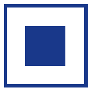

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He Heard, She Heard: Toward a Cultural Sociology of the Senses[1]

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When studying cultural goods, sociologists have tended to focus on the production of those goods, and on the social patterning of tastes. To date, little work has considered the organization of cultural experience. This reflects both a general historical devaluation of the embodied and experiential aspects of social life, and a tendency among scholars to view language and discourse as distinct from embodied and practical elements of culture. In this article, I introduce an interview method designed to facilitate the description of music experience. My data reveal gender differences in descriptions of a particular subtype of sonic experience, which suggest potential variations in experience. These findings indicate that (1) experience and discourse are culturally structured, (2) a more generative (re)conceptualization of the language-experience relation emphasizes domain interdependence rather than independence, and (3) particular types of language can facilitate the expression of harder-to-articulate qualities of experience.

KEYWORDS: culture; experience; gender; language; music; senses.

INTRODUCTION

When studying cultural goods, sociologists have tended to focus on the production of those goods, and on the social distribution of tastes. However, little work has examined the organization of cultural experience. Indeed, for much of the twentieth century, sociologists largely ignored experience and emphasized culture's symbolic elements. Historically, this led to a focus on language and to a model of culture as a text, and went hand in hand with a more general devaluation of the aesthetic[3] dimensions of social life. However, in recent years, scholars influenced by Bourdieu (e.g., 1984) and engaged with research in cognitive science and psychology, have begun taking seriously the body's role in processes of meaning making and have made strides in theoretically and empirically bringing the body into studies of culture (e.g., Cerulo 2018; Daipha 2015; Ignatow 2007; Lizardo 2017; Pagis 2010; Wacquant 2004; Winchester 2016).

One unfortunate consequence of this historical focus on language in culture studies is the tendency to view the body and discourse as distinct and opposed cultural domains. More specifically, conceptual knowledge is often equated with

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[3] By "aesthetic," I refer to the word's Greek root, *aisthetikos*, meaning "grasped by the senses" (see Guyer 2014).

linguistic, nonembodied knowledge, and embodied knowledge is, in turn, understood as nonlinguistic in nature (Pagis 2010; Winchester 2016). This dichotomy ignores variations in language and its use; although symbolic in the Peircean sense (1955 1940a:112), not all language is equally abstract (e.g., Lakoff and Johnson 1980), and some kinds are better suited for grasping qualities of experience than are others (Scruton 1998 [1974]).

Moreover, there has been recent interest among sociologists in the potential contribution of the senses to studies of culture: because social life is fundamentally embodied (Crossley 2001), scholars have turned to the senses to examine how meanings are constructed via the body, and how the body grasps social meanings (e.g., Bosman, Spronk, and Kuipers 2019; Cerulo 2015, 2018; Pagis 2010). In addition to promising findings, the senses have a research advantage: they allow for the collection of data respondents can provide—barring sensory processing disorders, brain damage, or synesthesia, humans have senses that operate roughly the same way. So when presented with tasks that attune them to sensory experience, respondents should be able to report *what* they feel, see, taste, or hear—even if they don't know *why*. This is in contrast to asking about abstract meanings and theories, which are less grounded in concrete physical experience and more fluid and subject to situational characteristics (Martin 2011).

In this article, I examine the social variability of cultural experience by facilitating descriptions of the experience of a particular cultural object: music. To do so, I draw on recent research on the senses as sources of cultural knowledge (Bosman et al. 2019; Cerulo 2015, 2018; Hockey 2006; Maslen 2015). For example, Cerulo (2018) examines the meanings people extract from perfumes and links differences in meaning extraction to social location. Her work assumes—and demonstrates—that the senses are encultured: as Marx (1978) and Simmel (1969 [1921]) argued, the senses mediate experience, and actors develop sensory capacities via interactions in their social environments. In this way, "embodied experience carries cultural meaning" and "bodily sensations are in themselves a mode of interpretation" (Pagis 2010:473; see also Pagis 2009). This claim that the senses are culturally variable is ultimately one about enculturation and is consistent with Bourdieu's (1984) understanding of habitus development: for Bourdieu, sensory capacities, or dispositions, develop during (early) socialization experiences. Accordingly, because the senses mediate experience and the latter shapes the former, different trajectories through social space should produce different ways of experiencing the same cultural objects (e.g., Pitts-Taylor 2016). In this framework, experience is a kind of sensory education via which actors develop into persons for whom things in the world look, feel, and sound certain ways.

While previous work on the body and culture tends to draw primarily on Bourdieu, I rely on American pragmatists Dewey, Peirce, and James; many of Bourdieu's influential ideas are found in their earlier work, and the pragmatists offer a particularly clear vocabulary for conceptualizing the body's role in meaning making. Accordingly, I define "experience" as do Dewey and James: an actor's phenomenal orientation to the world, built up over the life course through interactions with the cultural environment (Dewey 2005 [1934]:22). I focus on the description of nonclassical, contemporary music for several reasons. First, it is often possible to get a

sense of the quality of contemporary pop songs from short segments; they usually range from three to five minutes in length and have a consistent quality graspable from an excerpt. This is often not the case for classical music, which tends to be longer and where the meaning of any portion is only comprehensible in light of the whole. Second, because of its prevalence in popular culture, contemporary music is an art form readily accessible to a broad audience.

I begin by providing the theoretical background that informs my approach to measuring cultural experience and then present an interview protocol designed to facilitate the description of music experience. I focus on gender variations in description because gender is a variable with implications for enculturation. In this article, I limit my analysis to descriptions of an attribute salient to my respondents —namely, the experience of sound as "sexual."

SENSING AND MAKING SENSE: FINDING MEANING IN EXPERIENCE

Pragmatists like Dewey and James argued that the meaning of an object or event is equivalent to an actor's response to it; as James (1995 [1907]:41) put it, "grossness is what grossness does." This recalls Mead's (1967 [1934]:77) formulation in which meaning is defined as what a thing "calls out" for an actor to do. In this framework, meaning is a quality of experience and differs from "significance," which refers to an emergent understanding, often the product of extended reflection. This distinction between meaning as a quality of experience and meaning as a product of reflection appears, under different labels, in the work of various theorists: "immediate experience" versus "symbolic reflection" (Mead 2002 [1932]); "qualitative" versus "abstract" thought, and "primary" versus "secondary" experience (Dewey 1998 [1905]); the modalities of "firstness" and "thirdness" (Peirce 1955 1940b). For the case of music, Pratt (1961:84) differentiates between "embodied meaning, which is iconic with the sensory-perceptual material" and "designative meaning, which refers to something beyond the material given in perception." Across the board, the salient distinction is between meaning that is immediate, prereflective, and bodily grasped, and meaning that is abstract, conceptual, and linguistically articulable.

In a pragmatist framework, meaning and response are fused in experience. So things are always perceived as *some thing* (i.e., as meaningful): "I start and am flustered by a noise heard. Empirically, that noise is fearsome; it *really* is, not merely phenomenally or subjectively so. That is *what* it is experienced as being" (Dewey 1998 [1905]:116). This has been found to be literally true: Kay and Laurent (1999) demonstrated that rat olfactory bulb mitral cell response is modulated by previous experience with odors. Cell response is therefore not constant but can be modified by altering the meanings odors have for rats. So organisms do not respond to "raw" or "objective" stimuli but immediately perceive them as meaningful (see Katz 1999:46, 316–317 on the "seamlessness" of perception and response in social interaction).

