Post-Feminism's "New Sexual Contract" and Electronic Dance Music's Queered Femme Voices

Feature Article

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Abstract

Angela McRobbie argues that post-feminism's "new sexual contract" grants otherwise privileged white women the things traditionally denied women as a class, namely, economic success and self-ownership of their bodies as sexual property (McRobbie 2004). Because voice is commonly used as a metaphor for self-possessed agency, this article considers three ways white women and femme musicians across EDMC use vocal and authorial voices to reimagine post-feminist practices of self-ownership and property-in-person. Brooklyn band bottoms, Berlin techno collective Decon/Recon and Australian-American pop star Sia, all use voice to craft femininities that deviate from post-feminist gender norms and its "new sexual contract": bottoms perform femininity as self-dispossession, Decon/Recon's anonymous collective authorship centers women and femmes while de-centering private property, and Sia disconnects her voice from her person so that her performances of sonic resilience (James 2015) don't labor upon *her* body and turn it into private property.

Keywords: post-feminism, Sia, bottoms, Decon/Recon, queer

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Both in theory and in practice, liberalism[1] treats voice as both the medium for political participation and an inalienable component of membership in society, and indeed, in humanity. This is evident in political theories such as deliberative democracy, Habermasian concepts of the public sphere and in actual laws like the First Amendment to the US constitution or the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Thus, it's not surprising that both music criticism and common speech use "voice" as a metaphor for agency and subjectivity. For example, Kat George cites Missy Elliot's "body and sex positivity", "champion[ing] women-supporting-women" and "take-no-prisoners attitude toward feminine autonomy" as evidence of her "strong feminist voice" (George 2016). As George uses it, "voice" has nothing to do with the musical aspects of Elliott's vocal performance—it's a metaphor for agency and intentionality. In a 2014 essay, Rebecca Solnit, author of the "Men Explain Things To Me" essay that coined the term "mansplaining", uses "voice" as a metaphor for political activism and personhood: "thanks to the groundbreaking work of earlier generations, feminist voices on crucial issues have become normal and more or less mainstream" (Solnit 2014). Likewise, pop songs use apparently unrestrained, unrehearsed vocalizations to express rebellious, individualistic agency. Taylor Swift's vocal flourish in "Shake It Off's" drop (Swift 2014) and Poly Styrene's screamed "O Bondage, Up Yours!" (X-Ray Spex 1977) use vocal excess to show women busting out of sexism's confines. Swift's forceful, expressive melisma is evidence that she's shaken off all the restrictive stereotypes she's tried on throughout the video. Styrene's scream is her (negative) response to the sexist cliché that she articulates in the song's first line: "little girls should be seen and not heard".

As I argued in my book *Resilience and Melancholy* (James 2015), beginning sometime in the early 2010s, strong, loud, resilient voices are not so much evidence of women's liberation as they are a new gender norm used to police the boundaries of real, legitimate, respectable femininity. According to Cathy Cohen's classical formulation of the concept, respectability politics are a race, class and sexuality-based discourse that privileges femininities that conform to other hegemonic subject positions over those that are insufficiently white, bourgeois and/or cisheterosexual (Cohen 1997). Arguing that "'good' girls are the ones who show a continual, active commitment to overcoming the limitations patriarchy places on women" (James 2015: 84), I showed how neoliberalism has updated respectability politics to focus less on chastity and more on economic success. As James argues, neoliberalism has upgraded mainstream (white, cis, etc.) notions of femininity and feminine gender roles: passivity is out, assertive agency is in. In early 21st century Western liberal democracies, women are expected to be strong, assertive, and resilient; they must overcome the limitations of traditional femininity, limitations like passivity, silence, physical weakness, sexual objectification, poor body image and so on (Whitefield-Madrano 2016). Instead of changing society to be more inclusive and less harmful to women and femmes, post-feminism expects women to get over whatever held them back. Overcoming the limitations of traditional femininity, women show they have the kinds of agency demanded of all full participants in the State and the market—that is, that they have "voice".

This neoliberal respectability politics impacts how fans and critics evaluate women musicians. For example, Noisey's Emma Garland argues that "we [have] created an environment in which female artists are being judged only on their feminism" (2015). Fans and critics expect women artists to demonstrate some sort of nominally feminist gesture: we like it when Demi Lovato proclaims her Confidence (2016) or when Meghan Trainor says a firm "No" (2016). As the sheer volume of criticism of *Lemonade* and *A Seat At The Table* suggests, we especially like it when Beyoncé and Solange center black women's experiences and aesthetics, perhaps because it is easy to (mis)read these albums as presenting relatively hegemonic, middle class, heterosexual representations of black femininity (Barlow, Escobedo-Shepherd). Many post-feminist pop songs narrate such overcomings: for example, Trainor's "All About That Bass" (2014) is about overcoming poor body image, and Daya's "Sit Still, Look Pretty" (2016) is about overcoming the male gaze and its idealized images of femme beauty and complacency. This resilient femininity saturates the pop mainstream. Similar attitudes are expressed in the popular media. For example, in a 2016 interview with CBS News, Eric Trump responded to his father's (then Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump) comments on what Eric's sister Ivanka should do if sexually harassed at work with the claim that "Ivanka is a strong, powerful woman . . . . I don't think she would allow herself to be subjected to that" (Shabad 2016). From this perspective, the solution to sexual harassment lies in professional women's personal fortitude: these women ought to be so self-possessed that they prevent harassment before it even starts. To be harassed at work is thus a sign of failed femininity and poor class and job performance. Instead of explicitly denying women access to full political personhood, patriarchy increasingly expects women to conquer those traditional barriers on their own.[2]

