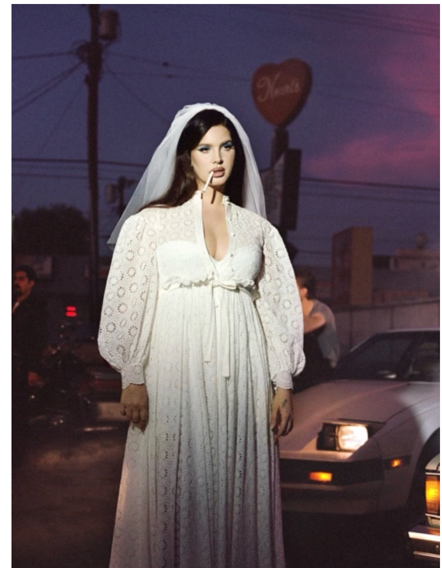
Like LDR, Anhedönia creates distance and distortion in the voice of Ethel Cain to communicate the sad girl persona. Her cavernous voice births a chasmic space in which the listener searches for solid ground. Take, for instance, "Ptolemaea." The track buzzes to life with the sound of swarming flies as a modulated, distorted spoken word gives way to what sounds like weeping. The use of timbral invention here destabilizes the emotional core of the song. It is equal parts disturbing and undeniably beautiful, with a low echo swirling around the listener in a dizzying haze. "Her gratuitous use of reverb creates a sense of loneliness, mimicking the echo of an empty hall or abandoned church," (Kern) reflected in songs like "A House in Nebraska," potentially Anhedönia's most well-known song to date. It soars with a dramatic piano; the voice is heavily reverbed to create a residual echo, adding to the cinematic quality. Elsewhere throughout her discography, echoes are used to cultivate a sense of disorientation and suspension. Tracks like "Two-Headed Mother" and "Antlers" sound like they are being delivered to the listener from across a canyon.

LDR and EC employ similar sonic effects and lyrical themes to communicate the sad girl persona. Despite Anhedönia's vehement opposition to critics who compare her

performance as Cain to Del Rey, there are clear signifiers and stylistic choices throughout her catalog that suggest she is part of the LDR lineage. Consider her music video for the song "God's Country." It is shot on an old VHS camcorder, giving it a "Video Games" texture. It is self-directed and self-written like many of Lana's first projects. The video mainly shows Cain rolling through desolate places in the Midwest and South – two regions Del Rey has featured heavily in her music as the backdrop for her vision of a gloriously gritty America. It even shows Cain in a red Budweiser racing jacket – visually in line with the red Ferrari jacket LDR donned in several early interviews and magazine shoots. The images below capture this overlap:

Inset One:

From "On the road with Ethel Cain" by Salvatore Maicki for *Fader Magazine*. Photo by Ethel Cain, 2021.



From "Lana Del Rey and Billie Eilish Fall in Love" for *Interview Magazine*, photo by Nadia Lee Cohen, 2023.

Inset Two:

From Ethel Cain's "God's Country" music video. Published 2021.

From Lana Del Rey's "Ride" music video. Published 2012.

Inset Three:

From "Ethel Cain's American Nightmare" by Wren Sanders for *them*. Photo by Ethel Cain, 2022.

From Lana Del Rey's performance at the 2012 iTunes Festival in London.

At face value, these aesthetic symbols place Cain and Del Rey in conversation; they are both women illustrating – through nuanced sonic and visual compositions – the complex emotional and sociopolitical terrain of American culture. Signifiers like the Budweiser logo, American flags, crucifixes, and retro wedding dresses populate their aesthetic palettes. These visual elements are situated in different contexts; their respective

personas inherit and exist in divergent worlds. Meaghan Garvey writes "…there's an immateriality to Lana Del Rey's dream of living her art that Cain casts into stoic relief." Just take a look at the images featured in Inset One. Though Cain and Del Rey don similar attire, the backgrounds they are situated in are diametrically opposed. Cain stands on a barren plain, presumably somewhere in the middle of the country. Del Rey, in a full face of makeup is positioned in front of vintage vehicles in the parking lot of an LA eatery, cigarette hanging loosely from her lips.

Here, the starkness of the Cain photograph embodies a central tenet of the Ethel Cain project, revealing that what we see is not always what's truly there. The wedding dress is ironic situated within the Cain story. The white gown is often associated with notions of purity, innocence, commitment to God, and virtuosity, yet Anhedönia takes a sledgehammer to all of these ideas in her deployment of the Cain character. She unsettles the peace and tranquility associated with pastoral spaces to reveal the haunting allure that thrums beneath. Love is "all-consuming," dangerous and ultimately deadly; life in these spaces is an "American nightmare" (Sanders).

Del Rey's imagery communicates a different aesthetic intention; she is keen on embodying an Old Hollywood glamour. Inset Two shows her wearing a wedding dress in the parking lot of a fast-food restaurant which is one of several examples of Del Rey's attire contrasting her surroundings. In the music video to "Ride" she flaunts diamond cross earrings and Shirley Temple curls while smoking cigarettes at an abandoned gas station; in "Chemtrails Over the Country Club" she sings of wearing "turquoise and jewels" while doing the laundry; in "West Coast" she tumbles in the Pacific surf donning a diamond necklace and heavy eye makeup. Her persona is built on contradiction; the spaces she

moves through do not match the opulence of her visual presentation, in turn communicating to the observer that anyplace, anywhere in America can be made glamourous and romantic just by her very presence.

In contrast, the Ethel Cain sound communicates "'…that feeling where nowhere is safe. Nothing is going to save you. You can hardly breathe'" (Sanders). There is perhaps no better evidence of Cain and Del Rey's departure than the images featured in Inset Two. Here, there are screenshots of scenes from their respective music videos for the songs "God's Country" and "Ride." On the left, Cain observes an American flag being burned. On the right, Del Rey holds the flag behind her, fluttering like a cape; at other points in the video, she is seen draping it around her like a scarf. Here, Cain and Del Rey are revealed to exist far apart on the spectrum of sad girls.[58] *Born to Die* introduced Del Rey as embodying a sort of doomed starlet. Featuring songs like "National Anthem" - accompanied by a music video where she plays Jackie O. alongside A$AP Rocky's JFK – the album is a love note to the American myth, or in Del Rey's words "the country America used to be."[59] That myth is deconstructed and exposed by Anhedönia through the vehicle of Ethel Cain.

