

'The Pleasure Is All Mine:' Music and Female Sexual Autonomy

On her recently released CD *Medúlla* the singer Björk has a song entitled “The Pleasure is all mine” stressing both pleasure in itself, the pleasures of women in particular, and above all the pleasure of doing something for others. Pleasure, to Björk, is something you yourself enjoy but it is always related to an other. With this ambivalent emphasis on self and other Björk – unwittingly – places herself in the middle of a debate of current feminist philosophy, namely that of relational autonomy. Against the critique of postmodern writers who see the subject as discursive citation, decentered, multiple or even as dead, feminist philosophers such as Catriona Mackenzie, Natalie Stoljar but also Paul Benson and Marilyn Friedman claim the existence of a subject position allowing autonomy.¹ However, this feminist notion of autonomy is different from the classical tradition. Feminists have often criticized this classical notion for its mere focus on the individual and on reason and therefore defamed it as a traditionally ‘male’ model. The philosophy of relational autonomy, in contrast, is informed both by some arguments of poststructuralism and by care ethics.² In opposition to most feminists, these feminist philosophers argue for the importance of autonomy in order to understand oppression and agency. But they modify the individualistically shaped notion by intentionally stressing a multilevel perspective on persons as emotional, embodied, desiring, creative, and feeling, as well as rational creatures. It is their common belief

that persons are socially embedded and that agent’s identities are formed within the context of social relations and shaped by a complex of intersecting social determinants, such as race, class, gender, and ethnicity. Thus the focus of relational approaches is to analyze the implications of the intersubjective and social dimensions of selfhood and identity for conceptions of individual autonomy and moral and political agency. (Mackenzie and Stoljar 3)

One of the key terms in this philosophy is *self-determination*, including the self-determination of oppressed groups. Diana Meyers analyzes the autonomy of people of a subordinated group who are yet able to reach autonomous decisions. She points out that autonomy is always a question of *degrees* and never overall and complete. Put simply: in some aspects

¹ Cf. the anthology *Relational Autonomy* edited by Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar.

² An excellent introduction to care ethics is *Justice and Care: Essential Readings in Feminist Ethics* edited by Virginia Held. Feminist inspired by the care perspective draw on the work of Carol Gilligan and Nancy Chodorow (cf. Gilligan; Chodorow) and focus on caring relations among persons, rejecting the isolated atomism of justice-based ethical concepts. For these theorists it is important to recognize autonomy as compatible with maintaining the relations of care and dependence that they characterize as valuable components of female agency. Jennifer Nedelsky writes that “the most promising model, symbol or metaphor for autonomy is child rearing. There we have encapsulated the emergence of autonomy through relationships with others.” (Nedelsky 12) – The issues raised by care critiques are only to some extent continuous with the project of articulating a relational conception of autonomy. In focusing “primarily on intimate dyadic relations, particularly between mother and child, care critiques provide a very circumscribed reconceptualization of autonomy.” (Mackenzie and Stoljar 10).

people are oppressed and limited, in other aspects they are autonomous. There are only higher and lower degrees of autonomy (cf. Meyers 151-180).³

People are formed within the context of social relations and intersecting determinants. Therefore, relational approaches focus on the implications of the intersubjective dimensions of selfhood for conceptions of individual autonomy. Relational autonomy thus emphasizes two coordinates: on the one hand, the concrete context forming values, desires, images (including self-images) – this is the relational part – and, on the other hand, the space that is *beyond* this influence. Central for this space – and this makes up the autonomous dimension – are the capabilities of critical reflection and self-reflection as well as feelings, memory, and imagination. Relationally conceived autonomy thus does not imply that one creates values and desires *ex nihilo* or that one mysteriously escapes altogether from social influences but rather that one is able to fashion a certain response to it.

To me, when trying to break away from oppressing stereotypes, including sexual stereotypes, it is not merely critical reflection but the *imagination* that is of the greatest importance. The imagination has the function of associating various images, both images coming from memory (that is individual and collective memory) and images of reality. But the imagination can go beyond these images in rearranging them in new ways, in creatively combining images from different areas. The imagination, therefore, has the potential of using past and present for hinting towards a different, possibly less stereotyped and less oppressive future.⁴ To make it very clear: The imagination is a relational capacity, and artist – as will be shown, for example, the musician Peaches, the performance artist Jennifer Miller, the band Tribe 8, and the Blues woman Ida Cox – have used their imagination by taking up academic, political, and musical texts in order to create subversive images, performances, and lyrics that go beyond the heterosexist and normative mainstream.⁵

So when analyzing women musicians dealing with sexual liberation against this theoretical backdrop, the following questions will be central: In which way do these musicians pick up persistent stereotypes and to which degree do they go beyond stereotypes in their imaginative projects? Which different dialogues play into these projects, both within a

³ Meyers even considers members of a subordinated group as particularly well suited in the striving for autonomy: “If members of subordinate social groups are more likely to experience alienation from some of their group identities than members of privileged social groups, they may be more disposed to critically assess the values and practices of different groups. Although other factors may counteract this disposition and neutralize this advantage, alienation may give individuals from subordinate social groups both a psychological incentive and an epistemic boost in seeking autonomy.” (Meyers 177).

