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Isabel Furman  
*Vassar College*

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**“I Called You Sister”  
Liner Notes on Women, Songwriting, and Self-Representation**

Isabel Furman  
April 26, 2019

A Media Studies Senior Project  
Vassar College

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in Media Studies

Advisors: Justin Patch and Giovanna Borradori

## INTRODUCTION

I remember the first time I heard the term “songwriter.” I was eleven years old, and Taylor Swift had just released “Teardrops on My Guitar”, the single that put her on the map as preteen pop’s newest singer-songwriter. The fact that she wrote her own material spoke more to me than the actual songs themselves-- there was suddenly a new element of music to think about. Her songs showed that the thoughts and feelings of young girls belonged in music, that they were important enough to sing about. Most of the other music I grew up with came from the men in my father’s CD collection. After discovering Taylor, it wasn’t long until I was writing my own songs and seeking out more women musicians for inspiration. Each new artist blew my mind; from jazz composers like Esperanza Spalding to classic singer-songwriters like Joni Mitchell to indie rockers like Mitski, these musicians expanded my emotional and creative vocabulary and became role models for my artistic aspirations. The work of these artists felt undeniably radical; not only were women making music, they were making innovative, exciting, boundary-pushing art. They were not just musicians, but songwriters, and their work was unapologetically, radically feminine.

I took on this project to explore the ways in which songwriting serves as a lens for the exploration of not only gender (in a broader, systematic sense), but the personal relationships of women to song, story, and self-representation. Devising this project meant unearthing my own conceptions of both gender and music, discovering how the ways that we are taught to create are bound to the ways we are taught to be recognized as women. Within that was a new kind of resistance; in the process of reinventing modes of writing was the potential for reimagining gender identity. This exploration begged me to unpack how my own notions of selfhood and

self-determination are linked to the agency I give myself in writing. To what extent is the experience of femininity, as it is learned and reinforced through social conditioning, invested in and interwoven with art? In what ways can we use creative expression to claim, celebrate, and channel the experience of gender?

The identity of gender is complicated in that it manifests as both an individual sense of self and a societally reinforced category. I use the term “marginalization” in this project to relate the personal experiences I discuss surrounding gender to broader conceptions of systematic oppression and identity. “Marginalized” evokes the spatiality of social structures-- the work, needs, and success of dominant groups are centralized, while those of oppressed groups are pushed to the margins. While the category of woman has come to represent a form of marginalization, everyone experiences it differently, in accordance with their positionality across other axes of identity. This project approaches gender as a point of departure for interrogating the relationships between oppression, selfhood, agency, and creativity. I utilize the category of womanhood as a vantage point for exploring marginality, as it has manifested in my own life. In doing so, I draw from personal experiences of gender, which are inherently mediated by my experiences of whiteness, cisness, queerness, and more.

I created this project with the awareness that every identity group would have their own version of articulating marginality through song. I do not intend to essentialize what it means to be a woman, or claim that my experiences dictate the experiences of others. However, the fact that there *is* a socially constructed category of womanhood implies some common realities of oppression across this particular axis. As I was writing about myself and my experience, it became clear that much of that experience was based in a shared, systematically reinforced,

categorically-defined mode of existence. In this way, the project negotiates the relationship of the personal to the collective, offering observations from my own positionality in the hopes of engaging with and illuminating some of these commonalities.

This project utilizes feminist theory, particularly that which surrounds language, writing, text, and creativity, in placing the musical in conversation with the theoretical and the personal in conversation with the societal. Writing this project has been a process of learning to blur the lines between theory and creativity. Researching happened simultaneously with making music, such that while I was never critically thinking about my songs, the theory that was ruminating during their inception is inextricable from the artistic result. Constructing this project was, then, also an exercise in finding creativity in theory, and vice versa. As my exploration will come to uncover, the process of songwriting from the perspective of identity blurs the boundaries of both theory and creativity. If queering is a tension between the position of marginality and cultural hegemonic boundaries, feminine songwriting may be an act of queering that deconstructs and reconfigures the form. Songwriting is therefore transformed through the lens of identity and marginality, disrupting traditional boundaries between the theoretical and the creative, the personal and the collective.

The textual format of this project takes inspiration from “liner notes”, short pieces of writing found in the lining of albums that explain or elaborate on each song. Liner notes are opportunities for artists to offer textual elaboration on their work. They often include anecdotes, biographies, disclaimers, or short essays. In keeping with the blurring of creativity and theory, my liner notes integrate the theoretical framework with a discussion of the artistic explorations in each of the five songs. Doing so allows me to relate every song to broader conversations about

gender, creativity, and agency. Liner notes personalize and authorize the musical content of the album, linking the creative product to both the process and the author. As such, they demonstrate that songwriting is more than music; it is a personal statement.

This album is a collection of meditations on my own relationships with womanhood, femininity, and music. Albums are in themselves a variation on the montage, offering vignettes rather than streamlining a cohesive narrative. Each song on this album is a snapshot from a life spent interacting with questions of gender. I offer these glimpses not as a comprehensive summation of womanhood, but as a starting point for interacting with the presence of femininity in both the creation and analysis of music.