What is perhaps most fascinating of all these photos is Inset Three. Here, Cain and Del Rey wear identical Budweiser crew neck sweatshirts, the photos taken nearly a decade

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[58] Anhedönia has said herself that "'I think it's kind of a detriment to the expansive work of two female artists to just reduce them to being similar to each other'" (Byron). That is why it is necessary when situating these two artists – and any two female artists – in conversation with one another to consider the various levels of the self as observed in their persona, personage, and person.

[59] Del Rey, in many ways, embodies the ignorance of the American myth. Consider the music video to "Ride." It features scenes replete with brazen rides on the backs of Harleys with aging Hell's Angels, gun-wielding rowdy tumbles in the desert, and Del Rey donning a Native American headdress that, when situated within the context of the video, is made even more tone deaf. To her – a conventionally attractive, cis white woman - America is a land full of possibility; its darkness teems with romance.

apart. The difference is context: Del Rey stands on stage at the 2012 iTunes Festival; Cain walks an unnamed road in a rural space. In Del Rey's case, the Budweiser sweatshirt is an intentional symbol deployed in the setting of a live performance that communicates her persona to the audience. Paired with red lacquered nails, buoyant tresses, and an emerald ring, the clothing embodies the message that Del Rey can make anything glamorous. It is a costume, a layer to the persona. Not shown in the image is the screen behind Del Rey with the words "Psalm 51" gleaming. Notably, this psalm is one of repentance, buttressing the narrative arc of sin and redemption that is central to the LDR mythology.

In the other photo, it is difficult to see where Anhedönia ends, and Cain begins; the sweatshirt could very well be from Anhedönia's own closet. By deploying the same symbols but in different contexts, these artists' personas enter into a challenging conversation with one another. The opening monologue of the "Ride" music video finds Del Rey taking after the likes of Whitman and Kerouac, wandering the open road aimlessly, seemingly reiterating the subtext that to have no final destination, to have no goals beyond knowing the self**,** is to arrive at a place of peace, contemplating loneliness against the backdrop of an endless expanse of possibility. She mulls over her lack of direction while taking comfort in her aimlessness. Cain, on the other hand, exposes the underbelly of America and its religious foundation, singing of the brutality of God and the violence inherent within pastoral spaces. To Anhedönia, "Running […] is hardly synonymous with being free" (Sanders).

Anhedönia, through the persona of Cain, desires to narrate the "'unraveling of the American Dream'" and portray "'something that's raw and freaky and scary because that to me, that's what America is'" (qtd. in Pappis). There's a visceral ugliness to the scenes

she paints, stimulating the senses in a plethora of unpleasant ways. In the House of Cain, rotten smells swirl in pitch black bedrooms, filthy mattresses are centerpieces to nights of rough, often violent, sex, and "sun-bleached flies" collect beneath smoggy windows. I echo Liam Hess' apt insights on Anhedönia and Del Rey:

> Anhedönia's music has frequently been compared to Lana Del Rey's, and the similarities are evident: the reedy, mournful vocals; the meandering song structures; the tales of seedy corners of American life. But where Del Rey seems only to try these quotidian existences on for size, you can hear that Anhedönia has really lived them: listening to *Preacher's Daughter* front to back is a genuinely emotional experience.

Del Rey's persona is created in part by the distance she places between it and who she presents herself as in other domains. The Lana captured on social media is happy with a 7/11 Slurpee and a Parliament in hand, roaming barefoot through California open-air markets. There's a striking girl-next-door playfulness that is jarring when placed next to her cutting, decked-out-in-diamonds persona.

Conversely, the gap between Anhedönia's persona as Ethel Cain and her person seems tighter. She constructed the Ethel Cain character from the materials of her own biography and inspiration from Bible stories (Byron). Outcast by her Baptist community and vehemently religious family upon coming out as a teen, Anhedönia moved out of her home in Florida, getting into drugs and living in a state of despair.[60] She explains in an interview with Joe Coscarelli: "'The only vision I had into the real world was this violent, graphic media, full of drugs and murder.'" This influenced the name she would choose

[60] Del Rey has a song called "Florida Kilos" where she sings of courting a cocaine dealer, doing lines in her "gold hoops" and asserting "People never die in Miami" – a romanticization of the life Anhedönia actually lived and witnessed while in Florida.

upon transitioning: Hayden Anhedönia – the last name meaning the inability to feel pleasure in Latin (Coscarelli).

There is a unique entwining of persona and person evidenced in her work. Though the Ethel Cain character and her narrative are fictitious, the palpable ache that is felt within these songs is a product of Anhedönia's real-life experiences. She's described being "possessed" by the Ethel Cain character during a particularly difficult time in her life. Despite this alter ego taking a strong hold of Anhedönia, she asserts "We inhabit the same space, at least visually, but I'm very different from her" (Hess). This is the separation between the persona of Cain and the person, Anhedönia. It's true that Ethel Cain's arc is far from Anhedönia's lived experience; Cain gets abducted and ultimately murdered in a cannibalistic rage by her captor. Yet, one can't help but think there's something of Anhedönia's DNA in the narrative she threads throughout *Preacher's Daughter*.

Over the course of the album, we observe the Ethel Cain character falling victim to familial trauma. "Hard Times" – a heartbreaking song about childhood abuse - comes to life with a stripped-down guitar and a surprisingly restrained vocal performance. The veil between the Ethel Cain character and Anhedönia is perhaps thinnest on this song. Moving into the hook, the voice is a splinter wedging into the listener. The aching voice sings "I'm tired of you, still tied to me," made even more heartbreaking when placed atop the ghostly backing vocal. The most significant sonic maneuver is when Cain sings "Too tired to move/Too tired to leave" adding a circular run to punctuate the final syllable and underscore the cyclicality of trauma. Here, the core of the song – and the sad girl ethos – is presented. Despite recognizing her pain, Cain cannot escape it; all she can do is look it in the eyes and name it.

While Lana invokes a state of dreaming, Ethel conjures nightmares, poking holes in the mythology of Del Rey's America by deploying a narrative of brutal heartache, familial trauma, abuse, and loss. This is evidenced on the opening track to *Preacher's Daughter*. "Family Tree (Intro)" is a glimpse into the world the Cain character will linger in for the next 12 tracks, establishing a sharp, cutting lyrical foundation that is fortified by equally emotive vocals and shattering instrumentals. The listener is suspended in a liminal space with the Ethel Cain character literally "hanging" in the final moments. The song moves like molasses, opening with a muffled, indiscernible spoken word that crescendos at the 1:45 mark as Cain breaks into her signature Gregorian-chant-like wailing. The darkness of the lyrics is driven by thrumming drums, making for a blisteringly emotional listen.