If that's what respectable, hegemonic femininity looks like in a post-feminist world, how are women negotiating this gender norm and creating alternative femininities? In this article, I consider three instances from 2015 where queer women use musical voice (singing voice, authorial voice) to perform something other than the type of agency, self-possession and economic success that post-feminist gender norms expect women to embody and express. Brooklyn "gender-problematizing goth dance band" bottoms (2016), Berlin EDM collective Decon/Recon and Top 40 dance-pop singer-songwriter Sia (who is bisexual) each develop musical voices that are alternatives to post-feminist narratives of voice-as-agency. bottoms work in Brooklyn's queer alternative dance music scene and perform femininity as dispossession. Decon/Recon work in mainstream—and still overwhelmingly cis-men dominated—house and techno; their authorial practices center women and femmes while de-centering private property. Finally, Sia works in the multinational commercial dance-pop market and disconnects her voice from her person so that her performances of sonic resilience (James 2015) don't labor upon *her* body and turn it into private property. I have selected these three examples because they all use voice to intervene in post-feminism's demand that women demonstrate self-possession and economic success. I'm limiting my focus in this article to white queer women musicians and music scenes for several reasons:

(1) white supremacist patriarchy designs resilience discourse to work intersectionally and impact women and femmes of color differently than it impacts white women and femmes; (2) as work by scholars such as Roderick Ferguson, L. H. Stallings and Alexander Weheliye shows, white supremacist patriarchy treats blackness as a type of sexual deviance, always-already queer from jump, and queer in a different way than white queerness; and (3) I consider black women's responses to post-feminist pop in other work (James 2017).

What is Post-Feminism?

Before I talk about the music, I want to clarify what I mean by post-feminism. In general, post-feminism dismisses feminism as obsolete in order to hide ongoing patriarchy behind women's supposed emancipation. As Angela McRobbie explains, "post-feminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasize that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force" (2014: 256). There are specific variations of post-feminism, each citing different reasons for its obsolescence and instituting different norms about feminism's acceptability. Unlike the backlash-style post-feminism of the 1980s, which rejected feminism as harmful and unnecessary, neoliberal post-feminism makes feminism compulsory: explicit, overt feminism is a necessary part of 21st century femininity[3]. As Michelle M. Lazar has shown, 21st century "power feminism" is a global discourse, both in the sense that it is "put into circulation by international media corporations", and articulates itself in varying "glocal" (2006: 206) forms. Patriarchy hides itself behind the superficial acceptance of feminist women: if we like feminists, if we even have friends who are feminist, how can we be sexist? "Gender retrenchment is secured, paradoxically, through the wide dissemination of discourses of female freedom and (putative) equality" (McRobbie 2014: 719–20).[4] Doubling down on the very oppressions it claims to progress beyond, post-feminism resembles concurrent, intersecting phenomena such as homonationalism, wherein "'acceptance and 'tolerance' for gay and lesbian subjects have become a barometer by which the right to and capacity for national sovereignty is evaluated" (Puar 2013). Post-feminism treats the nominal acceptance of feminist women as evidence that feminism's political project has already been accomplished. This supposed fact can then be used to call into question the right and capacity for sovereignty among populations where feminism still seems necessary, which tend to be non-white, poor and working-class and non-Western. Respect for feminist ideas and feminist women is also used as evidence that the so-called "alt-right" are unacceptably extreme. For example, both the press and the Republican party treated then candidate Donald Trump's brags about sexually harassing women as more reprehensible and damaging to his candidacy than his explicitly racist comments and policy proposals (Jacobs et al. 2016). Similarly, *The New York Times* hails the woman killed at the 2017 "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia as a "strong woman" committed to social justice (Caron 2017). The press frequently presents Heyer's murder as evidence that actual self-professed Nazis are violent extremists and not just

people with different opinions (Feinberg 2017; Phillips 2017). The underlying norm here is that women ought to be strong because, much in the same way private property ownership was once a barometer of "civilization", strong, empowered women, women who possess themselves, are now that barometer. 21st century post-feminism thus revises conventional respectability politics to center less around sexual mores and emphasize empowerment and self-ownership instead.[5]

In order to keep its cover, patriarchy requires women to incorporate feminism into their gender identity; to count as a "normal woman" whose gender performance is not in need of generally class- and/or race-based reform, you have to be "gender aware" (McRobbie 2014: 732) and profess and practice feminism. The ability to, as Jack Halberstam puts it, "catapul[t] anachronistic formulations of men, women, and everyone else" is one component of the overall flexibility and adaptability neoliberalism expects us all to embody (2012). But, as Dawn Foster (2016), bell hooks (2013) and plenty of other feminists have shown, it's a really narrow sort of feminism, focused on economic empowerment and ownership of one's self (one's sexuality, image, body and body image, etc.). This idea of self-ownership and economic empowerment is central to post-feminism's "new sexual contract" (McRobbie 2014: 718). The original sexual contract, as theorized by Carole Pateman, is grounded in "the political fiction of property in the person" (2013: 17). According to 18th century English philosopher John Locke, property in person is the private property interest one has in the products of one's labor; this property interest lets you obtain both (a) more private property (by improving things with your labor) and, more important, (b) political personhood. "By being master of himself, and proprietor of his own person, and the actions or labour of it" (1988: 2–44), one can consent (or not) to the social contract. Owning your property-in-person is what gives you voice, in the sense of political personhood and participation. Traditionally, women as a class are defined as the group of people who permanently sign away their ownership of their property-in-person—and thus their civil personhood—in marriage contracts.[6] Women's civil sub-personhood persists. For example, feminists use the idea of "rape culture" to describe "cultural practices that reproduce and justify the perpetration of sexual violence" (Rentschler 2014). Among these practices is the idea that men are entitled to use women's bodies as sexual property and can intrude on their property-in-person with or without their consent. Post-feminism gives women their civil personhood—their voice—back by giving them back ownership of their property-in-person. Because the original sexual contract defines civil personhood, not just as ownership of one's own property-in-person, but also as the "use of a woman's body (sexual property)" (Pateman 2007: 184–5), post-feminism's new sexual contract construes women's newfound civil personhood/voice in both economic and sexual terms: women can now own both the products of their labor and the use of a woman's body—THEIR body—as sexual property. Sexuality is central to post-feminism's new sexual contract, and to the kinds of femininities that it sets up as new norms. Women's voices must express the use of one's body as sexual property. This is why pop critics and fans think "there's a lot to love about this ode to sexual