Further, meaning is qualitative: the units of experience are qualities, and any alteration in perceived quality amounts to a change in the experienced object: "the

quality *is* what it means, namely, the object to which it belongs" (Dewey 2005 [1934]:270; see also Peirce 1955 1940b:77). Qualities are also "*potentials* for experience"; they exist in objects but are only "actualized," or sensed, by actors in experience (Martin 2011:186). The qualities an actor senses depend on the dispositions s/he arrives to a stimulus with. This is the crux of Dewey's (e.g., 1958 [1925]) claim that experience is funded: experience cultivates particular habits of perception and response, and these habits make actors sensitive to some, but not other, qualities of experience. This accounts for the fact that two actors with different histories (and consequently, different dispositions) can look at the same, say, blue and gray streaks on canvas and experience them as "dreamy" and as "dreary," respectively. Because present experience is the cumulative product of past experience, people with different histories can experience the same things differently: an actor's "mental reaction on every given thing is really a resultant of [his/her] experience of the whole world up to that date" (James 1950 [1890]:234).

FINDING THE RIGHT WORDS

The aforementioned suggest that the experience of cultural goods is likely to vary on the basis of variables relevant to enculturation. One way of investigating this is to examine variations in the qualities different kinds of social actors sense in the same cultural objects. However, the distinction between first order experience—which is fundamentally qualitative—and second order experience—which is discursive and linguistic in nature—creates a challenge: simply put, how can sociologists access qualities of experience when communication requires their translation into symbolic, second order form (i.e., language)? Peirce offers a vocabulary to conceptualize this puzzle, and his ideas have been leveraged fruitfully in the past by ethnomusicologists to study music experience (Turino 2014). For Peirce (1955 1940b), experience takes three forms, which he calls firstness, secondness, and thirdness. The first and the third are of particular relevance to this work. Firstness refers to the prereflective experience of a phenomenon's qualities, which are "revealed" to actors by their senses (77). Firstness is a quality of "feeling" that "consists in nothing else, and which is of itself all that it is" (81). It requires no thought or analysis; qualities in objects present themselves to actors, who sense those that the senses they "are furnished with are adapted to reveal" (77).

But somewhat ironically, it is impossible to actually grasp firstness: "But when he asks what is the content of the present instant, his question always comes too late. The present has gone by, and what remains of it is greatly metamorphosed" (Peirce 1955 1940b:83). What results is thirdness, or an experience that, although rooted in firstness, has become the object of thought and so, is abstract and symbolic: "It differs from immediate consciousness, as a melody does from one prolonged note" (96). Crucially, language is suited to capturing thirdness, not firstness. The challenge with measuring qualities of music experience is thus to "explore and explain the expressive and emotional potentials of music—which are reliant on iconic and indexical signs—through the carefully delineated use of" symbols (Turino 2014:201). In other words, the challenge is to capture a first with a third.

Although in a strict Peircean sense, language is symbolic and as such, a third (1955 [1940a]:112), not all language is equally abstract and propositional and has been used successfully by scholars in the past to study experience (e.g., Bosman et al. 2019; Cerulo 2018; Maslen 2015). Scruton's (1998 [1974]) work on aesthetic description is particularly helpful in delineating how language can be used to communicate experience. He explains that common words can be applied to novel contexts—without undergoing a change of meaning (49). This kind of "extended" or "nonstandard use" of words, in which words retain their typical meaning in an atypical context, is the crux of aesthetic description. The key point is that people can use words from their everyday lexicon—for example, "thick" or "curvy"—nonfiguratively to communicate their *experience* of, say, a song. This is in contrast to using such language to describe the *song itself* (i.e., the *object* of art). The latter involves the notation of formal properties. Thus, when words like "prickly" and "rubbery" are applied to describe an *object* rather than one's *experience* of the object, their use becomes metaphorical (i.e., a song cannot *literally* be "prickly," but one can communicate the experience of it by drawing on the ordinary meaning of "prickly").[4] This extended and nonfigurative use of language has an important advantage: researchers (e.g., Herbert 2011) who have used diary and interview data to explore music experience report that respondents often employ figures of speech to describe sound. These are problematic as they often hang together not because they reflect experience but because of convention. Stock phrases (e.g., "George Clinton killed it"; "Taylor Swift fell flat") are convenient short hands for communicating broad types of experience (e.g., positive, negative) but fall short of capturing qualities of experience. Related, one might describe songs by AC/DC or the Grateful Dead as "hard" and "trippy" even if they sound "soft" and "folky," respectively. In both cases, attributes derive from classificatory conventions and associations, rather than from one's experience.

Part of the problem is that because people are rarely tasked with articulating sensory qualities, they lack a strong vocabulary to do so (Bosman et al. 2019; Maslen 2015:59). Much easier to articulate are "significance" qualities (e.g., *bold*, *meaningful*) and formal properties of sound (e.g., high/low pitch). Accordingly, Bloch (1991:193) recommends protocols that discourage the use of "stylistic devices" and encourage descriptions "of the way things look, sound, feel, smell, taste and so on"—descriptions, in short, that draw "on the realm of bodily experience." This advice has proved fruitful: in recent work, Bosman et al. (2019) found the use of "sensorial wordings" helped respondents describe their embodied and difficult-to-articulate experience of sex. For the case of music, I argue that by scaffolding the use of adjectives not typically used to describe music that lack obvious mappings to formal properties of sound, sociologists can circumvent many issues associated with using language to capture qualities of experience.

[4] Because aesthetic descriptions communicate *experience*, they "need not have truth conditions in the strong sense" (Scruton 1998 [1974]:55). In other words, the terms used to describe experience need not literally map onto the objects they describe because they are not "used to describe some *de facto* relation with the central case" (50). In Scruton's words: "In aesthetics you have to see for yourself precisely because what you have to 'see' is not a property: your knowledge that an aesthetic feature is 'in' the object is given by the *same* criteria that show that you 'see' it" (54).

METHOD

My approach to studying cultural experience is informed by pragmatist conceptions of meaning as a quality of experience, by Scruton's (1998 [1974]) insights on aesthetic description, and by Hevner's (1936) work on composition classification. In her research, respondents listened to classical music selections and chose adjectives from a list that matched the emotion (e.g., *melancholic*, *joyful*) conveyed. Building on this, I designed the following protocol.

First, interviewees were asked about their aesthetic biographies. Specifically, I asked whether they were musicians, what music they grew up listening to, and what their current likes/ dislikes are. Next, I presented them with 40 randomly distributed white index cards, each with an adjective, typed in black ink, on it (see Appendix Table A for the list of adjectives). I offered adjectives to scaffold a discussion of harder-to-articulate experiential qualities. The terms gave respondents a means to communicate their music experience—a challenging and unfamiliar task —with words already a part of their everyday lexicon (see Scruton 1998 [1974]). The list developed with the research and is in no way exhaustive. I began by freely generating a list of commonly used and easily graspable terms and their opposites. I then continued to adjust the list in pretests, adding terms that (1) are commonly understood, used, and a part of an English-speaking adult's lexicon, (2) are not typically applied to music, (3) do not refer to emotion (e.g., *cheerful*, *morose*), evaluation (e.g., *funny*, *lame)*, or technical properties of sound (e.g., "high" pitch), and (4) refer to a concrete experience. Accordingly, I included words referring to tactile, visual, auditory, proprioceptive, and taste qualities. As I conducted pretest interviews, I eliminated terms that were never used, or that when used, did not have a concrete experiential referent. Respondents rarely reported a dimension of experience was not covered by the list, but even so, I allowed them to go beyond the terms in their descriptions. Because of this, there is no reason to think the terms restricted or channeled descriptions. Henceforth, when I refer to a term from the adjective list, I italicize it to distinguish it from terms respondents introduced in their descriptions.