There's a sharp shift into anthemic pop on track two, "American Teenager," a song that catapulted Cain into the mainstream consciousness. It opens with her cavernous voice, birthing ample space for an instantly memorable chorus. It is simultaneously a commentary on the American dream and an anthem for the sad girls. She sings of the "neighbor's brother" coming home "in a box," Dale Earnhardt, and nursing a hangover while contemplating her religion. It is a song about the impossibility of the American dream, as Anhedönia states in her press release "I wrote this song as an expression of my frustration with all the things the 'American Teenager' is supposed to be but never had any real chance of becoming" (Linzinmeir). Sadness in this song is generative; "crying in the bleachers" is fun; standing alone under waning streetlights is self-affirming. Cain even sings "It's just not my year/But I'm all good out here." She doesn't "need anything or anyone," to soothe her; she is completely folded within the layers of her own affective terrain.

Striking is the connection between "American Teenager" and Del Rey's song, "American." Created a decade apart, the songs reflect a divergent take on what it means to be a young American through the eyes of the sad girl. On her track, Del Rey sings of Elvis, Bruce Springsteen, and driving in fast cars through LA. In the chorus she croons "Be young, be dope, be proud/Like an American," as she ogles her love interest. It reads like a snippet from Kerouac's *On the Road*, with Del Rey using words like "crazy" and "wild" as synonyms for American joy. The only pride in Cain's song is that of the self which she divorces from national pride. "American Teenager" challenges neoliberal conceptions of individualism because it is only when Cain is alone and doing what she wants (which, as implied in the song, is not what is expected of her) that she feels a sense affinity with the self. It is a warning to the listener to avoid "Putting too much faith in the make believe" (i.e. the American dream) as it will inevitably lead to disappointment, and potentially death.

Track four, "Western Nights," yawns to life with a coalescing of electric guitar and piano. The song sounds like its underwater as the voice bursts to the surface. Lyrically, there are echoes of Del Rey. Lines like "He's never looked more beautiful/On his Harley in the parking lot" and "I watched him show his love/through shades of black and blue" evoke songs like "Ride" and "Ultraviolence." In the latter, Del Rey sings The Crystal's line "He hit me and it felt like a kiss," conflating love and pain. The key difference is the palpability of Cain's presentation of these themes. There is something remarkably tangible to the songs, evidenced in the contrast between her boundless voice and the claustrophobia of the scenes she crafts. Where Del Rey's music is replete with romance, Cain's is drained of it. "Western Nights" paints images of a decrepit, dying neighborhood that renders the subject – and subsequently the listener – suffocated. The only way out is to cling to a lover.

Unlike Del Rey's passenger seat passages, where love is a way towards freedom, to Cain, love – even its mirage - is a means of survival on the open road, and eventually the source of her brutal end.

Preacher's Daughter illuminates the darkness that thrums beneath the pavement of the open road. "Thoroughfare" is deceptively hopeful, with Cain hitching a ride from a stranger who she ends up falling in love with on their way to California. The following "Gibson Girl," deflates this hope with its dark, brooding atmosphere. Here, the Cain character quickly realizes the man she's with is not interested in love, but seeks to have sex, hurt her, and leave her for dead. Led by a sap-sticky weeping guitar, the track trickles down to a heartbeat of a bass before catapulting into a syncopated percussion. The guitar solo that explodes into the foreground in the latter half, paired with the slight autotune, generates a dizzying effect that both unnerves and subdues the listener. The low languidness of the voice makes for an eerily rapturous vocal performance.

"Sun Bleached Flies" brings the record to a cinematic peak. The character of Ethel sings from beyond Heaven's gates, reflecting on a life of abuse and turmoil. The song breaks out at the 4:30 mark, with Cain making peace with her life on earth, singing "I forgive it all as it comes back to me." A flurry of saxophone and percussion surges at the song's apex before falling away to reveal a notably quieter voice who admits "I can't let go when something's broken/It's all I know and it's all I want to know." Here, there is the admission of what Cain knows to be true; there is no chance of redemption. The trauma she embodies – whether it be familial or a product of the pastoral spaces she moves through – is immovable, unresolvable; it is all she knows and all she ever will.

By the conclusion of the album, both Cain and the listener are left breathless, suspended in a thick haze. "Strangers" cuts through with an incredible balance of delicately honed vocals. The lyrics detail the horror of the Ethel character being cannibalized by her captor. Referring to herself as a "freezer bride" stored in the basement of her killer - a crude and chilling image - sets the tone for what is a rapturous six minutes. The surging repeated line "Am I making you feel sick?" sets the bridge on fire before tempering in the final minute where she directly addresses her mother from beyond the grave. It is a stunning closer that leaves one completely adrift, unsure of how to make sense of it all.

In the case of Del Rey, the sense of being unmoored is blissful, communicated as wistfulness for an imagined time gone by when the open road teemed with possibility. For Cain, it is a disturbing reminder of her lack of safety, her inability to find closure. Though Del Rey and Cain world build from similar materials, they represent vastly different visions of America. There's no clearer evidence than the contrasting images within their music; while Del Rey blissfully swings from a tire swing in the "Ride" music video (her ode to the open road), Cain sings of swinging by her "neck from the family tree," emphasizing the differences in what each artists' persona has inherited.

Both Del Rey and Cain embody contradiction, constructing a liminal space within their music that is primed for queer listening. The vocal modulation, reverb, and distortion creates a literal and affective distance that sinks the listener deep into the self. In attending to these artists through the practice of queer listening, one accounts for the musical and extramusical elements; the voice is not simply a transmitter of sound, but a vehicle through which we come in contact with the resonant affect of a song. What results is an excavation of the self through the archiving of this resonance. In the final chapter, we will look more

closely at why queer listening is important in this current cultural moment, paying mind to beauty and authenticity within the context of late-stage capitalism and post feminism.

CHAPTER THREE

Beauty and Authenticity in a Changing World

My goal in life is to have met myself.