⁴ However, it is important to point out that the imagination can be escapist and, therefore, is not *necessarily* liberating. There is always a reciprocal relationship between the imagination and the world.

⁵ This concept resonates with Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism, which claims firstly that there is neither a first word or image nor a last one and secondly that the self cannot exist without the other. It thirdly shows that one expressive area – such as the carnival – can influence a completely different area such as literature, and fourthly that the body is also part of a dialogical relationship, a relationship between body, mind, and the world.

musical tradition and from academic fields, such as feminist theory or Disabilities Studies? How do these practices enter into and revise dialogues already in progress? And finally, which role does the body play?

In order to illustrate what I think of as a common sexual stereotype I would point to magazines including *Cosmopolitan*, which even in the late 20th century asked questions such as ‘How to please your man,’ then giving the hardly original answer: ‘Fake an incredible orgasm.’ Such answers show how heterosexist our society still is, that his pleasure is more important than hers (in other words: the pleasure is all *his*) and that the orgasm, that is: his orgasm is put center stage.

For the last few years women have increasingly and publicly presented themselves as equal to men and self-determined in important areas – including sexuality. Especially since the late 1990s signs of a positive change can be seen, reflecting growing numbers of women’s consumption of music. (cf. O’Brien ch. 5) Yet, as many experts of the music industry claim, when looking at music production, women are still ‘exiles in guyville.’⁶ The assertion of Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie that women are most successful when they conform to the same “singer/songwriter/folkie lady” mode (and having the “diva” model as the main alternative) still holds true today. (cf. Frith and McRobbie 377) Music – just as any other sphere of symbolic interaction – is caught up with gender ideology: “The goal of producing a commercially successful media product has colored the ways audiences are perceived and addressed [...] and a design intent on perpetuating the social condition of gender inequality.” (Lewis 5, 55) As a consequence, just as Theodor Adorno argued against popular music in the 1940s because he considered it as “social cement” instead of making listeners pursue “really new experiences,” (Adorno 39) some women have argued that popular music cements the status quo and is not capable of having subversive potential.⁷

Some women musicians, however, do think it possible and necessary to work against gender inequality and for sexual self-definition from within the music industry. One of these singers is the Canadian musician Peaches. She thinks that women have to fight for more self-determination with respect to their bodies, their sexuality, and their music. In this fight Peaches not only uses her music (what you might call a punk low-fi-minimalism) and lyrics but also her performances and even the visual makeup of her CDs.⁸ In some of her concerts as on the cover of her second CD (*Fatherfucker*, 2003), she wears a faked beard. She thereby

⁶ Cf., e.g., Gracyk: “Shifting our focus from consumption of music to its creation, we see that women face far more barriers to participation than do men. Hurdles range from active harassment to latent prejudice” (170).

⁷ An example is Lydia Lunch of the New York punk scene with the band Teenage Jesus and the Jerks. Lunch did not find the punk scene progressive enough when it came to sexuality and therefore encouraged women to distance themselves from the music industry and to turn to poetry and performance art instead.

⁸ For the growing importance of visual material in the music industry see Cynthia Fuchs: “Music and images are interdependent (especially given their marriage in marketing campaigns, film and music videos): for all the sound, rhythm, and noise that music brings to the world, it also generates and is generated by graphic elements.” (Fuchs 178-79).

stresses and critiques the pressure for women to rid themselves of much of their bodily hair in order to be considered beautiful and sexy. Peaches is against such limiting stereotypes, against such pressure.

That women should not be the *object* of sexual pleasure is also emphasized on a verbal level, for example by the neologism of such words as fatherfucker. In general, her lyrics are about sex, they are outspoken, vulgar, and funny. She wants to irritate but she also wants to amuse – both her female *and* her male audience. She wants people to be able to go beyond stereotypes, enjoy themselves, and have fun, to see themselves as sexual beings on equal terms. This kind of equality can also be seen (or rather heard) in one of her songs in which she asks the women to “shake yer tits,” but likewise the men to “shake yer dix” (which she has chosen as the title of this song). Thus, Peaches will only be happy when *everybody*, that is heterosexual women, lesbians, and all men are able to say “the pleasure is all mine.”

