Sounding the Arcane: Contemporary Music, Gender and Reproduction

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Reproduction is a central but largely unquestioned concept in sound and music studies, where it is typically used to refer to the capture, mediation, repetition, and distribution of sound via practices and processes of recording. However, reproduction has a variety of other meanings and connotations. In this article, I develop an expanded notion of reproduction as a critical apparatus through which to address contemporary music, its gendered formations, and its connection to contemporary social life. Drawing on theories of reproductive labour, I argue that contemporary music is sustained by an ‘arcane’ of reproduction values (Fortunati 1995), which helps secure its gendered formation. This arcane consists of naturalised, and often unwaged work necessary to the (re)production of artists, their musical activities, and life under capitalism.

Considerations of reproductive labour and social reproduction are largely absent from studies of music and capitalism, which tend to focus on conditions of musical
production, distribution, and consumption (Taylor 2016). Yet there is plenty of evidence of music’s imbrication with formations, activities, and relations associated with reproduction: from popular music’s narratives of love, family, and motherhood to Spotify’s mood-oriented playlists that promise to provide listeners with the ‘boost’ they need to carry on in life and work (Rekret 2017; Drott 2019). These might be considered more obvious starting points for an interrogation of music and social reproduction. However, it is precisely because of contemporary music’s apparent disjuncture with reproduction that I begin here: reproduction is the ‘arcane’ of contemporary music, insofar as it often remains out of earshot. When music’s relationship with social reproduction has been addressed within musicological and ethnomusicological scholarship, it has often been predicated on a Bourdieusian framework, which focuses on the role of education and cultural institutions in perpetuating unequal social relations. (Bull 2019; Burnard et al 2015; Green 1997; Wright 2016) While there are certainly points of convergence with Bourdieu’s notion of social reproduction, I build upon an alternative theoretical lineage that is found primarily within Marxist feminist scholarship, which emphasises the imbrication of capitalist exploitation, and gender and racial oppression. With this, I connect contemporary music with the social division of labour; and ostensibly non-musical reproductive activities and concerns, including cleaning, childcare, and access to housing. In doing so, I aim to provide an alternative theorization of contemporary music, gender, and social inequality that intersects with, but extends beyond questions of representation and inclusion. Indeed, as I seek to demonstrate, social reproduction can be used as a framework both for analysing specific musical pieces, and for understanding the changing organisation, circulation, and effects of contemporary music.

In attending to the relationship between reproduction, contemporary music, and gender, this article is partly a response to the emerging body of critical scholarly work that has sought to expand the purview of art history through an attention to feminist theories of reproduction and, in doing so, demystify the conditions of artistic production (Dimitriaki and Lloyd 2017; Stakemeier and Vishmidt 2016). Although contemporary music has an aesthetic and social history distinct from contemporary art, I consider ongoing feminist discussions of artistic labour, reproduction, and value also to be applicable to contemporary music, insofar as it shares contemporary art’s historical relationship to artistic autonomy (which is to say, its formal exceptionalism as a mode of production). Contemporary music, like contemporary art, concerns a distinct relationship between artist, labour, and value that diverges from other capitalist modes of production. Likewise, contemporary music, like contemporary art, works to conceal its own relationship to labour. Conversely, this article seeks to highlight the centrality of labour to contemporary music. However, labour does not only refer to the creative activities of the artist, musician, or composer but also to forms of productive and reproductive labour that may sustain these creative activities.
This article begins with an account of contemporary music’s ideological attachment to the temporal coordinates of the ‘now’ and the ‘new’, which are central to its (re)production as a discursive formation. I suggest that these temporal coordinates provide a complex terrain upon which to think about contemporary music in terms of reproduction, insofar as its ‘newness’ is often imagined in terms of non-, un-, or anti-reproducibility. Drawing on analyses by Tara Rodgers and Rebecca Lentjes, I identify the gendered implications of bracketing creative innovation from reproduction. Contra this separation, I argue that reproduction is a central component of contemporary music as a field of artistic production. Making reference to Marxist feminist theories of social reproduction, I consider the relationship between contemporary music and the ‘arcane’ of reproductive labour, and propose that Áine O’Dwyer’s Music for Church Cleaners functions as a sonic analogue for this relationship. I then consider contemporary music’s implication in processes of social reproduction and the contemporary reproductive crisis, as exemplified by The Industry’s experimental opera Hopscotch. The sonic disruption of the opera by anti-gentrification protesters in the Boyle Heights neighbourhood of Los Angeles amplifies contemporary music’s relation to reproductive crisis and the systemic functionalisation of artistic autonomy.