After presenting the list, I played respondents 12 to 15 sound clips, each 12–25 seconds long (henceforth, stimuli or samples), from a sample of 25. To keep sound quality constant, I played all selections from a MacBook Pro. Stimuli were taken from contemporary, nonclassical music. Because it was crucial respondents not recognize the songs or artists from which the stimuli were excerpted, a variety of nonmainstream music deemed interesting yet accessible by the author and a second sociologist with significant music knowledge were selected. The selection of stimuli for each respondent depended on interviewee characteristics, and I avoided presenting music from genres respondents reported having expertise in to reduce extramusical association. Moreover, because pilot research indicated stimuli with lyrics encourage the selection of adjectives descriptive of lyrical content, no stimuli with discernable lyrics were used (see Appendix Table B for a list of samples referred to here). For each sample, respondents were asked to select five adjectives that best described the sound and to explain why the terms applied. When necessary, I provided prompts to facilitate response, clarify ambiguous word use, and flesh out

vague remarks (e.g., "Where does the [*curvy*]-ness come from?"; "What makes the sound [*rubbery*]?").

DATA

Sixty-one interviews (M = 34; F = 27; age range: 22–68), ranging from 80 to 120 minutes in length, were conducted over 14 months.[5] All were audio recorded and transcribed by the author. Previous work connected me to members of various local music communities, and I sampled from these communities and relied on key informants for referrals beyond. Slightly over half of respondents are musicians, producers, radio DJs, or sound engineers. The rest do not have extensive music expertise but consider themselves fans. The majority of my respondents live in a large midwestern city (but come from across the United States); 13 are originally from countries outside of the United States, including India, Russia, Israel, and New Zealand. The majority are white, identify as heterosexual, and hold a bachelor's degree or higher.

During data collection, it became clear that although male and female respondents often agreed on which samples were *sexual*,[6] their descriptions varied in interesting ways. Notably, different adjectives and aural dynamics, for male and female respondents, correlate with *sexual*: male respondents hear as *sexual* sounds that are *lush*, *open*, and *fuzzy* and focus overwhelmingly —and in complete contrast to female respondents—on the *relational dynamics* of stimuli.[7] In contrast, female respondents emphasize *movement*, are more likely to hear as *sexual* sounds that are *curvy*, *jagged*, and *masculine*, and to pay attention to space—specifically, whether it is filled or unfilled. Unlike male respondents, they experience "unpredictability" and "unscripted-ness" as *sexual*. Further, even when male and female respondents select the same adjectives (most commonly *curvy*, *lush*, and *open)* to describe *sexual* stimuli, they often use the same words to anchor different descriptions.

Accordingly, I conducted a more thorough investigation of all cases where respondents called stimuli *sexual*. To do this, I looked at the 82 instances across interviews where *sexual* was used to describe a sample. I considered the adjectives that co-occurred with *sexual* any time the term was selected, paying particular attention to the explanations respondents gave for why the attribute applied. The findings I present below come from an analysis of the adjective selection data from a subset of respondents (n = 35; M = 21, F = 14; age range: 22–68), and music experience descriptions of all 45 (M = 26, F =19; age range: 22–68) respondents who selected *sexual* to describe a stimulus at least once. When analyzing these data, I also considered other potentially salient variables such as music expertise and sexual

[5] Of those, 14 involved a different protocol in which terms were sorted into groups from which respondents could select only one. Only adjective selection data from the ungrouped selection task are considered here. But because all respondents regardless of selection protocol were asked in the description component of the interview to go beyond the terms provided, I consider description data from all 61 interviews.

[6] None of the stimuli used refer to sex in any way.

[7] See Heider and Simmel's (1944) classic study of shape perception.

orientation. But descriptions did not vary notably or consistently by those variables, as they did by gender.

DO YOU HEAR WHAT I HEAR? GENDERED DESCRIPTIONS OF *SEXUAL* SOUND

For male and female respondents, respectively, descriptions of *sexual* sound fall along a continuum bounded by two poles. Although descriptions share some similarities, there are notable between-gender differences that suggest possible variations in music experience. My analysis focuses primarily on these variations, and I present my data in such a way so as to highlight these. For both genders, descriptions tend to conform to one of two main organizations, or experiential gestalts. What is more, when respondents offer descriptions, they appear to do so with an awareness of—and in reference to—a second kind of experience different from, yet complementary to, the one they describe. Each gestalt presented below summarizes regularities in my data and reflects common recurring themes. In their descriptions, male respondents emphasize *relationship dynamics*, such that one type of description is characterized by sonic give-and-take, and another by an agentic dynamic. Female respondents anchor descriptions in types of *motion*: one kind of description features free, indeterminate movement, and the other regulated, controlled movement.

Male Sexual Gestalt (a): Communal, Give-and-Take Dynamic

Communal interaction and growth are central to the first subtype of *sexual* sonic description. Male respondents apply the term to describe the experience of sounds "in relationship" and attribute *sexual*-ness to the interaction of sonic elements. For example, Aiden (42 yrs; nonmusician; C#3) links *sexual*-ness to the interaction of two voices: "They were playing off each other, moving in and out of each other in a living, *lush*, *sexual* way. The notes were slipping and sliding in and out of each other like the fibers of silk, filling each other's space in a vibrant way." The sense of "give and take" is important. For instance, Luke (29 yrs; musician; C#3) describes the same interplay highlighted by Aiden as "a give-and-take between two partners." This is associated with a kind of *sexual* experience that is, in Luke's words, "a balanced" or "equal type of *sexual*" distinct from a "forceful, almost not consensual, very male-driven" experience.

This communal relational core is articulated in various ways. Peter (42 yrs; nonmusician; C#3) focuses on the "ritualistic" nature of the sound, which he says is neither *feminine* nor *masculine*: "The first thing I thought was tribal and communal, because the sounds felt like they were interacting in a ritualistic way. They're *round*, not as in shape, but as in how they interact. There's no lead sound, they're all equal and . . . facing inward towards each other." The sound is *warm*, with a "natural *lush*-ness. Like, the community is ready to harvest." Others echo the notion of "harvest" via references to fertility and reproduction: Andrew (52 yrs; musician; C#6) describes a stimulus as "fertile for breeding and full of possibilities." He attributes this to the "percussion groove" and "melodic content," which is "spatial and full of promise."

Together, these elements create the feeling that "it's going to be a good harvest, there are going to be twins." Such stimuli tend also to be described as "slow" and "heavy." In Andrew's words, the sound "[is] dipping down with the weight of the percussion." He likens it visually to the curves of a woman's hips and, conceptually, to foreplay.