It is no surprise that Peaches distanced herself from her early career as a singer/songwriter. Just as she appropriates the beard and (a traditionally ‘male’) sexual assertiveness, she musically fits into a tradition dominated by men. As music experts argue, early punk represented the moment when rock became self-conscious and destabilized the mainstream, “creating a space in popular music for expressing a radically alternative identity.” (Gracyk 35-36)⁹

In trying to create this space for alternatives as well as in pointing out the constructedness of both male and female sexuality and of beauty norms, Peaches’ imaginative projects not only take up *feminist* arguments but also aspects of Disability Studies. Disability Studies resist interpretations of certain bodily configurations as deviant and a simple either/or-dualism, pointing out that we are *all* more or less able to do certain things – and this is, of course, changing: as we grow older there will be more things we are not able to do. Disability Studies also question the enforcement of universalizing norms, including sexual norms, interrogate the politics of appearance, and explore the politics of naming, of naming someone as lacking something (for example, as Freud defined women as lacking a penis) or having too much of something (for example facial hair) instead of naming a person as simply different.

Not just Peaches but also the New-York-based performance-artist Jennifer Miller is part of this debate on physical and sexual pluralism and difference. Miller places herself in the tradition of the Bearded Ladies that participated in American Freak Shows. Leslie Fiedler calls women like Jennifer Miller “neo-feminists” and assumes “that even now more Bearded Ladies choose careers as Freaks than as Revolutionaries.” (Fiedler 143) That *freak* and revolutionary

⁹ See also Laing.

or rebel do not have to be mutually exclusive and that they certainly do not exclude each other in the case of Miller is analyzed by Rachel Adams in her book *Sideshow U.S.A.* With her imagination, Miller consciously puts together aspects of the classical freak show, music, entertainment, and discussions (discussions reminiscent of feminist consciousness-raising), often about sexuality and lesbian sexuality in particular.

Miller also produces both sonic and visual material, such as the photograph called “Pin Up # 1: Jennifer Miller Does Marilyn Monroe.”¹⁰ You don’t have to read the name of the



photograph to realize that it is an adaptation of the earlier picture of Marilyn Monroe. In this regard it bears pointing out that the cultural perception of *bodies* is obviously not separated from *sexual* stereotypes: Marilyn Monroe’s picture is from the first *Playboy* of 1949.



With this reference to early pin ups and to *the* sex-symbol of America, Miller underlines that she is self-determined in feeling sexually desirable and that she defines herself as such despite the fact that American society at large would never ever name a woman with a beard and hairy body as sexy. Thus, both Miller and Peaches take up arguments of academic and political debates and create subversive images and texts that go beyond the heterosexist, normative and close-minded mainstream.

Musically – I would argue – Peaches is influenced both by a (‘male’) punk rock tradition and by riot girls/grrrls, especially the type of riot girl that has become known as Queercore or dyke punk rock, as the band Tribe 8, for example, calls its music.¹¹

The lyrics, the music and the performances of Tribe 8 are all meant to provoke and to stimulate. Tribe 8 mainly criticizes two groups: chauvinist males and the radical feminists of the late 1970s and 80s. Their gender bashing is usually kept to a minimum, in favor of sexual preferences, but in their song about male bonding called “Frat Pig” (from *Fist City*, 1995) they have a retaliatory stance, singing: “frat pig/it's called gang-rape/we're gonna play a game/called gang castrate.” So here they are working against the common image of women as passive and as the victims. However, what interests the band even more is struggling against the fact that second-wave’s radical feminists themselves proclaimed this image of women as always sweet, and female sexuality as always soft. Therefore, they make fun of

¹⁰ This photograph taken by Zoe Leonard has been shown in New York’s Paula Cooper Gallery in 1995 (cf. Leonard).

¹¹ Other Queercore bands are Team Dresch, Random Violet, The Mudwimmin, The Third Sex, The Butchies, The Vegas Beat, and Sleater-Kinney.