“I Called You Sister” is a lyric taken from the last song on the album. Growing up with two brothers, the role of sister was instrumental in reifying my feminine identity; it was one of the first feminine terms I could use to describe myself. As such, this title represents one key moment in the formation of my feminine consciousness. Later in life, I used the word “sister” to describe women with whom I shared deep connections, as a means of evoking love beyond the boundaries of traditional friendship. These two interpretations of the title feel representative of a core theme in the album: both the ways in which terminology inscribes social roles and the ways in which that same terminology can be used to transgress conventions.

Songwriting is nominally divided into two parts: that of song (melody, harmony, form), and writing (text, syntax). Engaging with the practice of songwriting therefore means reconciling the dichotomy between the written and the sung. This project discusses not only the process of writing but also the impact of the song as the product of that writing. Some of its themes seek to disturb and deconstruct the structure of dichotomy: personal vs. collective, subjective vs.

objective, voice vs. text, masculine vs. feminine. When Stuart Hall discusses reception analysis, he explores the relationship between encoding and decoding, or the meanings the artist imbeds in work in relation to the meaning that is interpreted (see, Ott). This theme of duplicity in the album parallels the encoding/decoding relationship. My process encodes both theory and personal experience. In doing so, it provides the opportunity to decode collective engagement with gender and artistic practice. In undergoing this project, I embed my own reconciliation with the experience of gendering in the hope that its reception will provoke a conversation about the ways we both find and write ourselves in songs.

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## AMELIA

*What are they teaching ya, Amelia  
I steal from you every second  
There's a method and it's real to ya, Amelia  
I feel like I'm progressing*

*Do you know what you ask me to do, for you  
To be what I'm supposed to, for you  
And maybe I conceal it, but Amelia  
I'll always be blue*

*I wasn't made for dealing but  
I feel like I'm knee deep inside some bet  
Against me while I'm reeling 'cause, Amelia  
You take what you can get*

*Do you know just what you accuse, do you  
I told you I was telling the truth, to you  
And maybe nothing's real except this feeling  
Hey Amelia, I'm blue  
Yeah maybe nothing's real 'cause to Amelia*

*There's a box 'round every body  
 Is that what your mother taught you  
 You can't wear shorts in the summer  
 Is this the girl you always wanted  
 Are you the girl you always wanted*

*Do you see what we put each other through, us two  
 But I guess what you want from me I'll do, for you  
 And maybe I reveal it to Amelia, but that doesn't make it true  
 Maybe I reveal it to Amelia, but that doesn't make it true  
 Maybe it's a feeling, but Amelia, I'm blue I'm blue I'm*

\*\*\*

Many women can identify one person who taught them what it means to be a girl. Mine was my fourth grade bully. Her name was Amelia, and she claimed that I wasn't a girl because I didn't wear the color pink. I responded by rocking a pair of fuchsia underwear which I proudly showed her one afternoon in the bathroom. She never bothered me again.

Songwriters will often describe their craft as storytelling. However, the process of writing this song was not so much as telling a story, but rather building a relationship with the voice of a character. I wrote "Amelia" as my fourth grade self. Unconcerned with big metaphors or poetry, younger me saw the situation plainly as a test of my ability to pass among everyone else. But among that confrontation was the totally secure observation that maybe I was not like everyone else. As the song says, maybe while the other girls were pink, I was blue.

This story engages with the question of performativity in both gender and songwriting. As Judith Butler famously argues, gender is constituted not by some inherent biological character, but by a series of societally conditioned, repeated acts that come to construct and define a way of existing in the world (Butler, 519). Performativity is the very monster that my

younger self confronts in this story; although most aspects of gender conditioning occur subconsciously or involuntarily, this character encounters head-on the necessity of performing specific acts as a means of signifying a correct or normative gender identity.

There is a conception of singer-songwriters that the genre or medium signifies some element of authenticity. Because the listener is aware that the voice we hear is the same voice that wrote the song, there is an element of trust and reassurance implicit in the relationship between songwriter and audience. Authenticity relies on an unmediated presence of “the self” of the songwriter within the song, and the idea that the song works to represent or embody that self wholly and truthfully. However, the discourse of authenticity is misleading in that it paints the artistic process as passive or unintentional. Women artists especially wrestle with the assumption that the work they create is inherently confessional; society expects women to be constantly emotionally accessible, such that women’s work is often assumed to be diaristic. “Authenticity” becomes synonymous with the belief that women’s art is ruled by emotional outpouring and serves as a window for accessing their emotional lives, instead of as an exercise in artistic agency or craft. Moreover, the idea of confessionalism implies some level of guilt or apology. In the same way that women are conditioned to apologize constantly, this passivity implies a level of shame in the act of expression. We are expected both to reveal our whole emotional selves and apologize for doing so.

In many ways, “Amelia” is very inauthentic; its narrator is both *not* me and also unreliable in its storytelling. The lyric “Maybe I reveal it to Amelia, but that doesn’t make it true” actually acknowledges the withholding of truth from both Amelia and the listener. There is then a performativity involved in the writing itself; as a songwriter, I engage with the assumption

that my work authentically comes from me by performing the act of writing, and especially writing as a woman. But that performance is destabilized by a narrative that actively refuses to tell the truth, both in its literary voice and in its admittance of its own performativity.

In her 1986 essay “Towards a Feminist Narratology”, feminist literary theorist Susan Lanser outlines the relationship of public/private dichotomies to women’s textual tradition. She claims that published text is a form of public space; historically, however, women’s spheres have been confined to the private. As such, forms of women’s writing covertly disguise public messages within traditionally private modes of writing, such as letters and diary entries. This dichotomy between the public, or masculine sphere, and the private, or feminine sphere, means that a deeper interpretation of both women’s literary work and their social condition exists within levels of text. The extradiegetic level is the voice of the author-narrator; it speaks publicly for the text, on the same level of narration as its receiver. The intradiegetic voice, on the other hand, speaks within the text as the private voice.