In their descriptions, male respondents refer to stimuli as "living things" that are tactilely appealing, *lush*, *open*, *curvy*, and *hot*. Matt's (27 yrs; nonmusician; C#4) description emphasizes the textural smoothness, *silky* movement, and *round*-ness of the sound and exemplifies this subtype of experience: "There's a rolling quality to the chords. . . . They have their own cycles, mini climaxes set against the voice, like what you'd see if you were watching wind go over an open field, grass bending and then coming back up. It's like an open moan, a very soft thing. Not high-pitched, not jagged." Others liken stimuli to fruits like mangos (for their shape and supple flesh) and plums (for their color and, when ripe, squishy wetness). Kenny (30 yrs; nonmusician; C#8) compares the sound to peaches that "are not too soft that they're going to squish in your hands, but not too firm that you don't want to bite into them." The sound, he concludes, "has just the right amount of give."

Such stimuli "draw" respondents "in"; they are "alluring," have emotional depth, and a unique *open/closed* dynamic. Specifically, male respondents describe as *sexual* both *open* and *closed* sounds. My data indicate that although *open* and *closed* can refer to spatial properties, it is in this case more appropriate to view the terms as denoting the ability or inability, respectively, to invite respondents in. Thus, a common distinction at the level of discourse—*open/closed*—does not here translate to an experiential binary: for the case of *sexual* sound, *closed*-ness creates the boundary that permits entry. The distinction between *open* and *closed* sound helps explain why respondents find appealing stimuli described as "soaring" and that create expansive soundscapes, and those that convey the sense of small, enclosed space. In short, even sounds experienced as spatially *wide* can be experienced as *closed* as long as respondents feel they can "get into" or "latch on to" them. So, what seems central to *sexual*-ness for male respondents is the subjective sense of being able to "get into" a sound, regardless of its spatial dimensions.[8] This *open/closed* dynamic is also related to a sense of emotional intimacy: stimuli with this dynamic are "small and separate from the outside world" (Casey; 25 yrs; nonmusician; C#3) and they make respondents feel like they are being "taken into something . . . pulled in slowly, eased in"[9] (Clark; 47 yrs; musician; C#12).

Male Sexual Gestalt (b): Agentic, Ego-Oriented Dynamic

For male respondents, *sexual* sonic descriptions also take a second form, one that reflects a more agentic dynamic. Such descriptions are characterized by sonic

[8] Derek (42 yrs; nonmusician; C#10) refers to *closed*-ness to explain his negative response: "[the sample] has no room for me to attach to it. There wasn't a lot of room to get into it, no entry into that sound, or hook to bring me in." This lack of what one respondent called "entry points" is often associated with a negative response.

[9] This is in contrast to female respondents, who talk about *sexual* sounds as "going into" or "coming at" them. It is interesting that although the experience of sound "coming at" one is not restricted to female respondents, only female respondents characterize *sexual* stimuli in those terms. Male respondents say some stimuli "come at" them—but never those they call *sexual*.

lean-ness, one-dimensionality, and *cold*-ness. Stimuli that reflect this dynamic lack warmth and vibrancy, and they cut as they are cut off. They also tend to be perceived as devoid of all, but especially human, life. And yet, relationship continues to be central to these descriptions. But whereas the first subtype is characterized by a developmental and communal experience, the second is more "primal," "soulless," and "focused on itself." Unsurprisingly, stimuli described as such are slightly more likely to be perceived as *masculine* than as *feminine*. Scott's (56 yrs; nonmusician; C#11) description exemplifies this subtype. Likening the sound to "carbon nanofibers," he notes how the combination of "primitive" rhythm, *narrow* frequency range, and mechanical repetition conveys a sense of "smuttiness" and "lasciviousness" that while "arousing," fails to "evolve." In his words, the sound "stayed within a *narrow* channel and wasn't offering new things; it didn't develop but stayed focused on its own rhythmic-ness." Andrew (52 yrs; musician; C#11) concentrates on the "hard slapping bass," *flat* repetition, and "fast-and-steady in a forward way" motion. These characteristics prompt him to select *sterile* and *coarse*. The sound, he explains, is "exploitative" and "pornographic"; it "doesn't feel like it's building up to anything"; it "stay[s] the same and is completely void of emotion and life."

This second subtype features an egocentric relationship dynamic, or what Matt (42 yrs; musician; C#4) calls a "perfunctory" *sexual*-ness. Matt begins by identifying a *feminine* (the "cooing vocals") and a *masculine* ("the rhythmically insistent drums") component. He explains that independently, neither element is *sexual*—in fact, he refers to the sound's overall texture as "scratchy." But their interaction, on the other hand, is: "The vocals are *cold*—it's not a 'come hither' cooing. They're not sung from the diaphragm but from the head. There's an affected distance, where they're detached from the rest of the music, which is just a straight 4/4, on-the-beat percussion, the basic rhythm of sex." Such sounds are "forceful," "single-minded," and *narrow*. Rick (47 yrs; musician; C#5) notes how the sample fails to "go far in any direction" and "stays incessantly on one, single-minded track." For Andrew (52 yrs; musician; C#2), the "slow-and-steady, unchanging beat" contributes to the *sexual* quality. But the *sexual*-ness is "superficial"; "it's casual sexy, like a hookup." The sound lacks "meaningfulness": "it sounds completely *sterile* and mechanical and inhuman; [it's] repetitious, not soulful, the opposite of fat and *lush*."

It is important to emphasize that despite the negative tenor of these descriptions, male respondents find these stimuli attractive. Indeed, the feeling of being drawn into a stimulus continues to be central to this gestalt, too. Further, although gender occasionally figures into explanations, its role is comparatively small in organizing descriptions. Rather, when describing *sexual* sound, male respondents focus on one of two sonic relational dynamics, each of which seems to roughly reflect a particular type of erotic encounter.

Female Sexual Gestalt (a): Free, Indeterminate Movement

For my male respondents, the most salient dimension of *sexual* sonic experience is a sound's relational dynamic: descriptions center on whether sounds interact communally or agentically, and the former tend to be described as *lush*, *curvy*, and

open, and the latter as *narrow*, *sterile*, and *coarse*. In somewhat surprising contrast, female respondents never discuss "relationship" in descriptions of *sexual* sound. Although their descriptions also point to two subtypes of *sexual* sonic experience, they focus primarily on motion—on the way sounds move—rather than on relational dynamics. More precisely, they identify two types of movement: slow, indeterminate, self-generated movement with an emphasis on return, and fast, goal-oriented, other-generated movement with an emphasis on repetition. This is in contrast to male respondents, for whom *sexual* sounds can be fast or slow, regardless of subtype. Moreover, male respondents often hear *sterile* sounds as *sexual*. But my female respondents never perceive *sterile* stimuli as *sexual*.[10] Likely related is the fact that they also do not pick terms like *cold* and *closed* when describing *sexual* stimuli. For them, *sexual* stimuli are always *hot* and *open*, regardless of subtype.