- Lana Del Rey (qtd. in Hannah Ewens)

As I move into the concluding chapter, you may be thinking *Why does any of this matter?* Throughout this work, I have argued that queer listening is a way of entering the glitch, of excavating the beauty that lives within the self. The glitch – as theorized by Russell – is a space of refusal, where binaries collapse, challenging normativity (24). Though Russell's theorizing concerns the boundaries between gender, the body, and technology, the foundation of her ideas entwines with the concept of queer listening put forth by Brooks and explored in this project. More specifically, I imagine the "adjacent space" created by the queer listener as the glitch.

Within the glitch, the body is stripped of its anatomical limitations; it becomes an archive of affective resonance where beauty abounds. As conceptualized by Armstrong and Detweiler-Bedell, beauty is an emotion catalyzed by engaging with the unknown, the novel, the surprising, and the unresolved. The value of submerging in the unknown is twofold; it destabilizes normative structures that delimit affects according to normatively constructed categories (namely genre and gender) and allows for the individual listener to come in contact with the self. Queer listening takes Steph Ceraso's concept of "multimodal listening" a step further because it is not a "full-body" listening experience, but a *beyond-body* experience.

Queer listening is a critical framework through which we can more closely examine the ubiquity of sad girl pop in contemporary culture. The queer listener is primed to engage

with sad girl pop because it is music built on subversion, on a refusal to adhere to norms. Contrary to mainstream pop - particularly girlboss pop - sad girl pop's affective intention is not centered on communicating happiness, empowerment, or joy to the listener. It is not feel-good music. Rather, sad girl pop thrives in irresolution and liminality in both musical and extramusical elements.

The artists at the center of this thesis are themselves queer listeners because they actively destabilize norms in how they not only deploy voice, but how they communicate their unique personas. Both Lana Del Rey and Ethel Cain have been labeled "alternative" artists because of their divergence from mainstream pop. This label is too loose, and frankly inadequate, when it comes to defining the work of these artists. They are not simply an alternative to mainstream pop music; they embody wholly unique and complex mythologies within their music and personas. Sad girl pop artists redefine beauty not as a solely aesthetic venture, but as an affective one wherein the layers of the self are parsed.

Though this concept seems highly theoretical, it has a real-world, empirical application. The Ethel Cain show mentioned earlier in this work was the most illuminating display of queer listening I had ever personally witnessed. Speaking to fellow concertgoers affirmed my hypothesis that there is a both a normative way of listening and a queer way of listening. Normative listening privileges predictability, viewing the performance in terms of time, space, genre, and gender. Queer listening moves beyond normative structures to account for the beauty that lives in liminality, the glitch. Here, one meets the self, catalyzing identity formation.

Authenticity as a "Fraught Concept"

The discursive domain of performance is itself a space of glitch. The boundaries between real and imagined are blurry at best. The distance between persona and person is

difficult to parse; the "real" person never becomes fully visible to the audience because the performance realm necessitates the existence of a performed being i.e. a persona. The queer listener lingers in the liminality produced by these shimmering boundaries, oriented in an adjacent space that affords them a view of the empirical, material world of performance and a position within the mythology which is constructed by the persona. This is precisely why queer listening is the ideal methodology to deploy when observing a performance.

Normative listening is the lexicon of much music criticism and evaluation, where institutions like the Grammys and publications like *Rolling Stone* assess music in terms of defined genres and judge an artist's authenticity based on the relatability of their persona. In this view, music, and artists – particularly female artists – are meant to be systematically picked apart, analyzed, and scrutinized for their ability to evoke pleasure in the listener and adhere to various normative standards of performance. Their work is viewed solely through the empiricist lens, evaluated on the basis of their ability to "cultivate" art from within themselves, to create from a genuine personal experience (Blackburn 94).

Those who write from a biographical place, whose personas are deemed "relatable" are rewarded by normative listeners because they come across as more authentic. Authenticity is a "fraught concept" (Shank 147) because it is reliant on evaluations of what is real and what is not; it is an assessment of genuineness. Normative listening perpetuates the capitalist music machine because it rewards artists who fit conventions, thereby making them marketable. The queer listener foregrounds affect as the substantive material – not only of music – but of life. A performance is not evaluated in terms of its adherence to genre norms; a persona is not assessed in terms of gender norms. Queer listening is a rejection of the evaluative criteria that is the foundation of normative listening. Let me

demonstrate the shortcomings of a normative listening practice to illuminate how queer listening offers a more dynamic way of observing a performance:

In 2017, *New York Times* music critic Jon Caramanica reviewed a live performance by Lana Del Rey. He argues that the performance marked a recession of "Ms. Del Rey's personal mythology, making way for her songcraft." He cites Del Rey's "eerily casual" appearance and stark singing as evidence of her dwindling persona. Though there's certainly something fruitful in Caramanica's reading of the performance, his argument that the personal mythology and the "songcraft" cannot exist in same moment (the mythology must "recede" to clear a path for quality songwriting) exemplifies a normative listening practice. He insinuates that this version of Del Rey – the seemingly less "opaque" – is more authentic, akin to "someone performing at singer-songwriter night at the local coffee shop."

Caramanica sees the fading of the Lana Del Rey character (the mythology, the imagined) as requisite for a more embodied, authentic performance, seeming not to realize that authenticity within the discursive domain of performance is oxymoronic. Performance renders the idea of genuineness moot because a performer must always deliver some level of persona by virtue of existing within the performative domain. Queer listening enables us to move beyond using authenticity as a metric of an effective performance because it acknowledges that persona – the version of the self by which audiences typically measure authenticity – is innately performed, put on, constructed by normativity.

Brooks' definition of a queer listening practice as partly being about attuning to the "affective tonalities of neoliberal capitalist cultures" is central to exploring how artists like Lana Del Rey and Ethel Cain – through enactment of their personas and creation of their art – embody what it means to queer listen and thereby challenge normativity. These artists

refuse to adhere to the girlboss mode that is commercially lucrative and widely accepted by popular audiences. In this way, they push back against the mechanisms that reward normativity and performed relatability all the while being manifestations of neoliberalism.

Performed Relatability and "Profitable Vulnerability"

Though sad girl pop artists challenge the girlboss archetype, it is important to acknowledge that both sad girls and girlbosses are themselves a product of neoliberalism because they reflect the impossibility of stability and happiness for female and female-identifying individuals in a normative world. The girlboss can never truly reach a sense of stability within the self because she is perpetually encouraged – by the public and herself – to locate new areas for improvement. Happiness is bound up in the girlboss' adherence to normativity, her concept of self-realization and discovery tied to gender and genre standards.