The intradiegetic voice in *Amelia* is that of its protagonist, my younger self. She speaks candidly and truthfully, if not a little ambiguously. In many ways she embodies the assumption of authenticity, claiming the role of the protagonistic narrative voice and utilizing that platform to tell the story from a place of confession. However, as the songwriter, I’m not absent or passive. The disparity between my own subjectivity and that of the narrator represents the extradiegetic/intradiegetic dichotomy as well as a subversion of this expectation of authenticity. In other words, in the distance between myself and my narrator is a comment on the ways that time and growth alter our ways of performing both gender and stories. The confessional model of songwriting fails to account for the ways in which artists create these dialogues between their

characters and the art itself. In reinscribing narrative voice, I gave myself permission to access confessionality without the implications of passivity. “Amelia” refuses to apologize for the way its transgressive subjectivity straddles the personal and impersonal. As a story, character, and song, it refuses to apologize for existing. As women especially, this negotiation between public and private levels of meaning becomes a comment on that which we are expected by society to reveal and that which we can demand to keep hidden.

Who are we when we tell stories? As Lanser suggests, women writers, songwriters included, have developed approaches to writing that explore multiple subjectivities at once. The assumption of authenticity is problematic for women because it implies a responsibility to authenticate, to represent, the self. But when women tell stories, particularly about themselves, particularly about other women, there is always a performative, extradiegetic element that is asked to confront pre-existing notions of feminine selfhood. When I talk about Amelia, I’m not just talking about my fourth grade bully. I’m talking about where and how we as women learn what society demands of our performances. For me, “Amelia” was a means of negotiating the need to represent myself, as per the tradition of songwriting, with the awareness that women as writers are always inhabiting a multiplicity of selves, past, present, and future.

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## **THE BULLS**

*Let's negotiate just for a second  
My place here amongst the wreckage  
A muse or a blessing but  
Never human I guess it's your*

*Way with words that makes me  
Want the world  
A puppet of your pen  
To play with your pretty girl*

*Running with the bulls  
Coughing up dust like a cigarette bum  
Pretend to be drunk just enough to be gone  
You need me to run so you'll always have someone to want*

*Running with the bulls  
Safety of the pack as they're stacking their skulls  
Bargaining forgiveness, ruining their livers  
It's never enough just to love, I've gotta deliver*

*Me oh my, what a piece am I  
for your piece of mind  
As I swing my hips and refill your wine*

*Watch this red as I go on by  
It's not only bulls who've bled for the fight  
When they remove the sword from your spine  
It'll be mine, It'll be mine*

\*\*\*

There is an assumption about male creativity that is inextricable from their dominance in society; the idea of “genius” has long been considered a male attribute, both in the sense of men possessing the intellectual capacity for genius, and in the sense that their work is taken more seriously because of power and privilege. Moreover, because men have such a massive legacy of other male artists after whom they can model themselves, they are afforded the assumption of belonging within that canon. In other words, the white male domination of textual tradition is a

hegemonic power structure. We continuously normalize and permit notions of male genius that make it harder for marginalized groups to find a place within cultural production.

A crucial aspect of this domination is the lack of interrogation of art considered “classic.” Hegemony works precisely because things that have existed in dominant cultural tradition are left uncriticized-- not because they are undeserving, but because of a notion that they are too foundational, too formative, to question. This too is inextricable from identity; white men are given a cultural pass because they have the power, privilege, and resources to become formative to the canon. Critiquing these works is the first step to undoing the hegemony of male artists. Through critique, we challenge the idea that marginalized voices did not exist at the inception of these works by refusing to exclude them from the narrative. Moreover, we demand that if these works are to follow us into modernity, they be held to modern standards of social consciousness and inclusivity.

Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* was one of my favorite books in high school. As I re-read it recently, however, I found it impossible to ignore its blatant sexism, racism, and anti-semitism. The book had been taught to me in an AP English Literature class as an example of a classic novel and a piece of exceptional, groundbreaking writing. Both of these things are true, and yet, my first reading ignored its troubling social commentary for its status and prestige; I was just excited to be reading the great Ernest Hemingway. Reading it recently, however, I couldn’t help but notice Brett, the female protagonist, and in her tropes of women that I’ve come to recognize so frequently: a woman’s rejection being blamed for male destruction, a woman’s emotion and pain being glamorized and sexualized, and most of all, the idea that a woman’s sex appeal (and power) comes from her ability to be the only woman in a group of men.

In a literal sense, I wrote “The Bulls” about *The Sun Also Rises*. As I read the book, I took note of phrases and motifs used to describe Brett; for example, Hemingway’s characters frequently refer to her as “a piece”, their way of describing her sex appeal. I was also struck by the metaphor of the bullfights as a comment on power, violence, and obsession. But the amount of agency afforded to her by both the writing of the book and the book’s characters is entirely based on the way she runs with the bulls-- that is, the men, who seem to have lost all sense of self-control or self-awareness. The only power Hemingway gives her is as a motivation for these men to keep running, to keep spinning into self-destruction.