Johanna Lee's folk song "women's love," which was famous in the 1970s, by quoting ironically and with a nasal voice: "women's love it's so friendly/women's love like herbal tea." In this polemic song called "Neanderthal Dyke" (also from *Fist City*), they go beyond a criticism of other musicians and directly address academic feminism by stating: "i never read Dworkin/[...] i never read MacKinnon [...] my political consciousness is fried and i'm not exactly women identified/i don't give a shit i just want to get laid/by curvy little hot and sexy eye-liner babes/[...] maybe if you gave all the p.c. shit a rest/you'd get yourself some action/instead of being such a pest."¹² Tribe 8 underlines that violence is also part of lesbian relationships, part of women's sexual fantasies and practices. With their imaginative project Tribe 8 has also become part of a debate that not only criticized radical feminism, but has also created a new strand, the so-called pro-sex feminism. This, in the Bakhtinian's sense, is a dialogic debate. The women of Tribe 8 loudly and aggressively *screams* "the pleasure is all mine!" As Peaches does, Tribe 8 refuses the image of the nice vocalists; the band consists only of women, including the drummer and guitarist. Hereby they stress their opposition to stereotypes of women. With their music, lyrics, and performances they cross borders and criticize common images of mainstream discourse and strands of feminism.

Very much in the same vein and against the same kind of feminism popular in the 1980s, which has jokingly been called the "missionary position of feminism," (Gayle Rubin qtd. in Ross 185) Madonna has created images, songs, and videos to encourage women's sexual autonomy and pro-sex feminism. She is the best example that these discourses are not only possible in punk or underground music but also in the top of the pops. Madonna is probably the best-known woman in popular music whose early years have been forged in the representations of sexualities, both "straight" and "queer," and who has consistently celebrated sexual assertiveness and explicitness.¹³

In her 1990 released video "Justify My Love"¹⁴ Madonna shows a series of erotic fantasies underlining sex-positive identity, desire, subjective agency, and queerness. As the female protagonist of the video Madonna is in the position of supreme control: In the first scene on the bed she pushes her lover away saying "not like this" and in the following scene is in bed with an androgynous woman. By being in control she breaks down the notion of the woman as passive, which has been so prevalent in much mainstream discourse. Madonna displays what pro-sex feminism fought for in the years before the video came out: saying "I – not you – own me and my body," emphasizing women's sexual agency, choice, and radical pluralism including sex practices as S/M, fetishism, homosexuality, voyeurism, and role playing.

¹² Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon are the two most notorious feminists of the anti-pornography camp and *the* icons of 1980s radical feminism.

¹³ Even as recently as 2003 she created a debate by kissing Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera at the 20th MTV Video Music Awards.

¹⁴ The video directed by Mondino Jean-Baptiste was banned by MTV due to its sexual explicitness.

Hereby, Madonna points to different kinds of erotic pleasure, privileging indeterminacy – both of gender (especially in the scenes showing cross-dressing) and of the sex object and practice. It is also apparent that on another level she is saying that the erotic need not be linked to genital sex, or, for that matter, be linked to actual acts at all. The whole video can be read as a string of fantasies the female protagonist is having while masturbating in the hallway and then in the end walking down the hall, giggling about her ‘shocking’ imagination. And she parodies the romantic myth by beginning the song with the lines “I wanna kiss you in Paris – I wanna hold your hand in Rome” and confronting these lines by explicitly focusing on transgressive sexuality and stressing the possibility of multiple pleasures, thereby disrupting any sense of normative heterosexuality and romanticism.¹⁵ While wanting to justify transgressive sex, the quotation at the end suggests that one does not necessarily need other people’s approval: “Poor is the man whose pleasures depend on the permission of another.” Madonna thus implies that pleasure can reside in the domain of fantasy:¹⁶ “The pleasure is *all mine*.”

In their emphasis on sexual self-assertiveness and affirmation of aggression and pleasure, an important influence both on Madonna and on Queercore and the riot grrrl movement in general comes from African-American women rappers such as Queen Latifah, Salt’N’Pepa, Roxanne Shanté, Monie Love, MC Lyte, and TLC. However, that these musicians were very imaginative and went beyond common stereotypes earlier than white musicians has not been acknowledged by the media and seldom by academic writing, including feminist discourse.¹⁷

It has obviously been even more difficult for black women to show their black body with a self-defined gesture, to present themselves as sexual *subjects* and not objects of desire. This is the very reason why – as Tricia Rose claims in her groundbreaking book *Black Noise* – the arena of sexual politics is “the black woman’s rapper central contestation.” (Rose 147) An example given by Rose is MC Lyte’s hit “Paper Thin” (from *Lyte as a Rock*, 1988) on male infidelity and dishonesty, and the tension between trust and vulnerability in heterosexual relations. After the separation from an unfaithful partner, Lyte does not put men down in general but takes over control of the dating game and sets the tone of the interaction with her next date, which she expresses in the final stanza of the song: “I do not touch until the third or fourth date/Then maybe we’ll kiss on the fifth or sixth time that we meet/Cause a date

¹⁵ Some feminists have criticized the video for still privileging heterosex(uality) and for being nothing more than a sophisticated version of sexual tourism, a short visit in the world of sexual kinkiness, primarily using and capitalizing on the allure of screened sexual activity. Even if one agrees with this critique one has to admit that Madonna challenges male dominance and displays female sexual autonomy.