agency from pop superstars Nicki Minaj and Ariana Grande [titled "Get On Your Knees"] ... but, mostly, it's refreshing to hear two women reject objectification and assert their status as sexual subjects" (Dunlap 2014). Similarly, Meghan Trainor's 2013–14 megahit "All About That Bass" treats heterosexual appeal—what "boys like" and "boys chase"—as the ultimate ground of women's positive body image. Post-feminist voices express women's civil personhood as cisheterosexuality.

In this context, sexual deviance or abnormality registers as a lack of "voice"/civil personhood. Women and femmes whose gender expression doesn't transcend the limits and low status traditionally placed on feminine things read as backwards or pathological or deviant. Femininities that lack spectacular agency are queer in the sense of "abnormal", especially when that spectacle doesn't include using one's own body as cisheterosexual property. In the rest of the article, I'll show how queer femme musicians use musical and authorial voice to contest and build alternatives to post-feminist voice and civil personhood.

BOTTOMS

Signed to JD Samson's Atlas Chair Records and tied to the Brooklyn alternative drag scene, bottoms were soundly situated in white queer music and performance subcultures. On their Facebook page, they described themselves as "two shitty drag queens, a 303 and a drummer" (2016). Like 2014 Eurovision winner Conchita Wurst, bottoms' queens have beards, but the beards aren't what make their take on femininity "shitty". Their drag is "shitty" because they intentionally fail in performing the one component of mainstream white femininity that is the focal point of Conchita's winning song "Rise Like A Phoenix": resilience. Conchita's lyrics depict a person for whom damage and ill-treatment serve as fuel for positive transformation: who or whatever hurt the narrator is the "flame" that births the Phoenix. This type of overcoming, overcoming the damage feminization does to a person, is central to post-feminist femininity.

bottoms suck at performing feminine resilience. In their debut EP "Goodbye" (2015), bottoms talk about the damage and ill-treatment queer people experience and have experienced. There is an entire song about HIV, and the titular song is about suicide. The band told Fader that "We're really interested in the dichotomy of upbeat music with a more depressing lyrical theme. It's like sad music for the club—people dancing to a suicide note" (Fitzmaurice 2015). Instead of fighting back against the cruel world, they succumb to it. Like the sexual role from which they take their name, bottoms inhabit the feminized strategies of passivity and failure people like Jack Halberstam (2011) have identified in work by women and femme artists. Damage isn't overcome; it persists, and even if it impedes our agency, it doesn't impede our ability to enjoy music, dancing, our dancing bodies, or even a night out with our friends. Because bottoms don't perform the resilience component of normal, mainstream white femininity, so their drag seems off, incomplete, failed. Lead singer Jake Diebler understands this failure or "shittiness" as a way to carve out queer subcultures at

a time when most mainstream LGBT culture has been "assimilated into heteronormative culture" (Haberstroh 2015). Non-resilient femininity marks their failure or refusal of both post-feminism and homonormativity.

Both in their drag and in their music, bottoms fail to perform the feminine agency post-feminism demands of women. bottoms' music articulates a way for women and femmes to experience their bodies and sexualities as something other than property to be used and owned. "My Body", the lead single from the *Goodbye* EP (2015), reimagines aesthetic and sexual pleasure as something besides self-ownership. It does this both narratively and musically. The video stars Macy Rodman, a white trans singer and performer. In "My Body", Rodman cuts up and ultimately eats her breast. She uses a traditionally feminine and heavily eroticized part of a woman's body as her sexual and gustatory property, but in a way that signals the opposite of the mastery and dominance that both pre-feminist philosophers like Locke and post-feminist pop stars like Trainor, think such ownership establishes. Rodman works on her body, but not in a way that transforms it into her private property or human capital: rather than "improving" it, she undoes it.[7] The lyrics proclaim a similar self-dispossession: instead of post-feminist proclamations of positive body image reclaimed from the male gaze, they repeat "I hate my body!" over and over. Sung with phrasing and diction that echoes Bikini Kill, Diebler's vocal performance refashions sounds that are conventionally liberatory and resistant—that is, sounds conventionally interpreted as expressions or manifestations of agency—into an aesthetic experience that is queer *because* it neither succumbs to, nor overcomes, oppression, but reimagines pleasure and its conditions (like bottoms do sexually).