Relaxed, freely cycling, and rolling motion characterizes the first kind of female *sexual* description. These stimuli take "their natural course" (Elise; 40 yrs; musician; C#15), are heard as *curvy*, *warm*, and *spacious*, and progress in an unhindered, exploratory way. Kristin (33 yrs; nonmusician; C#9) emphasizes these qualities when she points out the sound's "relaxed and comfortable" gait, "soft repetition, intensifying slightly with each repeat," and gradual build up in speed and volume, all which convey a sense of cycling, forward motion. Indeed, female respondents use *curvy* to describe primarily movement: *curvy* sounds do not progress linearly but rather swirl and spiral in a light and airy way. Take Karla's (39 yrs; musician; C#4) description: "Listening to this is like watching clouds move, how they turn in on each other. The voices fold in on each other, and then each *new* sound folds in on the others, like steam curling from a boiling teapot."[11] This progression is described as "free" and is tied to a sense of boundlessness and exploration: "the sensation is of opening up" (Rebecca; 33 yrs; nonmusician; C#1). This is in contrast to male respondents for whom bounded-ness is key to *sexual* sonic experience across subtypes. Maria (33 yrs; musician; C#6) articulates this when she discusses the way that "the boundaries in the sound . . . constantly shrink and expand." Syncopation is important: rather than being "methodically timed out," the pace varies in a gently pitching and entraining way: "The rhythm isn't measured—it's not 1, 2, 3, 4, on the beat. It's stop . . . and go, stop . . . and go."

Lara (27 yrs; musician; C#5) also refers to freedom of movement when she distinguishes "this kind" of *sexual* sonic experience from one elicited by another stimulus earlier in her interview. She explains, "This one is a different type of *sexual*: it's more a free-and-happy, nature-hippy kind. I want to say natural and free, because of the freedom of the rhythm that comes from the unusual time signature." She refers to the experience as an "upper body-*sexual*" originating "from the rounder

[10] The difference does not seem to stem from variations in word use; male and female respondents share understandings of what makes a sound *sterile*, and the latter frequently use *sterile* to describe non*sexual* samples.

[11] Male respondents also hear *curvy* sounds as *sexual* but typically use *lush* to describe the same qualities. One possible reason for this may be that female respondents emphasize movement and so may orient more to sound's diachronic qualities. It is possible to imagine *lush*-ness as a synchronic variant of *curvy*-ness. It is also interesting that although *curvy*-ness is, for males, associated with *feminine sexual*-ness, female respondents link *curvy*-ness to *feminine*-ness in descriptions of *feminine* sound but rarely select *curvy* with *sexual* and *feminine*.

parts of the body, like the head and breasts." This contrasts with the "other type of *sexual*," or "lower body" type, which originates from the "upper thighs" (C# 11).

Space also figures prominently in descriptions. But unlike male respondents who focus on the *open/closed* dimension of space, female respondents focus on whether space is unfilled or filled. Unfilled space characterizes the first kind of *sexual* description. For example, Maria (33 yrs; musician; C#6) describes the stimulus as a "*round*, expanding sphere" that gives "a sense of room." Ava (31 yrs; musician; C#6) echoes her, noting the sound's slow movement, which conveys a sense of "space coming at" her.

Finally, although female respondents occasionally mention the term "organic," it is not central to descriptions as it is for male respondents, who talk often about fruits and harvests. Stimuli identified as *sexual* are sometimes perceived as organic, but they are just as likely to be perceived as inorganic. For instance, Elise (40 yrs; nonmusician; C#13) talks about a stimulus's "gauzy, man-made fibers," and adds that even though "man-made," the sound is still natural: "It's slow and chilled out, with no pressure. It felt like it wasn't in a hurry to get to where it was going; it was languid and relaxed, how sex should be." Her last remark raises the possibility that female respondents may divide *sexual* experience according to a logic that differentiates between what feels natural to *them* and the less-natural preferred progression of an (implied male) alter.

Female Sexual Gestalt (b): Controlled, Regulated Movement

The second subtype of female *sexual* sonic experience is characterized by heat, speed, and *jagged*-ness. These samples are stimulating, but sound "regulated" and "forced." Respondents frequently talk about aural and tactile roughness and describe such sounds as heavy, dense, and *dirty*. They do not move naturally but are "adrenalized"; they are "intentionally not clean, like black pepper: dark, with an earthiness and a *crisp* edge" (Samantha; 59 yrs; musician; C#11). In contrast to male respondents for whom lack of sonic development is central to the second subtype, sonic progression characterizes all female respondents' *sexual* descriptions. Interestingly, female respondents say sounds that progress predictably or "one-dimensionally" (two prominent qualities in male respondents' descriptions) are too boring to be *sexual*. Some clarification is needed. Female respondents associate one-dimensional sounds with *masculine*-ness, but only male respondents associate one-dimensional sounds with *masculine sexual*-ness. This is noteworthy because some of the same stimuli the latter call *sexual*, *sterile*, and one-dimensional are identified as *sexual* by the former. But female respondents do not experience the stimuli like their male counterparts—they hear them as generative and evolving, albeit in a controlling and forced way. When female respondents identify a sample as one-dimensional, they call it *masculine* but never *sexual*.

In descriptions of this second subtype, female respondents are more likely to select *masculine* and to report feeling encroached upon by the sound.[12] Take Lyla's

[12] Male respondents talk about the experience of stimuli "coming at" or "hitting" them, too—but only in non*sexual* sonic contexts.

(24 yrs; musician; C#5) account of a guitar line, which she experiences as stimulating: "It's almost teasing, the way the riff goes on, as if trying to create some sort of frisson. There's a back-and-forth with the guitars, and even the pitch of the guitar—it's hitting the teasing spot." The sound is "mouthwatering," like "biting into a honeycrisp apple," and the tone is "subtly aggressive." Samantha (59 yrs; musician) also hears some progressions as *masculine* and *sexual*: "It has a rhythm associated with a kind of masculine thrusting movement—it's forward-leaning, not laid back" (C#11); "it's not aggression, more a forward-moving force" (C#5). In this way, movement—whether a sample is experienced as moving forward forcefully or as cycling indeterminately—is a salient dimension structuring female respondents' descriptions of *sexual* sound.

The role of sonic aggression in descriptions is complex. Nearly all mention it and indicate that some aggression is attractive. But there is a limit on how much. Specifically, when describing aggressive sounds, female respondents emphasize that samples are "not exactly" or are "almost" aggressive. Consider Samantha's (59 yrs; musician; C#5) choice of language: "It's *coarse*, a little *dirty*, and a little *jagged* and feels like hemp. . . . You could touch it and it wouldn't hurt you, but it's still rough." Stimuli that jump the line between "almost aggressive" and "aggressive" lose their *sexual* quality and are experienced only as *masculine*. For example, when I asked Lindsay (26 yrs; musician; C#11) why the stimulus she called "driving," "stripped down," and "aggressive"—all terms she previously used to describe a *sexual* stimulus—was not *sexual*, she replied that the sample was "too aggressive to be *sexual*. If it were a little more nuanced melodically, it could be sexual, but it's so *straight* and driving that I'm turned off."