She can only weep for a moment before devising a plan to capitalize on her pain. She must always maintain an awareness of her audience because they sustain the economy constructed by the narrative of her struggle. The sad girl can never achieve a neoliberal conception of success because by virtue of being a sad girl, she foregoes the prospect of self-improvement, choosing instead to linger in her unresolved emotions. While the girlboss commodifies her journey of healing, the sad girl commodifies her complacency. In this way, these oppositional figures converge on the same space, underscoring neoliberalism's inescapable circularity.

Girlboss artists like Swift often write from their biographies, connect directly with fans on social media, and make themselves available to press. They are fully absorbed into the major music machine, selling their narratives and themselves to listeners, the consumers. Though Swift and her contemporaries in the girlboss pop space detail stories

of heartache, loss, and internal turmoil, the narratives they write are always resolved; the vulnerability gives way to empowerment. Fredrika Thelandderson coins the term "profitable vulnerability" to describe the phenomenon in which celebrities foreground personal narratives of mental health and emotional struggles to appeal to their fanbases and adopt the appearance of a relatable figure that is not so distant from their fan's everyday experiences**.** This is what I call performative relatability.

Thelandderson has in mind artists like Demi Lovato and Selena Gomez who have garnered major media attention by openly detailing their mental health journeys. These journeys, she posits, exemplify the ways that contemporary feminism is constrained by the normative structures of late-stage capitalism. Drawing on the work of theorists Rosalind Gill and Judith Butler, Thelanderrson posits that both neoliberalism and post-feminism "emphasize not only bodily transformation but also psychic improvement" (18).

Consequently, an economy constructs itself around the "commodification of self-help" – where celebrities present their personal accounts of mental health struggles in the form of social media posts, films, poetry books, memoirs, etc. This economy is both literal – celebrities cash in on these endeavors – and symbolic in the sense that they gain social capital among fans who can see their own struggles reflected back to them in the funhouse mirror of celebrity. The celebrity who reveals personally sensitive information in such a public way solidifies their authenticity by stepping out of the private space of struggle, forging pseudo-intimate para-social relationships with thousands, even millions of fans and followers.

Thelandersson positions Gomez and Lovato as case studies of this sort of phenomenon – where a celebrity's documentation of their mental health battles (for Lovato

these include substance abuse, eating disorders, BPD, and depression; for Gomez anxiety and bipolar disorder) serves to become a "lifeline for their fans" who, through the celebrity, "can acknowledge their own problems" (111). The externalization and commodification of internal struggle is made not only marketable, but desirable, leading to the conflation of pain with payoff.[61] However, these ailments can only become marketable, brandable, if they are resolutely conquered. Thelanderrson argues that post-feminism – the notion that all the aims of feminism have already been achieved – entwines with neoliberal ethos insofar that the journey towards self-empowerment is embedded in self-improvement, requiring relentless effort from the individual to take what is deemed as inherently negative and swiftly convert it into something positive, celebratory, and ultimately sellable (129).

An example of this is Taylor Swift's ongoing re-recording project. In 2019, music manager Scooter Braun was involved in a deal that granted him rights to Swift's master recordings. In true girlboss fashion, Swift decided to re-record all of her records as a way of ensuring not only ownership of her work, but the profits generated by such work. The project has made her millions, exemplifying the girlboss spirit; she transformed her "'worst case scenario'" (Grady) into something commercially generative and socially popular. Swift is perhaps the most obvious embodiment of the girlboss. Her songs are replete with heartbreak, contemplation, self-reflection, and at times self-deprecation. Despite the weight of these themes, there is the constant thrum of hope and determination; she is only ever temporarily unmoored before ultimately finding her footing.

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[61] Lovato and Gomez are just two examples of *sad girls* who are not necessarily *creators* of sad girl pop. They express sadness but adhere to the girlboss mold in the way that they work to resolve that sadness to sell a narrative of overcoming and empowerment. Therefore, they remain planted in the realm of normativity where their sense of empowerment is derived from self-improvement and capital accumulation.

Sad girl culture works to challenge the profitable vulnerability that sustains the girlboss insofar that it represents "a kind of rupture in the relatability paradigm in that those participating in these discourses are encouraged to consider depression, anxiety, and mental illness as central aspects of life rather than something to immediately laugh off" or actively work through (Thelanderrson 192). Artists like Lana Del Rey and Ethel Cain are openly disinterested in the commercial success achieved by contemporaries who have capitalized on their vulnerability and constructed triumphant narratives of the self.[62] Del Rey and Anhedönia have expressed not only a disinterest in a neoliberal version of "success," but have communicated – subtly and not-so-subtly - their lack of wanting to be close to fans.

Recently in a feature for *The Guardian,* Anhedönia stated that she felt like "'a dancing monkey'" on stage whose art was not being taken seriously by fans (qtd. in D'Souza). As a result, she deleted Twitter, explaining:

> I always kind of conflated openness with honesty and I thought that if I was completely transparent and bared every aspect of my soul that people would think I was relatable and kinda cool. Then I was like, I don't want to know you. I don't want to be friends with you. I don't want to have all of my personal business and every innermost thought just out there on the internet for the world to see. (qtd. in D'Souza)

By Anhedönia explicitly saying she does not want to be "friends" with her fans, she sets a boundary between herself and any prospect of marketable, brandable vulnerability insofar that para-social relationships with fans sustain the symbolic and literal economy of an

[62] Philip Auslander explains that artists – by nature of existing within a capitalist machine – are caught in a "cycle of commercialism" where they must push their latest "sellable commodity" to sustain relevance (115). In the case of Gomez and Lovato, their most valuable "sellable commodity" is a narrative of self-discovery, healing, and empowerment, For Anhedönia and LDR, what they sell is the idea that sadness is nothing to conquer, that the self in its most raw form is worth knowing. Del Rey sings on her unreleased track "Pawn Shop Blues" that she wouldn't mind living on "bread and oranges" and foregoing love altogether if it means knowing all she can know – communicating that knowledge of the self is more important to her than monetary success.

artist's career. Here, Anhedönia positions herself in direct opposition to Lovato and Gomez and more broadly the archetype of the girlboss. Anhedönia has declined opportunities to collaborate with unnamed pop stars and headline larger venues, explaining "'there's just some levels of success that I really don't want for myself'" (qtd. in D'Souza). This further expresses her discomfort with the girlboss archetype because she does not see absorption into the mainstream as desirable, underscoring her wariness of the normative structures that govern the music industry.