In a broader sense, writing “The Bulls” was an exercise in refusal and reimagination. Art imitates life which imitates art, which is to say that these toxic relationships exist and are reproduced through interaction with and representation in media. In writing this song, I was not only thinking about Hemingway, or even the tropes that male writers employ in representing female characters. I was thinking about my own interactions with the very real manifestations of these tropes. If these patterns are to ever disappear from life or literature, we have to start critiquing them in their origins. Writing this song was an assertion of the power to change common, classical, and unchallenged portrayals of women by turning a reductive stereotype into a protagonist with a voice of her own.

Standpoint Theory teaches us that it is crucial for marginalized groups to undergo this work of reimaging oppressive narratives. Derived from bell hooks’ idea of the oppositional gaze, standpoint theory argues that the voices of marginalized groups, from the perspective of their marginalized position, give a more accurate representation of the realities of society than the experience of dominant groups (Harding, 153). This means that articulating personal

experience as a marginalized identity is an inherently political act because it testifies against dominant social structures and authenticates the lived realities of oppressive conditions.

Therefore, “The Bulls” calls upon my lived experience interacting with men to contextualize and challenge Hemingway’s portrayal of women. Standpoint theory supports my prerogative and responsibility to utilize my experience to bring justice and truth to a character, and a legacy of characters like her, who have been treated unfairly by men who write them.

Literature is not the only medium in which we find antiquated depictions of gender. As music critic Jessica Hopper writes, “Men writing songs about women is practically the definition of rock ‘n’ roll” (Hopper, 17) When we comb through the catalog of songs by men about women, the depictions are disrespectful, at best. The very tradition of songwriting was formed, in part, through men writing about women; the massive canon of love songs, sex songs, and heartbreak songs would be nothing without feminine imagery. And yet, like literature, the ways in which these classic, great songs portray us rarely takes our perspectives into account. Standpoint theory suggests that women writing songs might actually give a far more accurate portrayal of societal realities, particularly those related to gender. It is our responsibility, then, to assert our own perspectives as testaments to these realities.

When I was writing these songs, I was listening to *a lot* of music, every day consuming an iconic album from one of history’s great female songwriters. I found my voice by echoing theirs, learning from the legacies they left and the paths they paved toward artistic representation. Rewriting problematic works of the supposed “greats” is part of this legacy-making; we create new “greats” in revising the old. It is so crucial to have role models, to have a representative legacy. It helps marginalized identities believe in their potential despite conditioning that

convinces them otherwise. The idea of male genius places incredibly limiting boundaries on the value we give to the work of certain identities. Instead of holding fast to the confines of a canon, we would be better served supporting artists who use their positionality to reinterpret it. In doing so, we build an artistic legacy that not only encourages more inclusive futures, but also stems from the ability to challenge each other, to learn and grow together.

Revisionism represents a key question in understanding the societal power dynamics of creativity: who writes who? Who is afforded the agency and access of telling stories about whom, and who is left silenced? Like “Amelia”, the narrator of “The Bulls” is not me-- I appropriated the voice of Hemingway’s character and recontextualized it in song. In this way, “The Bulls” calls into question the issue of self representation; as a character, Brett utilizes the form of the song to assert her right to represent herself diegetically. Yet as a songwriter, I take on Brett’s voice as a means of representing her. In doing so, the song asserts the ability to reimagine the use of character as a means of testimony. It is therefore symbolic of the ways marginalized voices can reclaim agency through revisionism. Whereas “Amelia” asked what stories we tell of ourselves, “The Bulls” asks how we find ourselves in stories, and the necessity of retelling and relearning stories that fail to represent us.

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## MAIN STREET

*I'm old enough to walk home alone, I'm bold like that  
and everyone is harmless when you're armed with a heart attack  
Loving to death, I'll love all that's left of my protection*

*So he'll watch me go off  
and I'll walk like it's not four o'clock in the morning*

*These ghosts follow me down the block  
and I will not believe they can smell my blood*

*And I will not run  
'cause I said I'm alright  
But why do we bandage our hands with these touches  
and leave one another to die*

*No I will not run  
'cause I said I'm alright  
But why do we bandage our hands with these touches  
and leave one another to die*

*He's back where I left him  
Awake and upset and  
Unwilling to get me*

*What kind of ghostliness relies on never knowing who you are  
What kind of ghostliness relies on never seeing where you walk  
What kind of ghostliness will press against your throat till you can't talk  
and our only sound is "ooh"*

*But I will not run  
'cause I said I'm alright  
But why do we bandage our hands with these touches  
and leave one another to die*

*No I will not run  
'cause I said I'm alright  
But why do we bandage our hands with these touches  
and leave one another to die*

\*\*\*

An unfortunate reality is that a discussion of femininity would be incomplete without a discussion of safety and violence. Patriarchy imposes both aesthetic and systematic hierarchies of masculinity, such that presenting, behaving, and existing as a woman becomes translated into

weakness, making women greater targets for the exertion of violence. The simple act of walking down the street as a woman or femme, for example, negotiates the fear of the potential of violence with the need to maintain resilience and independence. As we walk, we must appear strong, tough and fearless, even though the presentation of our bodies codes us as weak. This is yet another feature of gender performativity; the way that fear lives in the body is contingent upon both the bodies' social presentation and the awareness of its potential for being targeted. This risk is exacerbated when gender presentation intersects with other marginalized identities, such as race, class, or queer/transness. The performance of femininity is always simultaneously a performance of the history of systematic violence against feminine bodies, as they specifically present or intersect with other modes of identity. We are always aware of the gaze; we are always walking through it.