The Now and the New

Like the categories it shares kinship with—‘modern’, ‘experimental’, ‘avant-garde’—contemporary music resists concise definition. It has been deployed as both a generic descriptor and a critical concept, gesturing towards a specific set of artistic lineages and their audiences. The contemporary might pertain to a creative ethos, a political commitment, or a marketing strategy. Broadly speaking, the contemporary of contemporary music gestures towards a grouping of heterogeneous twentieth- and twenty-first-century European and American compositional and performance practices posited as aesthetically advanced, progressive, experimental, or innovative. Although it has typically referred to musics stemming from academic and art music milieus (e.g. ‘contemporary classical’), there have been attempts to take a more ‘inclusive’ approach, opening it up to include popular, vernacular, and non-European musics that resonate in some way with a modernist valorisation of progress and innovation. Consequently, contemporary music has also occupied a range of socio-economic positions: it has been financed by state and corporate subsidy, as well as circulating within mixed economies of art and commerce (Born 1987, 57).

The contemporary’s lack of specificity—‘its capacity to refer to everything and nothing in particular’—means that it, like many of the other aforementioned categories, risks appearing ‘tired’ (Paddison 2010, 3). As Max Paddison remarks:

Strictly speaking, ‘contemporary’ should mean ‘now’, right up to date, the music of our contemporaries in the twenty-first century. The problem, however, is that ‘contemporary music’ has become a label just like those it has tried to replace in a fast-moving culture—labels like ‘modern’ (from modo, meaning ‘now’, but displaced interestingly by
‘postmodern’) the ‘New’ (so often recycled, so many old ‘New Musics’) and the ‘avant-garde’ (which originally had more specialized meaning to do with pushing boundaries, but is now regarded in some circles as distinctly old-fashioned. (2010, 3)

As this description suggests, the contemporary is produced in close proximity to both the ‘now’ and the ‘new’. With regard to the former, contemporaneity evokes ‘the present’, even though much contemporary music relates to historic ‘presents’ – the recent revival of interest in US composer-performer Julius Eastman’s work, under the rubric of contemporary music, might be considered exemplary in this regard, insofar as Eastman and his work are frequently situated in relation to 1970s New York’s Downtown scene; and understood to embody the racial and sexual politics of his time (Dohoney 2015). Contemporary music is thought to act as a weathervane for its historical moment. Yet, the ‘now’ often carries with it the promise of the ‘new’, whereby ideas of futurity are evoked by the contemporary of contemporary music. The ‘new’, in other words, is ‘now’: the future of music is here. The marketing materials of many contemporary music institutions are instructive in this regard: Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival (HCMF 2018), for example, refers to itself as ‘the largest International festival of new and experimental music’, aiming to provide ‘life-changing and unique experiences’. Similarly, the organisation Contemporary Music for All (CoMA, 2018) cite both the ‘now’ and the ‘new’ when they state that their ‘unique music collection…contains some of the most exciting and rewarding new music being created today’.

These assessments of contemporary music should by no means be accepted at face-value. Benjamin Piekut notes that for American experimentalism, seeking definition via purportedly shared characteristics risks obscuring that the categories used—‘experimentalism’ or, in this instance, ‘contemporary’—are groupings that are made and remade. In other words, to accept these descriptors as given is to fail to recognise the work that lies behind the (re)production of these formations: ‘the combined labor of scholars, composers, critics, journalists, patrons, performers, venues, and the durative effects of discourses of race, gender, nation and class.’ (2011, 7) Nonetheless, for the purposes of the argument being made here, it is pertinent to note that the common conceptualisation of the contemporary via the ‘now’ and ‘new’ provides a complex terrain upon which to think about reproduction. Indeed, reproduction is often posited as antithetical to these commitments, particularly when predicated on linear temporalities of past, present and future: the new and the not-new, the now and the not-now. In Paddison’s account, for instance, an identified contradiction of New Music is that much of it is recycled: reproducibility results in a diminishment of its ‘newness’. Likewise, both CoMA and Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival’s aforementioned marketing materials, aligns the contemporary with uniqueness, that is, the unreproduced and the unreproducible.
The tension between reproduction and the new of contemporary music may also be symptomatic of an Adornian spectre, inasmuch as his writing on music and art continues to shape much thinking about contemporary music’s aesthetic and political ambitions. To provide a brief précis of the Adornian project: music’s relative autonomy from use-value affords it, in its authentic manifestations, a critical distance that enables it formally to reflect the truth of social alienation under capitalism. This distance also gives music the potential to provide a glimpse at how social life might be otherwise. Such ‘serious’ music’s confrontation of contemporary social conditions can be contrasted with repetition, which in Adorno’s framework almost exclusively pertains to stasis and reaction. Repetition is associated with ‘regressive’ musical forms, which range from Stravinsky’s recycling of folk music to his notorious dismissals of jazz and popular music.