¹⁶ However, I do find the phrase also troubling in that it also has the potential to authorize people to disregard consent.

¹⁷ This led the critic Hazel Carby to the charges that white-dominated feminism has marginalized nonwhite women and questions of black sexuality (cf. 9-22).

without a kiss is so incomplete/And then maybe, I'll let you play with my feet/You can suck the big toe and play with the middle/It's so simple unlike a riddle.”

Even more explicit in their public display of physical and sexual freedom are Salt'N'Pepe, for example in their rap duet “Shake Your Thang” (from *A Salt with a Deadly Pepe*, 1988), in which they sing: “It's my thang and I'll swing it the way that I feel, with a little seduction and some sex appeal.” They show their black body as beautiful, self-defined and a place for pleasure. And as in most women's rap songs you do not find a gender bashing but rather a criticism of certain aspects of male behavior. Similarly, Queen Latifah's song “Ladies first” (from her debut album *All Hail the Queen*, 1989), is not a general attack on black men, but a celebration of black women and their contributions in the history of black struggle (cf. Rose 164). The video opens with slides of black female activists Sojourner Truth, Angela Davis and Winnie Mandela, then coming to the most important passage: “Some think we can't flow (can't flow)/Stereotypes they got to go (got to go)/I'm gonna mess around and flip the scene into reverse/With what?/With a little touch of ladies first.” In their struggle to subvert stereotypes these women rappers are mostly in dialogue with each other and with the male part of the black community. With them, it should be noted, they seem to share a rather strong homophobia. Sexual freedom and pleasure in women rappers' terms is *heterosexual* freedom and pleasure.

This might come as a surprise because female rappers include aspects of an earlier tradition in their imaginative projects, and those are the blues women of the 1920s and '30s, who were outspoken in talking, that is singing, about both the difficulties and joys of lesbian and bisexual love. (cf. Davis 3; Lieb 123) These women, also called Wild Women or Hot Mamas, were the first to publicly sing about women's sexual desire, celebrating women's strength, female sexual autonomy, and at least at times their independence. However, they also expressed the complexities of hetero- and homosexual relationships, such as longing for an absent or unfaithful partner, and they even sang about staying with an abusive man because he happens to be an incredible lover.

Blues women did what now is called the strategy of resignification, that is giving positive meaning to a term or image that generally was meant to degrade or hurt, such as the word queer, which has now been rid of its negative connotations.¹⁸ These women not only used moaning and groaning as part of their music but also crude words and images in a self-assertive and even celebratory style. Both their language and lifestyles, traveling around from place to place, underline their autonomy and their challenge to the traditional notions of femininity that they were facing at their time. Blues women also challenged what second wave feminists later called the double standard, namely that men could have uncommitted

¹⁸ Cf. Butler.

sex while women lost their reputation if they did so. In some songs blues women explicitly reject the sexual exclusivity of marriage – or marriage all together.

Ida Cox, for example, refuses to romanticize heterosexual relationships and instead focuses on sexual desire. Furthermore, she is part of the classic Blues tradition in making use of humor, revealing its historic roots in slave music, wherein indirect methods of expression (such as using animal metaphors) were the only means by which the oppression of slavery could be denounced. As the following passages of Ida Cox's song "One Hour Mama" (from a session recorded with her All Star Band in New York in 1939) exemplify, her lyrics can be seen as a strong contrast to a sexuality privileging male desire over female fulfillment, of telling women to fake an incredible orgasm:

I don't want no lame excuses bout my lovin being so good,
That you couldn't wait no longer, now I hope I'm understood.
I'm a one hour mama, so no one minute papa
Ain't the kind of man for me.
[...]
I can't stand no crowin rooster, what just likes a hit or two,
Action is the only booster of just what my man can do.
I don't want no imitation, my requirements ain't no joke,
Cause I got pure indignation for a guy whats lost his stroke,
[...]
I may want love for one hour, then decide to make it two.
Takes an hour 'fore I get started, maybe three before I'm through.
I'm a one hour mama, so no one minute papa,
Ain't the kind of man for me.

As some of today's women musicians try on their terms and in their social context to subvert sexual stereotypes, I think one could sum up this tradition building on the legacy of early Blues women like Ida Cox, who were the first to musically encourage female autonomy, queer desire, and sexual freedom, as follows: "The pleasure *should* be mine, and if it is not, you ain't the kind of lover for me."

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