Del Rey has expressed similar skepticism, openly stating that she is not interested in feminism[63] or even making money from her music.[64] In a now infamous 2014 *Rolling Stone* feature by Brian Hiatt, Del Rey admitted that she wished people didn't listen to her music, saying "'I just don't want them to hear it at all.'" When challenged by Hiatt, who asked how that desire conflicts with her selling the record, Del Rey responded by saying "I don't sell the record. I'm signed to a label who's selling the record. I don't need to make any money. I really could care less.'" Here, Del Rey's insistence on distancing herself from the music business - paired with her admittance that she doesn't care about her records being heard – communicates an anti-girlboss attitude and helps construct her persona as aloof, disinterested in commodifying her sadness.

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[63] In an interview with *The Fader*, Del Rey stated: "Whenever people bring up feminism, I'm like, god. I'm just not really that interested" (Cooper) leading many to consider her antifeminist.

[64]The irony abounds here considering Del Rey's early obsession with opulence and riches detailed in the music. She even sings on "National Anthem," "Money is the anthem of success." Early symbols of Del Rey's taste for opulence come in the shape of white Mustangs, expensive cognac, diamonds, and evenings at the Chateau Marmot. In deploying these signifiers, she constructs her persona with the materials of capitalist consumer culture that adorn her vision of America.

Del Rey and Anhedönia, in the act of renouncing a desire for commercial success, position themselves a pole away from the impulse to constantly improve the self, thereby undermining the approach taken by girlboss feminists who champion self-improvement as a mode of self-empowerment (Thelanderrson 18). The distance they create in their voices is mirrored in the emotional distance they take from the public. In this way, their personas as sad girls undercut the performative relatability of their contemporaries in the girlboss sphere. While figures like Swift, Gomez, and Lovato seek to narrate their journeys of overcoming obstacles to relate to their fans and form a brand around that journey, Del Rey and Anhedönia entirely resist this narrative. Rather, they, like all sad girls, choose to observe sadness, and its various associated emotions, as something to ponder, contemplate, steep in, and intellectualize, reimaging pathologies as desirable instead of necessary to eradicate.

Why Sad Girl Pop?

Thelanderrson cites artist Audrey Wollen whose "Sad Girl Theory" "reconceptualizes female sadness as a form of protest" and seeks to respond to "a patriarchal world that requires women to smile" (21). In Lucy Watson's estimation, Sad Girl Theory advocates for a feminism that acknowledges the hardships of being a girl; a feminism that can accommodate empowerment and pain equally without feeling the need to discard the latter (cited in Mooney 179). It works to subvert the historical connotations and pathologies of sadness that have rendered it unproductive, destructive, necessary to eradicate, and instead position it as a generative mental space.

By expressing her disinterest with contemporary feminism, Del Rey embodies this Sad Girl Theory in the way that she does not attempt to remove herself from what is historically deemed disempowering. To her – like all sad girls - happiness is ever elusive.

She even has songs titled "Is This Happiness?" and "Happiness is a Butterfly" where she sings of the ephemerality of contentment. Wistfulness laces itself throughout her entire discography, not just lyrically, but sonically. The voice is cavernous, swallowing the listener without any prospect of release. There is no call to action in a Lana Del Rey song, no message of perseverance and overcoming.

Del Rey's music is resonating more than it ever has. At thirty-eight years of age, she's experiencing a renaissance of sorts, accumulating tens of millions of listeners on major streaming platforms, racking up Grammy nominations, being named of Artist of the Decade by *Variety*, and even receiving rave reviews from her former detractors.[65] In 2023, she won the Visionary Award at the *Billboard* Women in Music Awards. In the words of Taylor Swift, Del Rey is "…a legend in her prime" whose blazed a trail for younger female artists.[66] What can explain this shift in the mainstream reception of Del Rey who has continually pushed against contemporary feminism and been deemed antifeminist?

We might look to the Great Resignation for an answer. A confluence of factors, amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to record numbers of Americans leaving their jobs over the past decade (Fuller and Kerr). The Great Resignation is not just economic; it is affective. Statistics show climbing rates of depression – especially among women – since 2015.[67] Reports of general distress among American adults have increased since the start of the pandemic.[68] In recent years, teen girls have reported extreme levels of

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[65] Just this year alone, Del Rey rose to #28 on the Spotify global listening chart, was nominated for five Grammys, and received rave reviews from outlets such as *Pitchfork* and *Rolling Stone* who characterized her early work as "awkward," (Zoladz) "dull" and "dreary" (Sheffield).

[66] In her Grammys acceptance speech, Swift brought LDR onstage and declared her adoration and admiration for her work.

[67] From Gallup. See "U.S. Depression Rates Reach New Highs" by Dan Witters.

[68] See "At Least four-in-ten U.S. Adults Have Faced High Levels of Psychological Distress During COVID-19 Pandemic" by Pasquini and Keeter.

sadness and hopelessness.[69] This current climate is primed for sad girl pop because it offers an affective palette that resonates with a considerable swath of the listening population.

Several of Del Rey's most recent songs champion complacency. On "the greatest" she sings "I miss doing nothing the most of all." In a retrospective mode, she sings on "Fingertips:"

> All I wanted to do was kiss Aaron Greene and sit by
> The lake, twisting lime into the drinks that they made
> Have a babe at sixteen in the town I was born in, and die

Here, Del Rey admits that her life aspirations were to stay in her hometown of Lake Placid, kiss the cute boy from high school, and mother a child. This desire contrasts with the hunger for opulence and notoriety she expresses on her earliest records.[70]

The noticeable breathiness of the voice communicates this exasperation, meandering through a chorus-less 6 minutes. "There's no rhythm, no structure;" it is a song that "seems disinterested in holding our attention" (Horn) yet is one of the most compelling songs in Del Rey's extensive discography because she is seemingly breaking the fourth wall. In doing so, she expresses an exhaustion that seems timely. Similarly, the music of Ethel Cain captures the appeal of complacency. On "American Teenager" she admits that's "It's just not my year/but I'm all good out here" – showing no desire to overcome her sadness.

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[69] From the CDC, reported by Erika Edwards. See "CDC says teen girls are caught in an extreme wave of sadness and violence."