The story that became "Main Street" was told through a friend of a friend. Women talk about these things; we communicate in whisper networks, we gossip, we notice the ways that each others' bodies move through space. In this case, I heard the story of a girl who decided to walk the 45 minute journey home from her boyfriend's house, down the main street of a city at 4 a.m alone. The story was whispered to me in scandal, in horror. But I instantly felt both the fear and power viscerally; this walk is was not a death wish. It was an exercise in the rebellion of mobility. The social policing of certain bodies means that the existence of those bodies in space can be, in itself, radical. Although she undoubtedly put her life in danger, this girl intentionally positioned herself in the intersection of vulnerability and power. As she walked that street, she felt (and was subject to) the risk of existence as a systematically weakened body, but she felt something else that women are forced to learn: the need to appear strong anyway.

I wrote “Main Street” to explore this intersection. Writing the song did not put my body in the position of physical danger of the real situation. Furthermore, unlike “The Bulls”, the “character” in the song is a real person who lived through the event. However, songwriting here was an exercise in emotional reconciliation with a societal reality shared among many women. I relate to and empathize with the conditions of the story. I utilize that empathy in writing, with the intention that taking on this character is less about appropriating her and more about uncovering an emotional reality that exists in conjunction with these social conditions.

In truth, songwriting can do very little to counteract the very real systematic violences faced by marginalized bodies. However, some theorists would argue that there are other types of violence that underlie and reinforce those imposed upon the body. French feminist theory introduces the idea of “symbolic violence”, a type of oppression reinforced by the linguistic, communicative, and creative marginalization of women. The field of psychoanalytic feminist theory that discusses symbolic violence emerged in response to the work of foundational theorists like Jacques Lacan. Lacan is famous for his conception of “the symbolic”, or the sociological, communicative aspect of language created and reinforced by societal and ideological structures. He argues that through Oedipal interaction, the child learns the linguistic and social rules that govern their environment and develops practices for communicating. It is then the child’s awareness that The Father governs the rules of communication that forces the child to acquiesce to its regulations. As such, the symbolic order is defined, learned, and reinforced by patriarchal authority.

French feminist theorists such as Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray argue that the symbolic order represents the infiltration of patriarchy in language. They claim that structures of language

inherently disadvantage women because they arise from theoretical traditions like Lacan and Freud that have historically discredited femininity. Furthermore, Lacan's belief that the symbolic order is enforced through patriarchal authority means that language and writing are literally, structurally and sociologically masculinist. Because men define the symbolic, women have no control over the means of their syntactic and linguistic representation. The signs and signifiers that have then come to define gender are constituted by men; women's role in the symbolic order is to adapt to linguistic structures that ultimately support their own systematic oppression.

The remedy for this type of violence? Writing. By writing, women can reclaim features of the symbolic that have been used to misrepresent and disempower them. French feminist theorist Helene Cixous writes, "It is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence" (Cixous, 338). Women's writing therefore actively destabilizes the symbolic order, because the symbolic order is contingent upon regulating and suppressing the form and content of their self expression. When women write truthfully, thoughtfully, and intentionally, they rebel against conventions that try to silence them. The practice of writing may not destroy patriarchy, but it certainly mediates its power balance by moving control of language and text into the hands of women and out of patriarchal authority.

Every time I play "Main Street", I am reminded of both the fear and the power that went into writing it. The question of safety and violence is so intimidatingly integral to the topic of gender that in many ways, I was afraid of what exploring it might entail. But if writing about safety is one way that we can help keep each other safe-- that is, if writing as a woman has the

power to reassign communicative and creative agency and counteract systemic silencing-- then writing "Main Street" was a search for the same intersection of fear and power as its protagonist. There is a very real difference between the act of writing, while my body remains safe, and the act of walking. However, both attempt to find a territory in which the violence imposed on women can be met with the radicalism of taking up space. When we write, we demand to be heard. When we walk, we demand to be seen.

\*\*\*

## NEW ROOM

*Loosening a screw  
is all this is  
Something's been keeping the winds in  
Something is leaving its imprint  
I wanted a tattoo  
I wouldn't have picked this  
Half-hearted sketch of a witness  
A lazy love note for a hit list*

*God, instead I'm gonna get the  
scent of spring  
or a newly made bed  
The heaven of my breath  
stretching its legs in my chest  
Open real estate  
the old tenants had left*

*If you think I'm gonna let this  
emptiness rest  
You're right  
How nice to hear the silence it sets*

*I've unpacked my room*

*it is what it is  
Feels like it was made for a kid with  
no past to make this a beginning*

*But if it turns to a tomb  
then the shoe fits  
I live with your lies on my skin, it's  
less from the scars than the kisses*

*So bundle me up forever  
tucked in my bed  
I will never get a rest  
The war within me bled me  
till I'm marked with evidence  
A sedative won't stop the bird  
from falling out the nest*

*If you think i'm gonna get this  
heartbroken again  
You're right  
How nice our bodies don't let us forget*

*If you think i'm gonna get this  
heartbroken again  
You're right  
How nice our bodies don't let us forget*

\*\*\*

“New Room” is not your typical break-up song. After a recent end of a relationship, I found myself searching for something to teach me how to process. I listened to sad music, I watched rom-coms, I did everything that media tells us women do in response to heartbreak. It didn't take me long to realize that while these coping mechanisms had the appearance of healing, they really just demonstrated a type of emotional performativity. The art made about women and

emotion tends to dramatize pain, invoking a voyeuristic sense of pleasure and catharsis in its theatrics. It presents a variation on the confessional model by conflating the personal and the performative in a way that trivializes women's self-expression.