"My Body" treats this dispossession as a source of sexual and aesthetic pleasure. First, Rodman's performance depicts her self-dispossession as a form of autoeroticism. For example, at 3:50 in the video, as she cuts her breast open with a chef's knife, her facial expressions depict sexual pleasure. Second, the music avoids the tension-release structures post-feminist pop uses to represent resilience. Traditional cis white femininity involves experiencing your body as an impediment (Young 1980) and post-feminist pop makes a spectacle of overcoming body-as-impediment. As James has argued, postmillennial EDM-pop sonically represents that overcoming in the form of two complimentary tension-release structures: soars and drops (2015). Both structures use rhythm and timbre to maximize the sense of sonic crisis and recovery. "My Body" avoids that gendered narrative entirely. Musically, the song is a 24-bar loop repeated five and a half times; it builds by layering voices, but there's no tension-release moment (See Diagram 1). There's no climactic sonic overcoming, no crisis from which a girl spectacularly bounces back. Just as the lyrics express the opposite of post-feminist resilience, the song's structure avoids the songwriting techniques commonly used to express and represent that resilience. "My Body" doesn't use feminine resilience to cultivate (in the full sense of this term) aesthetic pleasure. Like the video's narrative, the song's structure expresses a femininity that does not hinge on mastery and self-ownership.

xx/xx (acapella intro)	Intro
xx/xx	
xx/xx	
xx/xx	
xx/xx (instrumental intro)	A
xx/xx	
xx/xx (ghasps)	
xx/xx	
xx/xx (claps)	
xx/xx	
xx/xx (claps, higher pitch in the synth)	B
xx/xx	
xx/xx (main groove)	Chorus 1
xx/xx	
xx/xx (more noodles)	Chorus 2
xx/xx	
xx/xx ("I hate my body...")	C Verse 1
xx/xx	
xx/xx ("I hate my body...")	
xx/xx	
xx/xx (more noodles)	repeat of chorus 2
xx/xx	
xx/xx ("I hate my body...")	C1 Verse 2
xx/xx	
xx/xx ("clap your hands")	
xx/xx	
xx/xx (gasps)	repeat of chorus 2 plus ghasps from A
xx/xx	
xx/xx — with main groove	chorus 1 (here's the other 16 bars from the last B)
xx/xx	
xx/xx	C2 Verse 3 — is 16 bars longer than V1 & 2
xx/xx	
xx/xx	
xx/xx	
xx/xx ("clap your hands")	
xx/xx	
xx/xx (more noodles)	B Chorus 1 and 2 blended
xx/xx	
xx/xx	
xx/xx	

Diagram 1. bottoms, "My Body" (2015).

Decon/Recon

As Rebekah Farrugia argues, though "the absence of lyrics in most EDM genres and subgenres prevents women from falling readily into typical, gendered traps in which their contributions are viewed only in terms of vocals and/or lyrics, regardless of the actual range of their contributions" (2012: 10), industry practices still exclude women, non-binary, queer and non-men artists from full participation. For example, lamentations about "the sheer lack of women in the dance music industry" (McCarthy 2015) or the fact that "the dance music scene, which is a counter culture at the beginning, has become so conservative

on many levels" (rRoxymore, in Docherty 2016) and carefully qualified claims that "*certain genres, such as EDM*, can have a 'Boys Only' mentality that makes it hard for female artists to make a name for themselves" (Byers 2015, emphasis mine) are common. Techno collective Decon/Recon think conventional approaches to songwriting and production constitute "a glass ceiling to keep the Privileged privileged" (Noise Manifesto 2016b). They have targeted this glass ceiling, using alternative relations of song production to shatter one specific musical convention that disadvantages women, queers, non-binary people, and non-men: authorial voice and attribution.

Decon/Recon is a collective formed by Paula Temple and a cast of three rotating musicians. Their first EP, #1 (2015), included rRoxymore, Oni Ayhun, Jaguar Woman (Temple), and Aquarian Jugs (aka Planningtorock). It was released on Paula Temple's Noise Manifesto label, which explicitly promotes the work of women, queers and non-cis-men in electronic dance music (Noise Manifesto 2016b). Their name clips and combines "deconstruction" and "reconstruction" (Noise Manifesto 2015), which is how the collective describes their signature compositional process. All members contribute a set of sounds to a sound bank, and then each individual member composes one track with sounds from that sound bank. These tracks are credited to the collective as a whole so listeners can never attribute sounds or arrangements to specific members of the collective. This way, nobody "owns" the track, in the Lockean sense of improving something with your labor and thus making it your (intellectual) property, and nobody can be credited with authorial voice. Whereas post-feminist pop aims to grant women voice, civil personhood, and property-in-person, Decon/Recon adopts a compositional style that abolishes the division of labor and private property. As Marx and Engels show in the *German Ideology*, the division of labor is both what makes private property possible and in the end "identical expressions: in the one the same thing is affirmed with reference to activity and is affirmed in the other with reference to the product of the activity" (Marx and Engels 1978: 159–60). Eliminating the division of compositional labor—you might say everyone in the collective made beats in the morning, clipped samples in the afternoon, and composed and produced in the evening—Decon/Recon makes it impossible for us to interpret their EP as any author's or artist's private property/voice. Paralleling Angela Davis' (2011) argument that women cannot be liberated from patriarchy without also abolishing private property, Decon/Recon's compositional practices suggest that women cannot be liberated from patriarchy without also abolishing authorial voice and private intellectual property. As they put it, decon refers to "the deconstructive process of the 'artist' status in terms of superiority or the elaboration of new politically active business models" (Noise Manifesto 2015). This process deconstructs the relations of production and distribute both hard and soft/social capital away from the women, queers and gender-non-conforming members of the music industry and reconstructs these relations in a way that forces people out of the interpretive habits (like authorial attribution) that support those traditional relations of property and production.[8] For example, as Farrugia argues, "turning EDM producers and DJs into brands favors the logic of capital accumulation" (2012: 41).

The decon/recon process also deconstructs classically liberal understandings of gender and sexuality, which treat them as attributes or characteristics of individuals.[9] This process reconstructs our concepts of gender and sexuality by framing them as political, social, and economic systems[10]. In their manifesto, the collective describe identity as something that structures the world and your relation to it, like:

> the ring of an alarm set on given daily routines in which you wake up the day you are born. Is it the repetition of given gestures in which you move as somnambulist, calcifying the borders of a social geography. Are these borders producing you as a subject of a constant flashback where past and future vanish and your living trajectory comes to an end by being its own beginning (Noise Manifesto 2016a).