Adorno’s notion of repetition is not straightforwardly interchangeable with reproduction. His unfinished Towards a Theory of Musical Reproduction, for example, complicates such a reading: in theorizing the relationship between composition, performance, and musical meaning, he both reiterates and subverts audiophilic conceptions of reproduction in stating that ‘[t]he idea of musical reproduction is the copy of a non-existent original.’ (2006, 153) Reproduction, in this context, pertains to the performance of compositional works: a process of translation that can—or should—bring forth the embedded structure and its truth content. However, a type of reproduction is nonetheless implicated in repetition. For Adorno, repetition is a mechanism through which reactionary formations of contemporary culture are often reinforced: the unwitting reproduction at the level of culture and aesthetics of the economic forces of capitalist homogeneity and social brutality (Vishmidt 2018, 1104). The always-temporary glimmer of the new thus sits in opposition to the reproductions of repetition.

The purported disjuncture between reproduction and the new of the contemporary can also be traced in certain strains of musical practice and their disavowal of the reproductive technics of sound recording. Rebecca Lentjes (2018) has revealed condescension towards the idea of reproduction in twentieth-century composition and accompanying scholarship and discourse. Citing La Monte Young and John Cage’s remarks on recording, including the former’s comment that ‘Some people just want to put out a CD—but for me it’s a waste of time because I’m only interested in producing masterpieces’, Lentjes identifies a sonic economy that posits the singularity of the live musical event or process as superior to the reproduced. The dismissal of recordings, by composers like Young, is underscored in an audiophilic logic, whereby reproduction pertains to a ‘mere’ copy: the ‘masterpiece’ [sic.] can only be experienced in real time. For Lentjes this sonic economy is also gendered, inasmuch as reproduction is frequently feminized through its associations with progeny. The gendering of this sonic economy has also been discussed by Tara Rodgers, who argues that masculinist claims to creation are frequently predicated on ‘masterful’ control, or erasure of the medium—that is, the means of sonic reproduction. Citing the electronic music
documentary, *Modulations for the Ear*, which traces the evolution of electronic music in the twentieth-century as ‘fathered’ by Karlheinz Stockhausen, Rodgers identifies the ways that aesthetic innovation is rendered masculine in its articulation through men’s testimonies (Rodgers notes how the credits list nearly eighty contributors, all of whom are men). The image of the individual and innovative ‘cultural producer’, however, is briefly juxtaposed with that of the anonymized and feminized factory labourer, responsible for the (re)production of mass-produced goods. In such cultural narratives, ‘particular ideologies of sound reproduction circulate unmarked for a particular politics of gender.’ (2010, 15) In the discourses and practices of certain strands of contemporary music, then, a masculinist and modernist valorisation of productivity can be traced, inasmuch as reproduction has been bracketed from the generation of the new.³

**Contemporary music’s arcane**

Contemporary music’s relationship with reproduction is contradictory, insofar as the disavowal of production and reproducibility, and an ideological attachment to the ‘now’ and the ‘new’ have been central to its (re)production as a discursive formation. Yet reproduction is also central to contemporary music as a material practice, which is to say, a mode of artistic production. If, as Marx and Engels elucidate, the first premise of all human existence and, therefore, of all history is ‘that men [sic] must be in a position to live in order to be able to “make history”’ (2004, 48), then this might be adapted – somewhat crudely – so as to state: ‘artists must be in a position to live in order to ‘make music’. With this remark, Marx and Engels gesture towards the relationship between production, broadly conceptualised (i.e. the making of history) and reproduction – the modes and relations of life-making and maintenance. However, despite being identified as ‘the first premise of all human existence’, reproduction is not ahistorical. Rather, modes and relations of production and reproduction are specific to their social situation.

While historically specific, the activities, relations, and social formations that serve to make and maintain ‘life’ and, with it, the capacity for production are often gendered and racialised. Indeed, Marxist feminist analyses of social reproduction – the domain of life-making and maintenance – have sought to illustrate the co-constitution of economic exploitation and social oppressions (Bhattacharya 2017). In considering how the gendered and racialised sphere of ‘unproductive’ socially reproductive labour relates to the generation of capitalist accumulation, moreover, these analyses have sought to provide a necessary corrective to a historically dominant Marxist focus on wage labour in the sphere of production (Federici 2012; Fortunati 1995; Mies 2014). In this context, reproduction refers to the affective and material activities undertaken to sustain current and future workers, as well as those excluded from waged work: it concerns caring for oneself and for others, maintaining domestic and other communal spaces and managing resources. Feminist theorists and activists have drawn attention to the naturalised and largely unwaged ‘arcane’ of reproductive labour that is undertaken in addition to—or instead of waged work, amplifying its gendered character as that which is disproportionately performed by women. In Leopoldina Fortunati’s *The
Arcane of Reproduction, she notes how, with the emergence of capitalism, ‘reproduction is separated off from production… now the general process of commodity production appears as being separate from, or even in direct opposition to, the process of reproduction.’ With this, ‘[r]eproduction now becomes posited as “natural” production’. (1995, 8) Furthermore, feminist theorizations of reproduction have highlighted how capitalist modes of production and reproduction have both relied upon and reinforced social hierarchies of race, gender, disability, and sexuality, inasmuch as reproductive labour and access to the means of reproduction (e.g. housing, healthcare, food security, clean water) are unevenly distributed (Bhattacharya 2017; Mies 2014). In this regard, social reproduction also concerns the maintenance of social inequality under capitalism.