[70] On Del Rey's early work, she sang lines like "Money is the anthem," "I want money/power/glory," and "give me them coins," reflecting an obsession with capitalistic metrics of success. As Del Rey has moved through her career, she has become increasingly disillusioned by the vision she set forth, writing of humbler desires like starting a family, eating ice cream with a boyfriend, and driving a John Deere tractor. This thematic shift is significant because it conveys an attempt on Del Rey's part to shed some of the persona which has often preceded her.

LDR's "A&W"[71] has been hailed as a song of the year, nominated for a Grammy, and considered one of her best tracks to date. It finds her crooning cutting lines, calling God a "charlatan," herself a "divisive" princess, and shedding light on her own inner turmoil. It is an active negotiation of her past and present, as she addresses her longtime tenuous relationship with the public[72] and the dissolution of her dreams. Del Rey sings "It's not about having someone to love me anymore/This is the experience of being an American wh*re." In just these lines alone, there is a collapsing of Del Rey's early persona. On "Video Games" she sings "Only worth living if somebody's loving you;" on "A&W" she acknowledges that the lofty fantasy world she has constructed is beyond her reach. In this way, she speaks to a generation of listeners who feel stuck, disillusioned, and betrayed by the promises of a fulfilling future.

The queer listener of sad girl pop is able to linger in the liminality of unresolved emotions without the pressure of having to overcome them. In this space, sadness is valid, a source of beauty and meaning. While the girlboss treats sadness as an ailment to cure, the sad girl sees it as a way of forging a deeper understanding of the self. There is no quote that better captures this ethos than one from a recent interview with Del Rey:

> I don't think happiness is the goal but my goal in life is to have met myself, have my heart in one place and my head in one place and it's not about being a ray of sunshine but it's…to even have gotten to that point, I think… (Ewens "'My goal'" 11)

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[71] The song title is a double entendre, used to signify the American soda brand and the phrase "American wh*re."

[72] There is a drove of controversies that Del Rey has been involved in since the inception of her career. This thesis is not focused on addressing these controversies as this would require a complete directional shift away from the questions at hand. This is not to say we should not consider Del Rey's courtship with controversy an element of her persona and take her actions seriously. Rather, it is not in the interest of cogency to delve into the complexity of these various instances. See "A Timeline of Lana Del Rey's Biggest Controversies" by Heran Mamo for more.

This is a powerful affirmation of the sad girl's introspectiveness. Here, Del Rey asserts herself as not only a lifelong sad girl, but as a queer listener because she expresses the ultimate desire to meet herself, regardless of the emotional terrain she must traverse to do so.

A Hand Pressed to the Glass

A new generation of female pop artists like Billie Eilish and Olivia Rodrigo – who have won a combined twelve Grammys – credit Del Rey with inspiring their art. Rodrigo's song "All-American B*tch" makes several references to Del Rey, including the line "I'm pretty when I cry" – a direct nod to the aforementioned LDR song. Eilish has said that Del Rey's *Born to Die* "changed music" with Rodrigo stating "'She defies any stereotypes of what a woman writing pop songs should or shouldn't be. She's constantly pushing boundaries and making work that is fresh, adventurous, and unabashedly feminine'" (Daly).

The sad girl has incrementally moved from the alternative lane[73] closer to the mainstream, yet still remains at an arm's distance. At this year's Grammy Awards, Del Rey can be seen being tugged onstage to accompany Taylor Swift. As Swift takes center stage holding her fourth Album of the Year award – which Del Rey was also nominated for – Del Rey stands behind and adjacent to her, tucked neatly in the shadows. The metaphor could not be more apt: Swift, mainstream pop's resident girlboss, is dressed in a sleek white

[73] Sad girl pop is one of many music spheres that have been relegated as alternative. Punk music and metal are other types of music that have been tossed in the alternative bucket. Interestingly punk and metal, like sad girl pop, are built on a refusal to adhere to norms. The rejection of conformity creates a space where performers and listeners alike foray into deeply emotional experiences. Music that has been dubbed "alternative" like sad girl pop, metal, and punk, positions both performers and listeners on the periphery of normativity. There, they are primed to queer listen.

gown, glowing beneath the spotlight; Del Rey wears a black dress and bow in her hair, appearing noticeably shy, uncomfortable with so many eyes on her. She is just outside the celebration, in view of it, but never truly inside.

The Grammys is an institution that is built on normative structures. It is no wonder Del Rey – despite having been nominated eleven times – has never won. Though she's certainly gained popularity over the years, the specter of her persona always looms, keeping her at a distance from mainstream absorption. In many ways, her persona has grown to precede her. Blackburn writes "when a persona becomes a lucid character that is adopted in public interactions and is embodied by a human being, such as Lana Del Rey, it becomes difficult, undesirable even, to distinguish between the person and the persona" (96).

On "Candy Necklaces," Del Rey contemplates her persona and place in the zeitgeist. The music video for the song centers on the death of the Del Rey persona as we once knew it. In an elaborate 10 minutes, Del Rey traverses a broad range of metaphors and signifiers that are callbacks to previous moments in her career. In one moment, she dons a *Born to Die* era wig; in another, she makes herself in the image of Marilyn Monroe, who she frequently references on early tracks. The video is mostly shot in black and white, interspersed with scenes of color.

Black and white symbolizes the past tense of the Del Rey persona, with the color shots being mostly background footage until the final scene. Often, she appears increasingly frustrated by the production process, holding a middle finger to the camera, and complaining about things "not working" (2:59). In a behind-the-scenes moment she says "All these women who change their name, change their hair like me, all fell into these different snake holes. The whole point is how do you learn from that and not fall into your

own thing" (4:07-4:25). Breaking the fourth wall, she communicates the exhaustion of having to embody and live up to the mythos of her persona. Throughout the video, she reckons with the shadow of her past self and attempts to evade a seemingly inevitable and tragic end.

There are jarring moments including Del Rey's portrayal of Monroe. She sits in what looks like a therapist's office; behind her are books including the *Handbook of General Psychology, Handbook of Post-Traumatic Therapy,* and *Elements of Psychology*. The significance of this symbolism cannot go unnoticed; Del Rey appears to be commenting on the tragedy of persona, the psychological destruction that comes with bearing the weight of a constructed mythology by donning the looks of one of America's most tormented stars. Throughout the video, she dresses as Elizabeth Short whose brutal murder in the 1940s remains one of America's most famous unresolved cases. It is presumed by the end of the video that Del Rey herself has died with blood staining an unopened chest. Cameras flash as they try to catch a glimpse inside before cutting to the final scene.