Emotionality and femininity have a complicated relationship. Since the rise of the medical phenomenon of hysteria, cultural representation of women's emotion has been exaggerated, theatricalized, and sexualized. Hysteria was predicated upon the notion that expressions of feminine emotion were signs of madness. As a result, neurologists like Jean-Martin Charcot created sites of medical theater to showcase the phenomenon. Women were put on display, made to perform and theatricalize emotionality for a masculine, medical audience. The performances were often highly erotic, as women theatrically convulsed and cried in throes of passion and uncontrollable emotion. The diagnosis of hysteria did not begin the societal perception of women as overemotional. However, by pathologizing womanhood, hysteria created a new definition of it, diagnosing womanhood as a condition of emotionality, theatricality, and sexuality. Since then, hysteria has come to symbolize the ways in which both medicine and culture find voyeuristic, performative pleasure in women's pain. Displays of emotion become conflated with these performances of madness; although decades have passed since Charcot's medical theater, showing pain as a woman still poses the risk of being dismissed as hysterical. Emotionality and pain are conflated in this way; the implication of over-emotionality works to invalidate actual pain, while cultural representations of women's emotion still engage in the theatrics of hysterical agony.

When I wrote "New Room", I was trying to write the kind of breakup song I needed-- not one that would fetishize the hurting woman, not one that would theatricalize my heartbreak, but

one that actually invoked the healing and processing that women are so rarely afforded. The song therefore begs an exploration of how to reclaim performances of pain from the tradition of hysteria, such that they cathartically, respectfully, and holistically portray women's emotion without trivializing or demeaning it.

Music, as it turns out, has a theoretical tradition of representing feminine reclamations of madness. In her study of music in the story of Ophelia, Leslie Dunn writes, "If music arouses excessive "feminine" passions, then it is also an ideal vehicle for representing feminine excess. [...] Music is like the "madwoman" in language, releasing subversive powers of self-expression by embodying them in the expressive powers of the voice" (Dunn, 59). When society categorizes women as hysterical, it claims that displays of emotion or pain are excessive, as in illegitimate, over-the-top, not to be taken seriously. However, Dunn argues that music becomes a means of reclaiming excess, such that the creative power and potential of music becomes a site for releasing emotion from the limitations of its societal boundaries.

The eroticism of hysteria worked to assert women's weakness and lack of control over their sexuality. As Audre Lorde writes in her meditation/manifesto on eroticism, women have been tricked into rejecting the erotic because of the way it has been co-opted against them. However, Lorde argues that within sexuality is power: "The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (Lorde, 53). The performance of hysteria appropriated eroticism such that it demeaned women; however, Lorde suggests that re-accessing and reclaiming the erotic points to a specifically feminine manifestation of power. If sexuality is a form of excess, in that it symbolizes transgressive expressivity, then music may be a mode of reclaiming it. Angela Davis'

*Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* discusses the ways blues queens like Gertrude ‘Ma’ Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday utilized blues music to inspire black proto-feminist radicalism. As Davis writes, sexuality for black communities was proof of the emancipation from slavery; their economic status had not changed, but their personal relationships had, making sexuality “a tangible expression of freedom” (Davis, 8). The women of the blues utilized music to proclaim this kind of liberation, as it manifested both in their lives as women and in their post-slavery contexts. They sang about infidelity, desire, and sexual freedom, boldly and unabashedly rejecting conventional white feminine notions of domesticity and or submission. In doing so, blues women channeled the erotic through music as a reclamation of black feminine power.

In French feminist theory as well music plays a role in radical liberation; it is not enough just to subvert the symbolic order, as discussed. Rather, Julia Kristeva argues that while the symbolic, because of its Oedipal associations, is an inherently patriarchal linguistic form, there exists a feminine alternative. Defined as “The Semiotic”, this linguistic approach is associated with the mother during the pre-Oedipal state. While the Semiotic is inherently derived from Lacanian psychoanalysis, it seeks to legitimize the period of linguistic development when the mother is still the primary representative of the social world. As Kristeva states, the Semiotic becomes a feminine alternative to the masculine symbolic: “Indifferent to language, enigmatic and feminine, this space underlying the written is rhythmic, unfettered, irreducible to its intelligible verbal translation; it is musical, anterior to judgment, but restrained by a single guarantee: syntax” (Kristeva, 29). This description of the Semiotic bears resemblance to cultural representations of hysteria, in its sense of unrestrained emotionality and freedom. In fact, traditional psychoanalytic theory itself takes inspiration from the phenomenon of hysteria;

Freudian (and subsequently, Lacanian) theory pulls from hysterical rhetoric in analyzing women's psychological conditions. However, by articulating the Semiotic within psychoanalytic discourse, Kristeva subverts both the patriarchal tradition of psychoanalysis and the pathological phenomenon of hysteria. In doing so, she reclaims this language so as to reaffirm, rather than disparage, women's emotionality.