There are some notable similarities between contemporary music as a field of artistic production and socially reproductive labour. Both, for example, are often framed as ‘non-work’, driven by love, passion or commitment. Where the socio-historic specificities of musical labour are frequently concealed via tropes of ‘effortlessness’, presented as a direct outgrowth of individual genius and natural talent (Miller 2008), the socio-historic specificities of reproductive labour are naturalised via tropes of maternal sacrifice, and presented as a direct outgrowth of gendered ‘biological destiny’. Likewise, both socially reproductive labour and contemporary music have an unusual relationship with the commodity form. Where contemporary music has had relative autonomy from use-value, insofar as it exists as a mode of artistic production, socially reproductive labour has been held as having relative autonomy from exchange-value insofar as reproductive labour remains ‘non-valued’, as the production of ‘pure use-values’ (Fortunati 1995, 10-11). The activities of both social reproductive labour and contemporary music, then, have—historically speaking—not been directly determined by the rules of the market.

However, in spite – or perhaps because – of these similarities, there remains an antagonism between contemporary music’s normative relations of production and socially reproductive labour. Indeed, notwithstanding the risk of generalisation and simplification, the uneven gendered distributions of reproductive labour can be understood as a contributing factor to the enduring gendered formations of contemporary music. As has already been suggested, the feminization of reproduction and, by extension, the masculinization of productivity has served to reinforce long-standing gendered divisions of artistic labour within musical discourses. Indeed, the histories of contemporary music are frequently articulated via what I have described elsewhere as a predominantly white, patrilineal ‘dotted line’ of creative innovators. (Thompson 2016; see also Rodgers 2010) This ‘dotted line’ both naturalizes experimentation and innovation as a masculinist domain, and secures a hierarchy of artistic labour, whereby composition is amplified and the ‘reproductive’ work of educators, archivists, musicians, curators, technicians, publishers, carers, assistants, and
many others is comparatively silenced. Notably, Suzanne Cusick has discussed the historic attempts in American culture to counter the potential conflation of musicology as ‘women’s work.’ To this end, Patrick Valiquet (2017) has noted the devaluation of contemporary music’s reproductive labourers within its own histories. In his critical account of Quebec educator Marcelle Deschênes and her role in the early dissemination of Pierre Schaeffer’s theoretical work, Valiquet argues that Deschênes’ definitive role in the development of acousmatic thought in Quebec has been neglected, in part due to the musicological tendency to privilege composition over the reproductive labour of teaching. In Valiquet’s account, attention to the work of educators such as Deschênes facilitates a reconsideration of the constitutive social dynamics of acousmatic praxis.

These gendered formations, however, are not only discursive. While women have been, and continue to be active as producers, there is a tension between, on the one hand, the unwavering ‘commitment’ required to participate in historically normative conditions of production in contemporary music—from often-romanticised artistic precarity to late-night working and the need to travel—and the unwavering ‘commitment’ of reproductive labour, which simultaneously requires both stability and flexibility. Where the creation of contemporary music can stretch into ‘unwaged’ leisure-time, reproductive labour occupies a similar temporal domain, often being undertaken in unwaged time as ‘second-shift’ work: as such, the latter can be understood as a restriction on the former. This tension is by no means unique to contemporary music. Lucy Green, for example, notes how interviewees in a variety of sources about music-making ‘come back again and again to the stress invoked by trying to have children and hold a family and marriage together while being an amateur or a professional musician.’ (1997, 50 n.38). She argues that:

Marriage and child-rearing are themes which run throughout the musical history of women. There are a considerable number of cases in many countries from at least the sixteenth century onwards throughout the classical tradition, and from the beginnings of jazz and popular music, of women who gave up or appear to have given up their musical activities upon marriage. (Green 1997, 50 n.38)

Of course, not all women are mothers; and not all women conform to heterosexual expectations of family and childcare. Such is the case for some of the most ‘audible’ women in contemporary music (for example, Pauline Oliveros, Wendy Carlos, Daphne Oram). Nor do all women have the same amount of caring responsibilities. There are some whose economic position enables them effectively to outsource reproductive labour to others who take care of children and elders, cook, clean, and manage households on their behalf. However, as the composer Emily Doolittle suggests, ‘all women may find themselves affected by an anti-mother bias’. She writes:

It’s still shockingly common to hear of women composers being passed over for positions because it is assumed that they’ll get married,
have kids, and give up composing, or of mentors refusing to write letters of recommendation for female students until they know their reproductive plans. The difficulties associated with being a composer and a mother are, of course, compounded once children actually come into the picture! Finding enough time to compose while earning enough to pay for childcare—in such an underpaid field as composition—is impossible for many, and grants seldom come with funding for childcare. (I just applied for a grant in which the maximum allowable monthly subsistence rate is 30% less than we pay our babysitter per month.) Attending evening concerts—so important, both for musical nourishment and for networking—is difficult, and new music concerts are even more likely than others to start late at night. Residencies are often offered in increments of one month, a prohibitively long period of time for most mothers of young children. (Doolittle 2017)

The uneven distributions and expectations of reproductive labour, organised in accordance with the heterosexual, nuclear family, can thus be understood as one of the material barriers that have served to shape gendered participation in contemporary music.