Sharp, intentional, forward motion often engenders the experience of being overwhelmed by sensation. Maria (33 yrs; musician) articulates this when she describes "this kind" of *sexual* experience as a "go, go, go" one that "makes the blood rush to the head" (C#13; this is in contrast to what she previously referred to as a "stop and go" *sexual* experience [C#6]). Such sounds are *thick*, and *thick*-ness is associated with physical power and strength. In her words, "this is an active and intense, almost athletic *sexual* experience with a lot of power." A minority draw on organic imagery in their descriptions: the sounds are so full of energy like "fruits that have reached maximum capacity." For others, the intensity is better captured with reference to machinery: Agatha (39 yrs; nonmusician; C#2) compares the sound's energy to the buzzing of an electric lightbulb.

Finally, a handful experiences musical unpredictability as *sexual*. This unpredictability makes them uncomfortable and feel on edge—but in a sexually exciting way. For example, Caroline (25 yrs; musician; C#10) notes how "the sound builds in volume and pitch, bringing the creepiness to a dissonant peak. It's sour and makes me want to cringe, like when you taste something sour, lemons or vinegar." Jill (28 yrs; nonmusician; C#7) relates a similar experience of trying to "hold on to" and predict the music, only to have it "slip away": "I was expecting something, but something else happened. It's scripted but carelessly. It's an unstable, indeterminate, volatile *sexual*." For Sophia (36 yrs; nonmusician; C#10), the experience is akin to being out of control: "That was *jagged* because it was discordant; you don't know where it's going, it doesn't have a recognizable melody, so it's difficult and

uncompromising. . . . It had an attitude, like, this isn't going to be your redemption song or your love song. This is *our* song."

ROBUSTNESS CHECK: DESCRIPTIONS OF MUSIC EXPERIENCE OR ASSOCIATIONS WITH SEX?

My sound description data suggest that when male and female respondents hear sounds as *sexual*, they may not be having identical experiences, even when they select similar terms. Several plausible interpretations exist, and I here address each in turn. First, it is possible respondents simply select random adjectives to describe the samples. But given the order in my data, this seems extremely unlikely. Second, it is possible respondents hear stimuli, some of which trigger a *sexual* response that they do not know how to articulate. In order to complete the task, they just select four adjectives that they associate with *sexual*. In this scenario, gestalts do not reflect gendered differences in experience but gendered differences in *sexual* associations.

To address this, I conducted a second set of interviews (n = 18; M = 10, F = 8; age range: 19–64) to measure associations with the term *sexual*. I presented respondents with the same adjective set used in the sound interview and asked them, first, to select four words they associate with *sexual* and, second, to select four words they would never associate with *sexual*. These data make a compelling case that the music description data presented above do indeed reflect experiences of sound rather than associations with the term *sexual*. To elaborate, in the association task, all respondents tend to associate the same adjectives with *sexual*—that is, *wet*, *feminine*, and *hot*. To that, female respondents add *pregnant*, and male respondents add *dirty*. This pattern departs from that observed in the sound interviews, where the latter were most likely to call *sexual* sounds they heard as *fuzzy*, *lush*, and *open*. In the association task, male respondents never associate *fuzzy* or *lush* with *sexual*, and only one ever selected *open*. While *curvy* was often associated with *sexual* by both male and female respondents (always to refer to the female body), no female respondent ever associated *jagged* or *masculine* with *sexual*—qualities they often employed to describe *sexual* sound.

Moreover, the explanations offered in the association task differ from those that dominate *sexual* sound descriptions. That is, when asked to associate, respondents almost exclusively talk about sex, sexual attraction, and parts of the body during sex. As one male respondent put it, "All the words I picked [*hot*, *wet*, *sticky*, *viscous*] have to do with me being *sexual* or observing *sexual* things" (Blair; 64; nonmusician). It is therefore unsurprising that most respondents spoke about sex or sex appeal when justifying selections: "I chose *feminine* because I'm a heterosexual male, and that's instinct, that's what I'm attracted to" (Hunter; 25 yrs; nonmusician). *Dirty* is often also selected, and respondents make clear they intend it "not in the gross, grimy way" but rather "in the sense of someone being *dirty* sexually, saying *dirty* things" (Hunter; 25 yrs; nonmusician). This figurative use of *dirty*—a figurativeness also present in explanations of why *hot* is associated with *sexual* (e.g., "someone who is *hot* is sexually attractive")—is absent from the sound interviews,

where *dirty* and *hot* refer to a lack of sonic cleanliness and temperature, respectively. Finally, some female respondents select *pregnant*, noting that it is "literally a possible outcome of sex."[13]

The more convincing case against the possibility that gestalts merely capture respondents' associations with *sexual* comes from the never-associate data. Male respondents are most likely to say *jagged*, *acidic*, *sterile*, and *dry* have no association with *sexual*. Female respondents agree: *jagged*, *acidic*, *cracked*, and *greasy* are "the opposite of what *sexual* means." Generally, these words are perceived as negative and hence, as incompatible with *sexual*. As Zach (27 yrs; nonmusician) notes, "*Greasy* and *viscous* seem like disgusting words, whereas *sexual* is the opposite of that. It's attractive." This is compelling, as these words feature prominently in descriptions of *sexual* sound. There thus is a mismatch between qualities that are salient organizers of *sexual* sonic description and those that structure their more abstract understandings of what *sexual* does/does not mean. In this way, what *sexual* means appears to depend on context—that is, whether respondents think about the term in the abstract or in the context of music experience.

Female respondents are slightly more likely to justify their never-associate selections with reference to movement: "*Acidic* and *jagged* don't mesh with things I associate with *sexual*, [like] the *wet*-ness and *hot*-ness of sex. There's a flow with sex that's absent with *acidic*, and *jagged* is too abrupt" (Kaitlin; 22 yrs; nonmusician). On the other hand, male respondents are more likely to refer to unpleasant physical sensation when explaining why terms do not apply: "I associate *crisp* with *jagged*, and *jagged* is harsh. I think of *sexual* as enjoyable and soft and exciting and inviting, and I see *jagged* as the opposite. Like, you'd better be careful, you'd better be on edge, you'd better be protected" (Blair; 64 yrs; nonmusician). *Sterile* and *cold* also provoke strong reactions. This is noteworthy, as these qualities regularly appear in descriptions of *sexual* sound. As Kurt (32 yrs; musician) put it, "*Sterile* is unsexy; it's the opposite of *sexual*. I associate it with *cold*, which I associate with hospitals, and there's nothing *sexual* about that. I have no interest in fucking on a mortician's table."

These data also suggest that respondents see some adjectives as, by definition, non*sexual*. It is not so much that these words are the opposite of *sexual*—like *sterile*, *cold*, *jagged*, and *acidic*—but rather, *crisp*, *buoyant*, *greasy*, *viscous*, *sinewy*, and to some extent, *rubbery* "belong to a different realm" of experience. Put another way, these qualities do not organize their ideas of what *sexual* means. As Jonathon (28 yrs; musician) notes, "I think of *viscous* as being a technical descriptor, like a *viscous* fluid. I just can't think of anything *viscous* that would share qualities of sexuality. Anything that's *viscous*, if you think of touching it, is gross and not great." *Crisp*, *sinewy*, and *buoyant* pose problems for respondents, too. And yet, respondents often employ these terms in descriptions of *sexual* sonic experience. Considered together, these data suggest sound descriptions may capture experience, rather than just gendered associations with, or differences in how male and female respondents talk about, the term *sexual*. Indeed, across-gender similarities in the

[13] Amusingly, a few male respondents select *pregnant* as a never-associate term and note that *pregnant* is the opposite of what they want to happen after sex.

association task indicate that respondents actually share many associations with the term and talk about it similarly.