Furthermore, Kristeva's notion of feminine language evokes musicality; although the Semiotic is still very much linguistic, this emphasis on rhythm and indifference to language suggests that maybe the Semiotic exists on a communicative level that is actually musical. Maybe we need music to access the freedom of the Semiotic. Furthermore, maybe the feminine belongs in music-- that the language we learn to speak, before we learn patriarchy, is both feminine and musical. As Helene Cixous writes in her famous piece "The Laugh of the Medusa", women's writing accesses a site of emotional resonance and freedom that evokes the form of music.

In women's speech, as in their writing, that element which never stops resonating, which, once we've been permeated by it, profoundly and imperceptibly touched by it, retains the power of moving us-- that element is the song: first music from the first voice of love which is alive in every woman. (Cixous, 339)

"The song" here is a metaphorical illustration of a collective sense of creative spirituality shared among women. And yet, when thinking about the implications of musicality in both feminine speech (according to Kristeva) and feminine emotionality, "the song" might very literally be music. In other words, the act of making music is in itself a manifestation of the emotional liberation of the Semiotic.

If the symbolic represents syntactic communication, then, and the semiotic poses an alternative that is musical and lyrical, then the two juxtaposed present a dichotomy-- specifically, that of “writing” and “song.” Songwriting, therefore, becomes a union of these two modes of subverting patriarchal creative authority and reclaiming emotionality. These theories disrupt the dichotomy between text and song so as to represent women’s engagement with transgressive modes of creativity. It is in the act of songwriting that women access a creative territory outside of the realm of patriarchal order, where they can finally control the means of self-expression.

Of all of the songs on this album, “New Room” took the shortest amount of time to write. It poured out of me, not like a wave of tears, but like a long sigh of relief. Much like Kristeva’s description of the Semiotic, the riff is rhythmic but unrestrained. It swirls and spins and pulls the listener through its own kind of catharsis. Writing allowed me to spend time in the heartbreak, soak in the sadness, and then finally release it in a performance not of hysterical anguish but of thoughtful, honest emotion. Because I was able to integrate the healing process with the writing process, my pain in this song is not able to be fetishized. Rather, when we reclaim the means of performing our pain, we resist the ways emotion is co-opted against us. There’s nothing wrong with a little madness; it makes the kind of music that sets us free.

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## **BEACHES**

*On New Years we sent pictures  
of us locking lips  
To the boys we were with  
in the hopes that they’d miss us  
You had a necklace  
to keep you from cheating*

*And I had your breathing  
to send me to sleep*

*When you pressed your fingers  
over my skin to tell me  
not to talk so much  
I knew I wasn't enough to be loved, to be loved*

*One day I will live among  
children and whisper  
and mock them for running  
away from kisses  
Today I'm surrounded by  
women, we reach for  
the answers in images  
bodies like beaches*

*We chart like cartographers  
over our skin everywhere  
that's been touched  
and wonder if it's enough to be loved, to be loved*

*If you were honest  
you haven't forgotten me  
softly upon you  
at night in the summer  
When I called you sister  
'cause I couldn't speak it  
and you had your breathing  
to send me to sleep*

*And god willing I've got  
some more chances to risk  
'cause my mother's still dancing  
on into her sixties  
And she left a handprint  
somewhere in my ribs with  
a heartbeat, a promise  
an artist's signature*

*Tell me that name, I can taste it  
I know it belongs  
to someone  
I wonder if it's enough to be loved, to be loved*

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Before I ever loved myself, I loved every girl I wanted to be. This is what queerness looked like in the whirlwind of puberty: the envy of a smile, a best friend's touch, the lust for attention. I was in love with every friend I had, crushing on this rush of newfound connection. Queerness in the traditional sense of a sexual orientation didn't resonate with me until much later in life, long after my infatuations had faded. To be queer, before sex or sexuality, was to learn how to love oneself by way of loving those around you. It was to rethink the boundaries of our relationships, to find intimacy in that blurring.

In contemporary gender and sexuality studies, "to queer" is a verb that means to alter, to transform, to transgress. To queer something is to shift it from its hegemonic focal point to marginality, a space with the potential for redefining conventional modes of being. Queering utilizes the voices of the marginalized as testaments to the magic of alternative spaces. It is not enough to try to mold oneself to fit oppressive or dominant fields. Real change, real creativity, comes from the ways in which identities utilize their unique voices to forge new approaches to traditional forms.

"Beaches" began as an ode to the women I have loved, and quickly became a meditation on how writing about queerness is not just the story of sexuality, but an act in itself of queering. "Beaches" unpacks and revels in the ways we learn loving within ourselves and within other women. When we think of the massive canon of love songs, the majority are explicitly

heteronormative, both in the genderings of their characters and in the traditions of heterosexual romance they espouse. Queering the form of the love song could be writing queer characters, but it could also mean rethinking the very narrative of loving in song form. “Beaches” looks at the ways in which feminine love is learned and internalized through platonic, familial, and individual intimacy. In doing so, it uses the narrative of queer relationships to redefine and transgress the tradition of love songs.

Like queer theorists, feminist theorists have also attempted to articulate specifically feminine approaches to traditionally masculine forms, in order to forge alternative approaches to creativity. The Semiotic is a perfect example; while Kristeva acknowledges the importance of subverting the symbolic order, the Semiotic does not request shared company with masculine syntax. Rather, to borrow from Virginia Woolf, the Semiotic is the linguistic room of one’s own, representing a communicative space that is specifically and unapologetically feminine.