Identity is a program that produces people of varying social status, and the decon/recon method hacks that program. Unlike post-feminism, which rehabilitates the status of "woman" and normal, white, cishetero, able-bodied femininity, giving patriarchal minorities a voice, the decon/recon process rewrites the gendered scripts or protocols that assign identities and dole out statuses—in particular the status of "voice" itself: authorial voice, ownership of intellectual property and cultural credit, full liberal personhood and citizenship. They decon "voice" and recon the practice vocalization—the practice or process of what philosophers would call political subjectivation, which is the way individuals and groups get assigned roles and statuses in a social group, the way they get in- or ex-cluded in the State or the market (this sounds a bit like what philosopher Jacques Ranciere means by disagreement).

Decon/Recon takes up gender and sexual identity at the level of epistemology and power relations: we hear them not as voices, but as sonic relationships affected by cisheteropatriarchy. But what does this sound like, and how do people hear it? As Tania Gualeni notes at Dummymag (2015), the sax on DR1-1 recalls no-wave provocateur James Chance. The timbral affinity between this musical voice and Chance's sax playing on, say, the August Darnell remix of his most famous track "Contort Yourself", recalls No Wave's negativity, which resonates with Lee Edelman's notion of queer negativity. Edelman argues that negation is sonically an-archic; "negation is a counter-hegemonic response to [European modernity's] supposedly coherent arche of teleological development, accumulation, and growth" (2004: 508). As a manifestation of this an-arche, "queer death sounds like meaningless repetition, 'random signals,' white noise, or 'electronic buzzing'" (2004: 506–7). Chance took pop's coherent arche and used practices borrowed from free jazz and punk to negate that arche—for example, he sped up Michael Jackson's "Don't Stop Till You Get Enough" so fast it broke down. Likewise, he used meaningless noise (not quite electronic buzzing or white noise, but noisy sax playing) to interrupt our expectations for disciplined timbre. Just as Edelman is negating the arche of reproductive futurity, Chance is negating the arche of pop song form and pop virtuosity.

If Chance and Edelman focus exclusively on the decon, in DR1-1 that uber-macho, confrontational "NO" gets reconed into a compositional process and aesthetic that intentionally generates what we might call queer affinities, affinities that don't follow

the relations that ensure the white cisheteropatriarchal transfer of wealth and property. Instead of saying "no" it says "let's do this instead". Aesthetically, DR1-1 constructs a sonic affinity between no wave and techno that re-scripts how we understand this particular style of sax playing, this, erm, "voice", if you will.[11] Deconstructing conventional relations of composition and production, they reconstruct sonic affinities that dis-identify with white macho queer politics (the negativity). Think of it this way: as a practice, decon/recon is neither a "NO" nor a contortion (nor even the kind of "riotous" circuit bending James talks about in chapter 2 of *Resilience & Melancholy*), but a way to find pleasure—seriously great techno—in different terms and through unconventional affinities. As London-based EDM retailer Juno describes it in their review, these unconventional affinities sound like "a wonderfully off kilter feeling running through all four tracks, as the traditional tropes of techno rub up against odd textural tones and weirded out strings" (Juno Records 2015). This isn't an-arche, but relationality that flouts arche. From *Disidentifications* to *The Queer Art of Failure* to the *Epistemology of the Closet* to "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens", crafting alternative affinities beyond and below cisheterocapitalist kinship structures is about as queer method 101 as it gets.

If the "decon" is more and other than Chance's or Edelman's "NO", the "recon" is more or other than the "creative" in neoliberalism's "creative destruction". As David Harvey, Naomi Klein, and plenty of others have argued, neoliberal market logics demand that all bugs get recycled into features. I've shown that this imperative has specific implications for oppressed groups, who, through things like resilience and grit and the like, must turn their gender, racial, class, and other identity-based damage into a resource, both for them individually (in the form of human capital) and for society as a whole. Though decon/recon seems to be a parallel process to creative destruction or resilience, its similarity is only superficial. Creative destruction and resilience deregulate the surface but control the background conditions; for a musical analogy, think about Reich's gradual processes, or Cage's chance pieces. Reich describes gradual musical processes as giving the composer "impersonal and also a kind of complete control" (Reich 1974) because by controlling the background conditions—say, what kind of mic you swing from how high over what kind of speaker in what room—the composer indirectly determines the range of possible outcomes. Neoliberal markets control background conditions so that the outcomes are always favorable to systems of domination. Decon/recon intervenes in background conditions (i.e., compositional practices) for a different end—in fact, for the opposite end—for outcomes that are not favorable to systems of domination but to oppressed groups.[12] As Temple explains,

> The point is creating the environment, the atmospheres, in order to make that possible. Whether that happens or not is a different matter. To have the attitudes and structures where people are not being sidelined or discriminated against, where they feel they can be part of it too without having to face additional barriers (in Sullivan 2016).

If voice is the most foreground manifestation of agency, attention to background conditions seems like inattention to voice. However, it's these background conditions that determine

what it means to speak, who counts as a speaker, and what sorts of voices can emerge from this background. Post-feminism proclaims women, too, have a voice without challenging the white supremacist, patriarchal assumptions that determine what counts as a voice or a vocalist. It assimilates some women into existing power structures without revolutionizing those structures, structures like property-in-person as the basis of civil personhood. Whereas post-feminist methods would make a spectacle of women claiming authorial voice, this collective's methods revolutionize the concept and practice of political membership. Obscuring who did what on the EP makes it impossible for audiences to interpret any division of labor into the record (e.g., the division between producer and studio musician, songwriter, vocalist, etc.) and to use private property as the basis for personhood and political enfranchisement.