DISCUSSION

In this work, I investigate cultural experience via description of music experience. My data point to several dimensions of cultural experience and support a multimodal view of culture (Lizardo 2017). First, my respondents' descriptions of *sexual* sound differ by gender and tend to take one of two forms. For male respondents, the most salient organizer of *sexual* sonic experience is a sample's relational dynamic. One experiential gestalt captures a more communal and organic encounter, and the second reflects a more egocentric and self-directed encounter. On the other hand, for female respondents, the most salient feature is movement: *sexual* stimuli move cyclically at their own pace, or forward in an "almost aggressive" fashion. Although the organization of sensory experience into opposing gestalts is consistent with Bourdieu's (1984) view of taste as structured by binaries, my data present an interpretive challenge: the same stimuli can elicit different descriptions in the same gender. That is, two same-gendered respondents may agree that a particular stimulus is *sexual* but describe it differently (i.e., one hears it as communal and another as agentic[14]). One plausible explanation for this finding consistent with Bourdieu's general framework is that another variable not examined here plays a role in shaping respondents' experiences of the stimuli. So same-gendered respondents who hear a stimulus as *sexual* but describe it differently may differ in terms of other factors relevant to (secondary) socialization. One variable that demands future examination is sexual orientation, specifically same-sex desire.

My findings raise important questions, not all of which can be answered with these data. First, what drives meaning making in the sound description interviews—the samples themselves, gendered discourse conventions and associations with *sexual*, or respondents' experiences of stimuli? My data do not suggest samples organize descriptions: respondents perceive a wide array of stimuli as *sexual*, and individual samples do not overwhelmingly elicit one type of description over another. As noted above, it is not uncommon for a stimulus to be perceived by, say, one male respondent as organic and communal, by a second as *flat* and one-dimensional, and by a third as *masculine* and not *sexual* at all.

What about gendered discourse conventions? Do, in other words, male and female respondents just have different ways of talking about what *sexual* means? In a similar vein, do they simply hold different linguistic associations with the term? It is difficult to completely eliminate this possibility, but the association data speak to this point. Most basically, there are key differences in the words respondents pick when asked to select their associations with *sexual* versus when asked to select

[14] Kurt (32 yrs; musician) hears a sample (C#12) as *lush* and *silky*: "The guitar and the drums and the accents on the cymbals and the toms roll," creating a sense of "*silky* smoothness." The "extravagant excess of playing"—"a generous use of notes"—contributes to the *lush*-ness: "It's definitely organic. I could have used *ripe* to describe it." But Marshall (25 yrs; musician) says the same sample is *sterile*. Kurt describes the chords as "rolling," but Marshall hears them as "failing to move." The tones are *fuzzy* and "melancholic": "There's a sense of longing; the music wants to go somewhere but doesn't."

words to describe music. The consistency across respondents and their reliance on cultural expressions ("girls are *hot*"; "she's *wet*"; "*dirty* talk") in the association task suggest that they may be drawing on declarative forms of public culture—specifically, on dominant ideas of sex—to make selections (Lizardo 2017). This also helps explain why they reject descriptors culturally associated with unpleasantness (e.g., *jagged*, *cold*) even if, in some cases (e.g., *viscous*), it is hard to deny their relevance to sex. This across-gender similarity in association task selections implies my respondents associate generally the same terms with *sexual* and tend to articulate their ideas about what the term means similarly.

These points lead me to favor the account that patterns in sound description data stem from my respondents' experiences of *sexual* sound. If this is the case, then descriptions do not reflect differences in gendered discourse conventions or their respective associations with the term but instead, reflect differences in somatic experience. In this scenario, variations more likely reflect a different sort of culture, one more idiosyncratic, embodied, and tethered to individual (gendered) experience. There are two main arguments in support of this theory. First, it is unlikely that respondents contemplated at length what *sexual* means in relation to music prior to the interview. Because the adjectives I provided lack clear mappings to sound, it is doubtful they were able to draw from public culture when making selections. Second, respondents often picked terms with negative cultural connotations to describe *sexual* sound—terms they outright rejected as associated with *sexual*, a term they conceive of as pleasant, in the association task. If we accept that differences in term selection are not shaped (at least primarily) by discursive associations with *sexual* or by gender differences in the vocabularies used to discuss the term, then the next likely possibility is that they reflect differences in music experience that stem from dispositional variations between respondents.

This raises still another question: If we accept variations in description stem from dispositional differences between respondents, then where, more fundamentally, do these differences come from? Put another way, what do the gestalts reflect? Do they reflect, for instance, gendered notions of sexuality, such that male respondents' communal descriptions and female respondents' descriptions of cyclical movement reflect a more culturally feminine sort of intimacy—"woman sex," for lack of a better term? This is possible, but my data permit a second plausible account. A straightforward interpretation of gestalts as gendered notions of sexuality does not neatly fit the data. First, gestalts and gendered attributes—that is, *masculine*, *feminine*—do not consistently map onto each other, and the terms, despite availability, are relatively infrequently chosen.[15] Second, in many sociological theories of gender (e.g., Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999), women are characterized as relationship-focused and emotional and men as pleasure-oriented and agentic. There is no doubt my respondents are aware of these cultural tropes. But their descriptions highlight *opposite* dynamics than those these theories predict (i.e.,

[15] Female respondents use *feminine* twice (n = 2) and *masculine* once (n = 1) to characterize the free-flowing, unregulated *sexual* gestalt, and *feminine* once (n = 1) and *masculine* four times (n = 3) to characterize the controlled-motion counterpart. Male respondents use *feminine* seven times (n = 6) and *masculine* three times (n = 3) to describe the communal gestalt, and *feminine* twice (n = 2) and *masculine* five times (n = 4) to describe the egocentric gestalt.

female respondents stress movement, and male respondents stress relationship). Whether female respondents have in mind a committed relationship when they talk about cyclical movement and a hookup when they describe almost-aggressive forward motion is an open question; explicit talk of relationship is markedly absent from their descriptions. Third, if gestalts merely capture gendered notions of sexuality, we might expect more across-gender description congruence (as in the association task) than there is.

These findings lead me to propose an alternative account: gestalts reflect gendered, embodied takes on the gendering of sexual experience. From this perspective, gestalts are connected to gendered notions of sexuality—but they do not capture notions that respondents hold as *thinkers* but rather those they hold as *hearers*, or as individuals with particular bodily orientations to things in the world built up in past experience. To elaborate, for all my respondents, *sexual* sonic experience consists of two reciprocal forms. That is, their understanding of *sexual* in the sonic context is polar in nature. This is evidenced by the fact that they do not interpret *sexual* sound in just one way, and even those who do not articulate both gestalts over the course of their interview construct descriptions with reference to another "kind" of sexual experience. One gestalt reflects a respondent's embodied understanding of sex as a particularly gendered person (*sexual* gestalts [b] and [a] for male and for female respondents, respectively).[16] The second gestalt reflects a respondent's gendered take on the *opposite* gender's experience of sex—based on his or her own experiences of intimacy as a particularly gendered person (*sexual* gestalts [a] and [b] for male and for female respondents, respectively). So both gestalts are informed by experiences of intimacy and, unavoidably, by cultural ideas of the other gender. If this is true, then gestalts reflect embodied takes on the gendering of sexual experience.