For Marxist feminists, reproductive labour is not simply the making and maintenance of life—via care work, domestic work and so on. Rather, it concerns, more specifically, the reproduction of labour power: the strange commodity that pertains to the capacity to work that is sold to an employer for a wage. It is important to note, however, that there are some difficulties in applying definitions of reproductive labour—as the reproduction of labour power—to contemporary music. This is due to the complex relationship between contemporary music as a mode of artistic production, and capitalist production as it pertains to the extraction of surplus value and the exploitative exchange of labour power for a wage. As has already been shown, artistic modes of production differ historically from other capitalist modes of commodity production insofar as the relationship between artist, labour, and value is distinct. Accordingly, artists, strictly speaking, do not sell their labour power as do other ‘productive’ waged workers. Yet, in spite of art’s formal exceptionality, contemporary music—as with other modes of artistic production—has remained bound to labour and its social relations. As Marina Vishmidt argues:

Art does…have a relationship to labour: like capital, it appears to be formally (or principally) free from labour, but is utterly dependent on it….Art must be seen as non-labour or transcendent in relation to labour, and this status was codified in what has yet to be fully dispelled – the Romantic-era concept of ‘genius’. (Stakemeir and Vishmidt 2016, 36)
Even if contemporary music is itself not directly sustained through the commodified labour power of the composer, and even if it has a formal freedom due to its ‘uselessness’, it nonetheless remains dependent on various modes of labour, both waged and unwaged. Indeed, many contemporary composers and musicians have supplemented their artistic activities through waged work in other or related arenas: as I have already suggested, composition and performance are often undertaken in addition to or as an extension of waged work. Moreover, if contemporary music and its production not only pertain to the activities the composer or composer-performer but, rather can be situated within a broader network of labour relations, then it can be recognised as containing the labour power of a variety of workers, from commercial electronics manufacturers, administrators, and cleaners, to performing musicians, sound engineers, and curators. Contemporary music as a field of artistic production, then, is sustained through both productive and reproductive labour.

**Playing the arcane: Music for Church Cleaners**

A formal staging of the relationship between musical creativity and reproductive labour can be heard in Áine O’Dwyer’s recorded release *Music for Church Cleaners*. Initially released in 2012 on the cassette label Fort Evil Fruit, and reissued in 2015 by MIE, the seventeen pieces result from O’Dwyer’s improvisatory responses to a graphic score using the pipe organ at St Mark’s Church in Islington, London. Recorded during her Saturday visits to the church in 2011, the pieces contain the noisy traces of the church cleaners who were also at work in the space while O’Dwyer experimented with the instrument. In addition to the sounds of cleaners working, the recording contains the sounds of visiting children and communal gatherings, including a coffee morning with older female parishioners. O’Dwyer’s meandering improvisations are underscored and occasionally punctuated by quiet bangs, clattering, hums, and chatter, contrasting with the timbral gravity of the organ.

According to O’Dwyer, the relationship between her musical work and the cleaner’s labour shifted over the course of the process. In an interview about the release, she states:

> You get little slaps that happen in time with the music, and things I never could have planned or discussed with the cleaners beforehand, just things that happened creating an environment or an atmosphere, which in turn gave me an added awareness of my surroundings while playing. At points, I had intended to play for them, and then sometimes I was making music about them. And aside from the punctuated points where the sounds of their actions actually intercept through the music, I had an awareness of their presence, or non-presence, throughout the sessions. (Connolly 2015)

As O’Dwyer’s description suggests, the sounds of the cleaners and their work primarily manifest as environmental background noise that is played over: their presence fades
in and out of audibility throughout the recording. This might be thought of as a sonic analogue for Marxist feminist descriptions of reproductive labour: as that which is necessary, but often overshadowed by waged, productive, and socially-validated work.

In ‘The Little Lord of Misrule’, bass drones and a melody consisting of arpeggios are underlined by the fuzz of a vacuum cleaner. As with many others on the album, the track has a lack of telos: there is little by the way of tension and resolution. The piercing and reverberant voices of young children can also be heard occasionally to break through O’Dwyer’s meditative organ playing, with one child repeatedly exclaiming ‘look mummy!’ However, the listener remains unable to identify ‘mummy’: it may be her voice remains too low in the mix to be discernible.