There, she appears a younger version of herself, adorned with her signature Priscilla Presley hair, flower crown, and white lace dress that she often wore during her earliest performances. In this scene, she sits next to her imaginary star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, beaming up at the paparazzi. It is a striking moment in which Del Rey negotiates killing off her persona or remaining planted in it, leaving the listener to grapple. The video is a commentary on the necessity of cultivating and sustaining a persona in order to be rewarded by the industry; there is no escaping it and if you attempt to, you will find yourself meeting a tragic end.

This shift in Del Rey, moving from what she calls "world building" to thought processing[74] on her most recent albums, reveals her to be a queer listener in the sense that she is actively addressing the constraints of normativity. She realizes that it is a danger to be a woman, "to fall into your own thing" because within these "snake holes" as she calls them, there is no escape route. She must pick a genre lane, adhere to the norms and procedures of being a female pop star because to do anything different would surely lead to ostracization. The irony is that by resisting genre convention and embodying a deviant femininity, Del Rey has inched closer to the mainstream, though she remains just on the outside. Where other pop stars attempt to create a clean, cogent, consistent image of themselves, Del Rey thrives in trying things on, confronting her dreams and downfalls with equal fervor. Liminality is her permanent home. This is where her and the queer listener convene to dabble in the beauty that is the unknown, the unresolved, their hands pressed firmly to the glass.

Limitations and Lingering Questions

Throughout this work, I have described what queer listening can do as far as parsing the work of sad girl pop artists. I would be remiss to not acknowledge the limitations of positioning Lana Del Rey as a case study of queer listening. She performs non-conformity in her music and persona yet is deeply embedded in the major music machine. She is a conventionally attractive, cis white woman who has made a living signed to a major label. Del Rey has derived inspiration from Billie Holiday and Nina Simone (both of whom she has formally covered in her discography) in developing her sad girl persona. She even has their names inked on her chest as a nod to their influence. This is important because Del

[74] Leading up to the release of her 2019 studio album *Norman F*cking Rockwell!* Del Rey explains that she moved away from "world building" to craft a record that reflected her internal thought process (K.Robinson).

Rey, by drawing on the legacy of black female artists to craft her "(white) Sad Girl" persona (Mooney 198), perpetuates the racialized aspects of affect.[75]

Popular writing about sad girl culture privileges the figure of the white sad girl[76] yet there are many artists of color whose work in the sad girl pop space should be acknowledged and recognized as such. FKA Twigs comes to mind. She is an artist whose work is multimodal, combining stunning visual displays with boundary-pushing music. Though she undoubtedly deploys the sad girl persona in her work, she is continually left out of the conversation when it comes to discussing sad girl pop. Instead, she is cast into the "experimental pop" and "alternative R&B" molds. In a 2014 interview with *The Guardian*, Twigs denounced the label of alternative R&B, calling it out as an arbitrary category used to maintain racial segregation in music:

> If I was white and blonde and said I went to church all the time, you'd be talking about the 'choral aspect'. But you're not talking about that because I'm a mixed-race girl from south London. (qtd. in Beaumont-Thomas)

The lack of artists of color within the sad girl pop conversation signals a racialization of emotionality. It appears only the white female artist is permitted to make beauty from her sadness, to turn a profit doing so. This perpetuates an emotional hierarchy where white sadness is privileged over that of people of color, in turn undermining the art that is made from the materials of such sadness. How can queer listening help us to consider how race intersects with affect? This remains an important question worthy of further study.

At its core, the glitch accommodates dimensionality, dismantling binary constructions, and collapsing categorical methods of assessment and evaluation. Russell

[75] See Mooney's *Sad Girls and Carefree Black Girls*, particularly her section on "(white) Sad Girls."
[76] A term coined by Mooney.

writes that "To seize 'multiple selves' is, therefore, an inherently feminist act: multiplicity is a liberty" (18). In the case of sad girl pop artists their deployment of persona creates a layered, dimensional world within which the music lives. It is here where multiplicity abounds, where nothing is concrete. Their mythologies operate beyond the material world, beyond what can be evaluated and assessed within a normative lens.

It is a futile venture to assess these mythologies with the tools of contemporary cultural criticism. The field is laced with the language of neoliberalism in the sense that artists are still assessed by their adherence to genre norms and their embodiment of particular gender stereotypes. Queer listening can allow us to deconstruct and reimagine this lexicon, to consider the work of the girlboss and the sad girl as equally impactful within the culture. Perhaps the most important use of queer listening is that it attunes us to the ways in which dominant discourses about art – particularly that made by women – undermine the significance and importance of beauty. In a world where logic and reason are privileged over affect, beauty gets lost necessarily; aesthetics are distrusted and relegated as unserious. Lost in this approach is the understanding that it is beauty – more than any other emotion – that leads us to a deeper awareness of the self, and therefore a richer understanding of our world.

I am left to ponder a few key questions: Can queer listening be aptly applied to the mainstream "girlboss" pop space? To what end? How does queer listening apply to listeners at various intersections of class, sexuality, and race? How does transness orient the queer listener?[77] How might queer listening complicate extant scholarship within the

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[77] In this work, I did not write about Anhedönia's trans identity and how it orients her as a queer listener and creator of sad girl pop. This is a limitation of this project that warrants further investigation.

realm of queer theory? I pose this last question especially because I believe a shortcoming of current scholarship is that it does not fully delve into how listening specifically is a way of orienting the body. There is abundant work on how affective experiences shape the body as evidenced in the scholarship of Sara Ahmed. I think there is more to be explored in regard to how listening impacts the identity formation of LGBTQ+ people.

As a self-identifying queer person, I have witnessed music's ability to catalyze identity formation. It is within the folds of sad girl pop that I have had the most connective experiences – with those around me and myself. Music – and its associated spaces – has long served marginalized groups insofar that it constructs a liminal location wherein the body can - to use Ahmed's term - "sink" into its surroundings (148). This seamlessness enables the otherwise alienated listener to coalesce with their environment while simultaneously maintaining critical distance from normative structures. Queer listening is the act of opening a door to a world where one can not only experience beauty but redefine it in their own terms, making it a powerful tool for reimaging what it means to know the self and one's place in the world.

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