Sia

Collaborating with producers like Giorgio Moroder and David Guetta, Sia Furler has a catalog full of dance-pop records. Famous first as a songwriter and second as a vocalist, she never eschews authorial voice. However, her signature as a pop star, the thing that stands out as her "brand" in the way the symbol did for Prince or the gilded left glove did for Michael Jackson, is her personal anonymity. For example, in January 2015 Billboard ran a listicle "6 Secretive Sia Moments" which collected several videos where "she's gone out of her way to avoid associating her face with her voice and talent" (Richin 2015). She's no Thomas Pynchon or Elena Ferrante, but Sia does intentionally avoid public attention to her person, especially when it comes to her appearance and her sexuality. In "My Anti-Fame Manifesto" she compares celebrity to a judgy "mother-in-law" who is "not just making cracks about dying before I give her some grandkids, she's asking me if I'm barren. She's asking me whether I'm 'so unattractive under those clothes that her son/daughter doesn't want to fuck me anymore', or if I'm 'so dumb I don't know what a dick is and how to use it'" (Sia 2013).

Beauty, heterosexuality, motherhood—these are all components of normative white femininity. And they're the things Sia thinks fame and celebrity take from her, much in the same way traditional marriage contracts take women's property-in-person and sign them over to husbands. Hermione Hoby's (2014) claim that this "faceless fame...seems unprecedented for a female pop star"[13] reinforces the gendered character of such exploitation. This is why Sia uses the mother-in-law metaphor: concluding her manifesto with the statement "me and fame will never be married". Sia clearly understands—implicitly if not explicitly—anonymity as a way to protect herself from the same kind of gendered exploitation marriage exacts on women: it protects her from having the public use her body as sexual property.

Whether live or in video, she generally obscures her face from the audience. She does this in one of two ways, each of them involving a blunt-cut blonde bob wig. First, in videos, album covers and other mass-distributed paraphernalia, the wig represents Sia. It either stands by itself, like a brand symbol (e.g., on the covers for *A Thousand Forms of Fear* and *This Is Acting*), or it's worn by actors and dancers to indicate that they are Sia's proxy (e.g.,

Maddie Ziegler in "Chandelier" and "Elastic Heart"). Second, in live performances Sia sings from behind an extremely large version of this wig with the bangs falling just at nose level so they don't interfere with the mic picking up her voice. According to Maura Johnson (2016), this has the effect of presenting Sia as "an omniscient narrator of the feelings wordlessly portrayed by others".

This visual rhetoric of anonymity disarticulates the musical structures that conventionally express post-feminist resilience from her femme subjectivity. Obscuring her face makes it more difficult for audiences to interpret her songs' *musical* expression as *personal* expression of her person or persona. If regular arguments with my students are any indication here, pop audiences commonly interpret vocal expression as the immediate expression of singers' emotions, not as practiced and calculated matters of musical technique. By making it impossible to read *her* facial expressions or other body language (for example, for her 2016 Saturday Night Live performance she stood still at the mic), Sia interrupts that interpretive habit. We can't match her musical expression to her facial expression and body language, or use the latter to contextualize and interpret the former. Her lack of physical expression is even more extreme than a classical musician—they frequently (if unintentionally) use facial expressions and body language—and audiences generally interpret them as performing a work that is not primarily rooted in their personal experience or expressions, generally because the work is written by somebody else. Obscuring her face and personal identity helps Sia draw a similar line between composer and performer, work and performance. Without facial expressions or body language (or even much information about her body—she frequently performs in loose-fitting outfits that obscure her physique; this deflects attempts to see her body as sexual property to be gossiped about by "sharp-tongued mothers-in-law"), the only data we get is from her vocal technique.

This is Acting, the title of her 2015 album, underscores the point that this is all technique. Sia and her collaborators originally wrote all the songs on this album for other singers to record and release: they were never intended to express anything about corporate-person/pop star Sia. Singing them, Sia embodies the songs as an actor does a character in a script. This is precisely how she describes it in an interview: "Generally, they're songs that aren't from my perspective, so it feels like acting" (Spanos 2015).[14] Actors use techniques—Stanislavski's, Meisner's, Adler's, etc.—to create credible performances of other people's emotions, comportment, and general being-in-the-word. She uses musical techniques to evoke emotional responses in listeners, but they're not really pop star Sia's or person Sia Furler's emotions that she's communicating.[15] For example, "Alive", the lead single on the album, was written with and for Adele, from Adele's perspective (Weatherby 2015). "Alive" prominently features specific technique she uses to convey a particular script: the technique is overblowing her vocal break, and the script is feminine resilience. Resilience means turning noise into signal, damage into profit/human capital. It's a kind of post-feminist co-optation of the queer performance strategy Jose Muñoz calls "disidentification". In disidentificatory performances, "the phobic object, through a campy over-the-top performance, is reconfigured as sexy and glamorous; and not as the pathetic and abject spectacle that it