These noisy traces that gesture towards the presence of cleaners and parents (specifically ‘mummy’) amplify that which is necessary but usually passed over in silence: the feminized arcane of reproductive labour. O’Dwyer’s piece can be heard to connect reproductive labour to artistic production, facilitating a meeting of the menial and the transcendent, as one review puts it. The nature of this connection, however, requires further critical attention.

It is important to note that O’Dwyer’s pieces are for or about the cleaners, but not by them. The sounds of cleaning (and childcare) are an extra-musical backdrop that is played with or over. The listener can hear sounds of the cleaners’ working but not the cleaners themselves. As is also the case with ‘mummy’ on ‘The Little Lord of Misrule’, their presence is, for the most part, heard indirectly, audibly represented via the sounds of vacuums, knocks, and creaking wood. Furthermore, the making audible of reproductive activities such as cleaning and childcare is not the same as questioning, resisting, or undermining the social character, role, and relations of these activities. Paul Margee credits the sounds of cleaning and children playing as adding ‘an air of unforced naturalism to the recording, which sits surprisingly well with the almost arcane [sic.] music.’ (2015, my emphasis) Margee’s description acts as a reminder of the ways that reproductive labour has often been subject to naturalisation, characterised as an act of love, natural proclivity, or biological necessity. In this regard, Music for Church Cleaners can be heard in relation to some feminist critiques that seek to challenge the reduction of socially reproductive labour to a discrete set of gendered activities and tasks that are valorised as good, useful, or virtuous, rather than denaturalised as such.

(Endnotes 2013; Gogarty 2017) While the ‘noble’ work of church cleaners is made audible, and invoked by the title and some of the release’s artwork – one of the featured images is a woodcut of a monk-like figure holding a broom – the neutral depiction of reproductive labour does little to raise questions about who undertakes this work, its role in society, nor does it trouble the distinction between musician and cleaner. Indeed, it is notable that, at one point, the listener can hear O’Dwyer being asked, on behalf of the cleaners, to not ‘stay on one note too long’: a moment that has been picked up in much press about the album. Sean Keenan, for example, suggests ‘its hard to not feel sympathy for the cleaners that she [O’Dwyer] shares the church with’; given the frequent use of discordant bass tones, ‘it is no surprise, indeed it is testament to their
power, that it is these sustained figures to which the cleaning ladies object.’ (Keenan 2015) Such remarks make apparent the distinction between cleaner and artist: the activities of the former are valorised (Keenan’s review repeatedly refers to the necessity and theological virtue of cleaning) yet remain cut off from the musical labour of the artist. In reframing the background noise of the church cleaners and visiting families as sonic content, O’Dwyer’s piece connects, but nonetheless maintains the separation of artist and artistic production, and menial yet valorised reproductive labour.

**Contemporary music and reproductive crisis**

Thus far, I have discussed reproduction’s implication in contemporary music as a field of artistic production. In this section, I want to change the direction of analysis so as to address contemporary music’s implication in struggles over social reproduction. With this, I move away from treating reproduction as a set of gendered activities – as exemplified by *Music for Church Cleaners* – and towards an understanding of reproduction as involving the broader terrain of social relations, infrastructure, and processes that include but also extend beyond these activities.

Much of the feminist theorising of and struggles over reproduction emerged in the 1970s and early 1980s. However, since then, the organisation and norms of reproduction have been subject to significant transformations within ‘high income’ societies. These reconfigurations to reproduction correspond to the emergence of neoliberalism, which has, in its various applications by different governments, facilitated radical changes to state provision, the deregulation of financial markets, and the maximisation and application of market logics to many aspects of social life (including family, love, and relationships). Where social reproduction was once organised in accordance with the ideal of the ‘family wage’, this has given way to that of the ‘two-earner’ family, with women being expected to participate in the (paid) workforce. Meanwhile, state infrastructures of social reproduction, such as housing, education, and healthcare, have been subject to disinvestment, privatisation, and marketisation. As a result, social reproduction has been commodified and ‘externalised’. With regard to the former, for those who can afford it, social reproduction has become increasingly market-mediated, being sold and purchased as a service. A portion of the (over)developed world’s care work, for example, is now facilitated by a privatised sector, being disproportionately performed by low-paid, working-class women of colour and migrant workers. (Duffy 2007; Endnotes 2013)

With regard to the latter, the rescinding of state provisions of welfare mean that responsibility for social reproduction has been shifted onto families and communities, while their capacities to undertake such labour have been diminished. (Fraser 2016)