My data do not allow me to definitively adjudicate between interpretations, and a more robust sample of same-sex-desire respondents is needed to test this hypothesis, as data from the handful of same-sex-desire respondents in my sample do not deviate from that of opposite-sex-desire respondents. But several key data points speak to this account. First, the absence of "relationship" in female respondents' accounts is puzzling from the perspective of sociological theories of gender—but *is* consonant with feminist accounts of female pleasure. Specifically, the latter state that male pleasure—not female pleasure—is inherently relational. In contrast to the male pleasure principle, which assumes arousal as the starting point and orgasm as the end point of sex, female pleasure is unbounded and autoerotic: "Without endangering her partner's ultimate 'success.'. . . Without defying the conventions dictating that sex be experienced more or less together, [a woman] can begin and end her pleasure according to a logic of fantasy and arousal that is totally unrelated to the functioning . . . of the 'conventional' heterosexual sex act. Moreover, she can do so again. Immediately. And, we are told, again after that" (Winnett 1990:507). Indeed, it is the *male* pleasure scheme that "fantasizes a scene of coupling" and "privileges a simultaneity of sensation . . . appropriate to one partner only" (509).

[16] This account draws on a specific model of heterosexual intimacy articulated by my respondents but does not preclude the possibility that other models might emerge in a more diverse sample.

My data reflect these pleasure asymmetries in interesting ways: the communal pole for male respondents (*sexual* gestalt [a]) involves an equal partner and is organic and reproductive in nature. The cultural associations with femininity are difficult to ignore: women, it is said, want committed partnerships, and women, it is said, are earthy and maternal by nature. In this framework, this gestalt reflects male respondents' embodied ideas about how intimacy is experienced by women—based on *their* experiences of intimacy as heterosexual *men*. This conception is embodied: even as they project themselves into their oppositely gendered alter, their *own* way of experiencing sex as fundamentally relational shapes descriptions, and their language continues to be informed by sexual dynamics relevant to their own-gendered experience: samples "envelope," "draw," and "invite" them in. This is a very different sort of experience than that described by my female respondents (*sexual* gestalt [a]). *Their* descriptions follow a different, notably partner-less logic that does not emphasize nature, motherhood, or relationship at all. Rather, the experience they describe cycles, is self-directed and exploratory, lacks clear start and end points, and follows its own course: it is sex "how sex should be" (Elise; 40 yrs; nonmusician; C#13), the kind that leads with the "upper body" and not the "thighs" (Lara; 27 yrs; musician; C#5).

Similarly, the descriptions of linear, regulated motion female respondents offer (*sexual* gestalt [b]) may reflect embodied conceptions of how intimacy is experienced by men based on *their* experiences of intimacy as heterosexual *women*. This type of experience, they say, is goal-directed ("go, go, go"), with demarcated start (arousal) and end (orgasm) points. In other words, it adheres to the male pleasure scheme. What is more, female respondents frequently compare the pace and implied motion of such stimuli to traditionally male sexual movements. But crucially, rather than talk about being in control—what, for male respondents, the egocentric encounter (*sexual* gestalt [b]) is all about—they talk about being *out* of control. Sounds, they say, "come at" and "go into" them; they feel forced to interact with an "almost-aggressive" alter who determines the encounter's progression. In this way, their experiences of intimacy as women inform their embodied notion of how intimacy is experienced by men. From this perspective, descriptions differ by gender because my respondents' embodied and gendered experiences of intimacy cut across and inform *both* gestalts. Similarities in description stem, on the other hand, from the shared nature of the encounter (e.g., seeing how oppositely gendered individuals act and respond in sexual situations) and by participation in the broader cultural environment (e.g., learning cultural tropes about gendered pleasure and sex roles). In other words, past experiences with intimacy and more general engagements with cultural ideas about gender and sexuality shape my respondents' understandings of what *sexual* in the sonic context means.

CONCLUSION

This work contributes to the growing body of research in the sociology of culture that takes seriously the senses as sources of cultural knowledge. I employ a novel interview method designed to facilitate the description of music experience,

and highlight the organization of one particular subtype of sonic experience: the experience of sound as *sexual*. This work suggests that methods that attune respondents to qualities of experience can bring researchers closer to understanding the social logic and distribution of cultural experience. Of course, the organizations of music experience I identify should not be generalized to nonmusic realms or even beyond the stimuli I provide respondents with. Future research should scale up this design to include a larger and more diverse sample of respondents and stimuli and to explore cultural experience in other modalities. My findings indicate that the traditional model of culture as text not only conflates discursive and experiential dimensions of culture but also highlights issues associated with pitting language *against* the body in culture studies. Specifically, this tendency ignores important relations between cultural domains. Here, I focus on the embodiment of meaning and its communication via language—on how the body grasps and shapes the meaning of cultural objects via the senses, and how language can communicate that meaning. Further, I show that these cultural meanings are neither singular nor fixed but instead vary based on what actors do—in this case, whether they relay a particular kind of experience via language or contemplate meanings in the abstract—and the kinds of bodies (and past experiences) they have. In this way, meaning is tethered to experience, both in the general sense that experience makes actors sensitive to some but not other social meanings, and in the specific sense that what actors *do* at any given moment informs and conditions the cultural meanings they can grasp and relate to others (e.g., Bosman et al. 2019; Cerulo 2018).

In the past, scholars have asked whether observed gender differences are artefacts of discourse conventions (Gordon and Heath 1998; Pennebaker, Mehl, and Niederhoffer 2003) or reflect actual differences in experience (Chodorow 1999 [1978]; Gilligan 2003 [1982]; Ortner and Whitehead 2010 [1981]). Ultimately, this is a question about how "deep" culture goes: does the social environment influence actors primarily at the level of discourse, or does it, as the pragmatists, and later, Bourdieu, suggest, engender differences in experience? This work supports the latter contention without denying the former and demonstrates that leveraging cultural domain interdependencies can bring scholars closer to capturing qualities of experience with language.

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APPENDIX

Table A. Adjective Set

Wet	Sexual	Flat	Open
Cracked	Sinewy	Crisp	Dry
Sticky	Wide	Dirty	Prickly
Fuzzy	Feminine	Hot	Greasy
Silky	Lush	Lean	Viscous
Thick	Rubbery	Juicy	Slippery
Cold	Velvety	Masculine	Jagged
Narrow	Round	Sterile	Coarse
Ripe	Pregnant	Buoyant	Acidic
Straight	Curvy	Closed	Pointy

Table B. Sound Stimuli

Clip	Song	Artist	Length
1	Bachelorette	Björk	:21
2	Breaker	Low	:22
3	Christine Bonilla	Joy Zipper	:24
4	Come In Alone	My Bloody Valentine	:21
5	Dude Incredible	Shellac	:21
6	Electric Fence	Califone	:22
7	La Schiena	Paolo Benvegnù	:24
8	Lost River	Murder by Death	:22
9	Lover's Spit	Broken Social Scene	:25
10	Mandy	Pere Ubu	:18
11	Pigeon Kill	Big Black	:12
12	Ringing Hand	Nels Cline	:24
13	When I Go Deaf	Low	:25