appears to be in the dominant eyes of heteronormative culture" (Muñoz 1994: 3). As a component of post-feminism, resilience discourse demands women perform their damaged femininities as having been overcome—that they make a spectacle of these pathetic and abject traits as things they have left in the past. Aesthetically, resilience co-opts formerly resistant strategies, like cutting or going into the red (two practices Tricia Rose identifies as central to hip hop aesthetics), transforming them from destabilizing practices into ones that reinforce the stability of the status quo. This is what Sia does with her overblown break: she turns her break into an ornament, transforming what is conventionally a flub into a feature. In the way Fetty Wap uses mordant-like turns or Mariah used to use melisma, Sia uses the break in her voice as an ornament. Blowing through her break as we hear her voice crack, Sia recalls Coltrane overblowing his sax. For example, in the build up to the first big hit on "Alive" she switches between a descending glissando and an overblown break to ornament "breathing": on the first and third measures, she uses the former, on the second and fourth, the latter. The hook does the same thing: the first two repetitions she ornaments "i" in "alive" with some descending sixteenth notes, the third repetition she replaces that with an overblown break, and in the final repetition she combines the two. Sia uses this overblown break as an ornament, a kind of intensification of pitch-centric ornaments (like the melisma). As an ornament, her vocal break sonically represents resilience: what traditionally sounds like an error is now the crux of Sia's vocal technique, noise is recycled into signal. Fans and critics interpret her voice this way. For example, Aimee Cliff argues that "her voice sounds like it's constantly hovering on a precipice, rasping, crumbling, and breaking at perfect moments" (2016). Later in her article, Cliff compares women's ownership of their "ugly" voices to women's reclamation of their body image from narrow beauty standards.[16] Cliff concludes her article with the claim that Sia's overblown vocals are a post-feminist victory: "she's liberated a new standard for female voices in major label pop, making it cool, and even desirable, to scream and falter and generally let your voice do whatever you feel like doing". Turning noise into signal, Sia's voice sonifies post-feminist resilience.[17]

Lyrically, "Alive" is all about resilience, about surviving struggle and trauma. Maura Johnson describes it as a "dour bange[r] that emphasize[s] resilience in the face of an uncaring and unfair world" (2016). We hear sonic resilience, but we don't have a woman pop star to attribute it to. It's not scripting a persona's or performer's personal subjectivity. Just like Iggy Azalea's rap accent abstracts sounds from the cultural traditions and lived experiences that they otherwise communicate, Sia's overblown break abstracts the sound of resilience from the discourse that supports it and gives it broad intelligibility. Sia stays within the musical conventions of post-feminist pop, but creates a distance between those sounds and her identity. Her singing *voice* might perform sonic resilience, but Sia the singer doesn't let us attribute that resilience to her as a person or a persona.[18] This interrupts the pedagogical function of EDM-pop's sonic signifiers of resilience (soars and drops) by abstracting the structure of feeling away from the structure of resilient post-feminist subjectivity. This helps us disassociate the pleasure we feel in listening to her sing this way from the structure of feeling—resilience—that we feel at least ambivalent, if not bad, about. Or, the pleasure

we might feel in listening is not the feminine and feminizing pleasure that the performance of resilience produces. This pleasure asks us to experience our bodies in terms outside compulsory femininity. When we enjoy singing and/or hearing it, we're going off script. In this sense, then, Sia's overblown breaks produce pleasures that queer neoliberal white femininity.[19] Separating herself and her identity from the sonic spectacle, Sia undercuts the interpretive move that lets listeners hear the sonic damage in her voice as an expression of her damaged femininity.

Demanding women labor upon themselves to transform their feminine damage into private property, post-feminism co-opts feminist practices like consciousness-raising into a form of enclosure.[20] In this context, women's empowered voices are evidence of that enclosure, a display of self-ownership and personhood-as-property. These displays contribute to a new type of respectability politics wherein only people who display economic success and/or self-ownership of one's sufficiently white, able, and gender-conforming body as private property are recognized as women. Across queer dance music subcultures, mainstream house and techno and Top 40 pop, the women and femme artists studied in this paper have developed various ways of queering post-feminist gender norms by practicing femme voice as something besides enclosure. All of them address post-feminism's "new sexual contract", which restores personhood to women in the form of property-in person and ownership of one's body as sexual property. Sia and bottoms use vocal techniques to perform femininities that refuse the resilient overcoming of sexual objectification in sexual self-ownership, and Decon/Recon's compositional methods disarticulate authorial voice from intellectual property ownership. These are far from the only ways to work around or avoid post-feminism's transformation of feminine gender performance into a practice of enclosure. For example, Ashon Crawley has argued that Billie Holiday and Nina Simone's vocal performance choices in "Strange Fruit" exemplify a black aesthetic tradition that frames versioning other people's material (e.g., covering a song) as contributing to a commons rather than laboring on that material to transform it into one's private property. Similarly, I have argued that black women hip hop artists use extra-vocal sounds to negotiate post-feminist respectability politics, which, as I argued above, use sexual self-ownership to police the boundary between hegemonic and subaltern femininities (James 2017). In all of these cases, sound is the medium for negotiating and performing femininities that don't follow post-feminist gender norms. This may be more than a coincidence. As Jennifer Stoever and I have each individually suggested, because classically liberal approaches to social identities treat them as primarily *visible* phenomena, colorblind racism and post-feminist patriarchy maintain the illusion of equality by emancipating the visual sphere while doubling-down on racialization and gendering in other perceptual registers, especially sound (James 2016; Stoever 2016). Traditionally, liberal democracies relied on uneven distributions of personhood-as-property to maintain the illusion of formal equality before the law amid systemic white supremacist patriarchy. Now that those distributions of personhood-as-property are shifting, sound is a taking on some of the work traditionally performed by those disproportionate distributions. Because we are accustomed to *looking* for inequalities (e.g.,

justice is blind), 21st century liberal democracies sustain the myth of political emancipation and formal equality before the law by hiding white supremacist patriarchy where we can't *see* it: in norms about listening, hearing, speaking and singing, music aesthetics, and so on. This means that popular music studies can make important contributions to the analysis of both contemporary discourses and practices of domination, and the strategies and tactics oppressed groups use to resist and build alternative ways of living. In this article I've addressed how white women and femme EDMC artists in Western liberal democracies use voice to queer post-feminist gender norms. That's a very limited slice of both identities and genres, and there is a lot of ground for future research to cover, both in studying differently-situated people and different genres and in comparative analysis across identity groups and genres.