With its externalisation and commodification, social reproduction has been increasingly discussed in terms of crisis. This crisis pertains to the expansion of the waged working day for workers of all genders, and the restrictions consequently placed on undertaking unwaged reproductive labour; the disparity between wages and the cost of living; diminishments of corporate social welfare policies such as sick and parental leave; and
the growing ‘surplus population’ cut off from sufficient waged work and, with it, the mean of reproduction. The contemporary ‘crisis’, however, stems from a contradiction, or crisis tendency, common to all capitalist formations of social reproduction. As Nancy Fraser argues, social reproduction is ‘a condition of possibility for sustained capital accumulation’. Yet ‘capitalism’s orientation to unlimited accumulation tends to destabilize the very processes of social reproduction on which it relies.’(Fraser 2016, 100)

Just as social reproduction has become more directly market-mediated, with the growing commodification and externalisation of care and domestic labour, contemporary music has also come to exist in closer proximity with the logics of the market via changes to arts institutions and policy. These shifts in both social reproduction and the arts have by no means been universal or uniform: although neoliberalism, as a form of ‘political rationality’ (Brown 2006) and an ideological and socio-economic schema, is given coherence by a number of common facets – namely, the privatisation of public assets, the contraction and centralisation of democratic institutions, the deregulation of labour markets and restrictions on labour organisation, reductions in progressive taxation, and the encouragement of competitive and entrepreneurial modes of relation within both public and commercial sectors (Gilbert 2013) – it has been diverse in its governmental implementations. In the UK, for example, there are significant differences between what Will Davies refers to as ‘normative’ neoliberalism, implemented by New Labour, with its ideological and economic investments in both the arts and certain forms of welfare (e.g. via the Sure Start initiative), and post-2009/2011 financial crash ‘punitive’ neoliberalism of the Conservative party, which has seen a return to and expansion of Thatcher-era policy, and which, via various ‘austerity measures,’ has withdrawn funding from various public and cultural sectors (Davies 2016). Nonetheless, since at least the 1990s, arts institutions have been ‘exhorted to implement new accounting methods for capturing value. Cost-benefit analysis, coupled to the neoclassical language of ‘market failure’ became the tests of legitimate public spending.’ (Davies 2016, 128) The ‘expansion of neo-classical economics and auditing into all walks of social and political life’ has served to strip ‘non-market domains of their autonomous logics’, achieving what Davies describes as ‘neoliberalism’s disenchantment of politics by economics’ (Davies 2016, 128).

These transformations have been accompanied by the ideological reorganisation of what might be described as contemporary music’s reproductive apparatus. This is illustrated by the growing emphasis within educational institutions on notions of musical entrepreneurship, whereby training offered to composers and performers encourages them to consider themselves as multi-skilled and self-branding entrepreneurs, so as to enable them to ‘compete’ within an increasingly precarious socio-economic landscape. Indeed, the valorisation of entrepreneurship might be considered as a mutation of, rather than a departure from, the ideals of musical genius: it celebrates the ‘driven’, risk-taking, and innovative individual. This has been mirrored
in the operations of a range of other contemporary music institutions, organisations, and charities, which seek to encourage professional artist development and hold networking opportunities. As Andrea Moore (2016) argues, apropos of US concert music culture, despite being steeped in progressive language and associated with modernisation, entrepreneurship advocates—rather than resists—the growing precarity of musical labour: it moves the financial risk of contemporary music culture from institutions onto individuals.

Neoliberalism’s expansion of market logics to incorporate both social reproduction and the arts also corresponds with shifts in artistic autonomy and its relationship to value. As Peter Osborne (2017) and Marina Vishmidt (2016) have separately argued, art’s relative autonomy of art from use-value has been transformed with its growing incorporation into the international circuits of the culture industry. This absorption has meant that art’s ‘uselessness’ has not so much disappeared as been systematically functionalised, whereby art must continue to appear as ‘useless’ precisely so this uselessness can be put to use. This ‘putting to use’ refers to art’s involvement in, for instance, urban regeneration, ‘the experience economy’, tourism and regional development. Contemporary music, likewise, has been ‘put to use’ for similar ends.

In November 2015, The Industry staged their experimental opera production *Hopscotch*. Taking place in October-November 2015, the ninety-minute ‘once-in a lifetime sonic and civic adventure’ featuring ‘126 diverse artists’ involved audience members being driven around Los Angeles in twenty-four limousines. The opera unfolds along three different routes, with aspects of the performance happening both within the vehicles and at various sites across the city. A retelling of Orpheus, the narrative revolves around three characters, Lucha, Orlando, and Jameson, and explores themes of time and memory. The opera’s director, Yuval Sharon, describes the piece as being inspired by a lineage of opera that conjoins Cage and Stockhausen, and aims to incorporate spontaneity and unpredictability (Robin 2015). The production garnered critical praise for its ‘innovative’ approach, having taken an old art form out of the ‘inaccessible’ opera house and into ‘the street.’ (Ritchey 2019) As a result, *Hopscotch* is understood to blur the boundaries between art and everyday life, with residents becoming (unknowing and unconsenting) participants in the production as it visited their neighbourhood. In his review of the opera’s preview, Jordan Riefe (2015) describes the performance as mingling real life and performance to transcendent effect: ‘as the lyric “At least we have each other” rises up, we happen to pass a real-life family picnicking near a grave. Later, Lucha sings her quinceañera song lamenting the fact that she must leave childhood behind and become a woman. We’re stopped long enough at a traffic light to see some tired middle-aged women emerge from a carnicería, kids and groceries in tow.’