In keeping with this approach, the 1990’s saw a movement of women seeking to reinvent approaches to writing and reading that included and embraced femininity. Coined “feminist poetics” by literary critic and feminist theorist Eileen Showalter, the manifesto for the movement articulates a vision for feminine writing that would disrupt patriarchal literary traditions.

The program of gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women’s literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories. Gynocritics begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition, and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture. (Showalter)

There are certainly issues with this approach; for one thing, the term “gynocritics” is suspiciously bio-essentialist, aligning womanhood or femininity with anatomy instead of

identity. However, the project of feminist poetics represents a core tenet of feminist aesthetics: that media is hegemonically patriarchal, and that there is in fact a way to participate in it without engaging with its oppressive history. Feminist poetics therefore advocates a queering of literary forms. Not only will this new writing subvert patriarchy by centering women's experience, but also the act of writing itself presents women's way out of masculine tradition.

Once again, the act of songwriting represents a theoretical and aesthetic tradition of women asserting their right to creative agency and reimagining a masculinized canon. Within "Beaches", like every other song in this project, is the recentering of the narrative voice such that the traditionally masculine medium of songwriting becomes, in itself, feminized in both its form and content. Like feminist poetics, "Beaches" articulates a way out of the structured, conventional form of the love song, demanding instead a way to write, sing, and love differently.

This song concludes the album, and in doing so, takes the listener full circle to where we started with "Amelia", back to the origins of our relationships with femininity and with ourselves. "Amelia" in many ways is also a queer song; it revolved around a younger self's discovery of attention, attraction, and interpersonal relationships. And yet, the theory uncovered in exploring the territory of the other songs allows "Beaches" to finally unearth the honesty and vulnerability of queerness in a way "Amelia" could not. Songwriting embodies the potential for reimagining the role of subjectivity, agency, and creativity such that it becomes inclusive of women's experiences and narratives. "Beaches" is not just the story of young queer love. It is also an explanation for why I took on this project of writing about and for women; songwriting is in itself the embodiment of love and intimacy. In the practice of songwriting is a level of both personal and collective connection in which women finally have space to love themselves.

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## CONCLUSION

I surprised myself often in writing this project. I wrote songs about things I had not spoken or thought about in years. When we embark on projects of self-excavation, we don't always like what we find. Sometimes I felt embarrassed about what I discovered; oftentimes, I questioned whether these subjects were even worth talking about. More than anything, I found myself at a loss for what to say. The search for creative inspiration leaves nothing untouched, and the deeper I dug, the more I uncovered the stories and experiences I had so deeply normalized and embedded in myself. These last seven months were a journey of trying to fit words and tunes to concepts that most of the time felt unreachable. But in the attempt to say what I wanted to say, I came to understand not only the ways music can articulate gender, but also the ways the conditioning of gender inherently influences that articulation. In trying to write for myself, I discovered all of the ways I had been taught to apologize, doubt, or hold back. These songs could not possibly undo that socialization. But the act of interrogating myself creatively and societally illuminated how my personal experiences fit into these systematically reinforced ways of thinking and being, and how creative processes can bring us that much closer to trusting our own voices.

Creating this thesis was a process of documenting this self-exploration. Each song acts as a testimony of the lived experience of gendering and the act of reconciling that gendering through the creative process. Because the form of the album is a variation on the montage, this album's goal is to assemble a series of moments taking place in the intersection between gender and music. In this sense, the experience of the album is not a narrative, but a process. If the

project is to be about the practice of songwriting, the final product of the album is proof of the work that went in along the way.

In order for songs to be documents, however, they must be recorded. When it comes to listener engagement with the project, the recordings alone stand as representatives of the process. I recorded these songs in the hope that their documentation allows them to speak for themselves in conversation with their listener. As such, it was important to me that the recording process reflected of the intentions of the project. Feminist projects often take inspiration from a DIY (do-it-yourself) mentality as a way of subverting knowledge gatekeeping; as such, I took on the task of teaching myself much of the recording process. I used my own equipment or borrowed from friends, and played all of the instruments (excluding drums, which were played by a fellow female student.) The DIY approach advocates process over product, emphasizing the importance of autodidacticism and emotional investment over perfection. My tedious, arduous, and exhausting process of recording was also incredibly gratifying and eye-opening. Within the recordings of these songs is my own emotional and creative labor. It is my hope that the embedding of this labor allows for further recognition of the importance of the processes behind the product in music.

I began writing these songs back in October. I did not intend for the album to take the shape it did. I often made lists about things I might want to talk about in this project, songs I might want to write. But ultimately, the songs that made it into this project emerged organically, from stories or feelings that had been brewing and begging to come into being. Living the experience of gender in some ways means existing in a constant state of collection. Gendered bodies at every moment are receiving lessons and messages about what it means for them to exist

and internalizing them. In this way, the experience of gender is not unlike the experience of writing. We gather as much as we can from what the world forces upon us, and eventually, it manifests either in the ways we present ourselves or in the ways we represent ourselves. It is my hope that this project reveals these realities about both gender and creativity by examining this intersection between the two. Within this connection is the potential of songwriting as a mode of revising, reimagining, and resisting oppressive conditions of gender. Songwriting can not only help reveal who we are and how we live, but who we want to be, how we want to live. In doing so, it brings us to a reconciliation with gender that aids in reclaiming identity and finding power in the experiences that define us. Our stories are more than just lived realities; our stories are songs.

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