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Notes

1 I mean "liberalism" in the political philosophy sense of social contractarianism and its variants, not in the vernacular American sense referring to the Democratic Party and the political left.

2 Like all respectability politics, this expectation lets a few extremely privileged women experience some of the benefits otherwise reserved for men, while simultaneously intensifying the oppression and exclusion of multiply marginalized women.

3 Rebekah Farrugia explains the difference between these two types of post-feminism as follows: "Dovetailing with the backlash, the term 'post-feminism' also entered the popular consciousness at this time...to indicate both a rejection of feminism, implying its failure, as well as a time when feminism is no longer necessary, signifying its success" (2012: 39). Two of the three artists I discuss here are loosely within the EDM category that Farrugia discusses in her book on women in EDMC. Farrugia observes that most women DJs and producers she studied rejected overt identifications with feminism. However, her fieldwork was done prior to 2013–14, when post-feminism broke pop music. Thus, I take the women artists I study as responding to a different cultural terrain than the women DJs and producers Farrugia studies.

4 For more on 21st century post-feminism, see Banet-Weiser and Portwood Stacer (2006), Joseph (2009) and Gill (2016).

5 Respectability politics refers to the practice of seeking assimilation to white bourgeois privilege by demonstrating the capacity to embody and perform its norms and expectations. For more on classical respectability politics, see Cohen (1997). For more on post-feminist revisions of respectability politics, see James (2017).

6 The permanence is the main thing that distinguishes marriage contracts from employment contracts, which are also about signing over one's property-in-person to one's employer: employment contracts are limited in duration, both in terms of hours per day or week, and overall.

7 "Improvement" has always been measured in hegemonic terms. This goes all the way back to Locke, who did not recognize Native Americans' use of nature as "improving" it because it didn't transform land into private property. See Mills and Pateman (2013).

8 Critics (Malinowski 2015) still try to attribute specific sounds to individual members of the collective, so they're not entirely successful in altering everyone's habits and desires.

9 See Alcoff (2006).

10 For more on gender and sexuality as a system, see Rubin (1975).

11 That affinity continues on DR1-4. The main melodic voice is staccato, stuttery and clumsy in a way that also recalls Chance's sax playing on "Buy".

12 To be clear, though Reich and Decon/Recon are both addressing composition at the level of background conditions, Decon/Recon aren't using Reichian musical processes. In Reichian gradual processes, the composer articulates a set of background conditions from which sounds emerge. In Decon/Recon's case, they articulate the background conditions in which composers do their work. In the former case, composers address the work's background conditions; in the latter case, artists address the background conditions of composers and composition.

13 Notably, Hoby contrasts Sia's anonymity with Kanye's fame, which culminates in "face so recognisable and so emblematic of celebrity that the world, god bless it, gave us Coinye West, a bitcoin emblazoned with the rapper's image. This is the man who married the woman most famous for being famous and then reportedly spent four days of his honeymoon retouching the image, until his and Kim's faces were perfectly ready for the Instagram history they made (2,347,389 "likes" and counting)" (Hoby 2014). Here, Kanye's fame manifests as both money-property and marriage-property, including the access to a woman as sexual property. Hoby's choice of counterexample is further evidence that audiences interpret Sia's anonymity in gendered terms connected to women's property-in-person and use of their body as sexual property.

14 Here's the full quote: "Most of the songs, if not all of them, I wrote for other people and they were rejected. Generally, they're songs that aren't from my perspective, so it feels like acting. I have rejects from Rihanna, Shakira, Beyoncé [Knowles], Demi Lovato, all the good girls, [and] Katy [Perry]", she said of the tunes on This Is Acting, noting her private persona also comes into play (Spanos 2015).

15 In this case, the repeated performance of a structure doesn't remake us in its image. So this is the opposite of Butler's theory of how performance works to create the gendered body as such.

16 Citing Sasha Geffen, Cliff argues that although conventionally "Like it does with women's bodies, popular culture permits a narrow range of acceptable beauty in women's voices,' it seems like it's no longer taboo for a woman to sound like she's near-breakdown on a huge pop anthem—it's a cause for celebration. Female artists, more and more, are actively allowing imperfections and limit-pushing moments into their records" (2016).

17 I'm not arguing that Sia is the first to use 'flawed' vocals. What's new is the way critics and fans evaluate that technique. The quote here treats Sia as setting a standard to which others should aspire, not as a rebel or an outlier. This parallels the shift in attitudes toward feminism: it makes a girl normal, not an anti-social revolutionary.

18 It's possible to interpret Sia's refusal of resilience as an attempt to overcome resilience discourse itself. However, as I argue in *Resilience & Melancholy*, the spectacular performance of feminized damage is the first step or element of neoliberal resilience—opening oneself up and displaying one's vulnerabilities for others is key. Sia's silence about her inner self doesn't fit this formula. She's not practicing a type of meta-resilience (i.e., a resilient overcoming of resilience discourse) because she's not showing us how resilience discourse has harmed her and then overcoming that.

19 This isn't the first time Sia has experimented with sonic resilience and written it off-script. She wrote "Diamonds", the Rihanna song that I use as my definitive example of sonic melancholy in *Resilience & Melancholy*. "Diamonds" has an undercut soar, a soar that never intensifies, a soar that never comes through with the overcoming of sonic damage soars usually produce.

20 Enclosure refers to the transformation of the commons into private property. According to eighteenth century English philosopher John Locke, enclosure happens when one labors upon unimproved or "natural" material; mixing your self with it, it becomes part of your person, and thus your private property (Locke 1988). For more on enclosure see Bloomey (2007).

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