As part of the opera, audiences were brought to Hollenbeck Park in Boyle Heights, an area to the east of the city that has been the site of numerous anti-gentrification struggles. In the first half of the twentieth century, Boyle Heights was a racially diverse,
working-class neighbourhood with a strong local manufacturing industry. However by the 1960s, Boyle Heights had become a predominantly poor and working-class Latinx neighbourhood, which it continues to be to this day. (Ritchey 2019) More recently, Boyle Heights has encountered an influx of developers aiming to regenerate the neighbourhood, and claiming to resolve the problems of deindustrialization. As part of this, former warehouses have been turned into galleries and studios, with the promotion of the area as a new art district. Local, long-term residents, however, have contested these changes to the social and economic makeup of their community, insofar as they make their inhabitation of the area increasingly precarious. As the affective and physical interventions of the growing, semi-professional art scene make the area increasingly attractive to property developers; and as the commercial and residential development of downtown LA expands, local working-class communities and businesses risk displacement due to rent increases and the loss of public housing. (Carroll 2016) In this regard, the influx of artists and developers to the area is considered symptomatic of gentrification: a process of urban transformation that involves disinvestment, ‘renewal’, and displacement. These processes are typically imbricated with what George Lipsitz refers to as an exclusionary ‘white spatial imaginary’, where space is recognised ‘primarily as a locus for the generation of exchange value.’ (Lipsitz 2007, 15) Consequently, the gentrification of Boyle Heights constitutes, for some, an intensification of reproductive crisis: disinvestment and renewal cut off the local community from the means of reproduction (i.e. housing, community, sustenance, as well as waged work). However, residents of Boyle Heights have long sought to resist the ‘renewal’ of their neighbourhood; and have fought against organisations and institutions perceived as participating in ‘artwashing’ with protests and direct action. These local actions, which have often involved creative and confrontational tactics, have come to gain international attention, with coverage in The Guardian and Newsweek. It was against this socio-economic backdrop that a segment of The Industry’s *Hopscotch* was staged in Hollenbeck Park.

There appears to have been little consultation of the Boyle Heights community in the development and staging of the opera: as such, some residents ‘were surprised and bewildered on October 24 when limousines began pulling up to Hollenbeck Park and people began singing, dancing and shooting cell phone video’, accompanied by an audience who will have paid well over $100 a ticket. (Ritchey 2019, 105) According to the production’s website, *Hopscotch* was hosted with ‘cooperation’ of a number of real estate and property development companies. The Industry also offered thanks to Joel Garcia of Self-Help Graphics and Art, a longstanding East LA Chicana/o and Latinx arts organisation that was founded in the 1970s, following the Chicano Moratorium against the Vietnam War. While it has previously been involved in community activism, Self-Help Graphics has itself recently faced protests: the anti-gentrification coalition Defend Boyle Heights has called for a boycott of the arts organisation, on account of their apparent proximity to property developers, their ‘silence’ in the face of ‘public and private displacement’, and their role in facilitating the performance of *Hopscotch* in Boyle Heights.6
The neighbourhood’s struggles against gentrification and artwashing became particularly audible during the final performance of *Hopscotch*. The Boyle Heights activist group Servir al Pueblo LA/Serve the People LA described the performance as:

A circus of white, privileged petite-bourgeoisie literally occupying a historically oppressed neighborhood that has and is fighting against gentrification…The company is trying to bring opera to the masses, irrespective of the content of the Opera or its relation to the communities in Los Angeles… But the oppressed nationalities of Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles do not want empty art that says nothing of Chicano/Mexican/New Afrikan struggle and history. Our communities cannot afford, nor do they want, to follow around white performers singing in our parks, on our hills. (Servir al Pueblo 2015)

As this suggests, the staging of *Hopscotch* in ostensibly public spaces should not be mistaken for community engagement. After a series of protests by activist groups – one involving luring Hollenbeck Park’s ducks with bread to quack during the performance – the final rendition of the opera was subject to a sonic protest by the Theodore Roosevelt High School Band. During the Hollenbeck Park scene, where the characters Lucha and Jameson share their first kiss, the school band used saxophones, trumpets and trombones to drown out the opera. When the *Hopscotch* performers moved to a different location in the park, the school band followed them.

Where critics such as Riefe had commended the opera’s ‘transcendent’ blending of fiction and reality, the noisy conflict between the performing musicians and anti-gentrification protesters marks a movement of ‘reality’ from background to foreground, with residents refusing to become part of the opera’s representational scenery. Instead, the Boyle Heights protest makes audible struggles over reproduction. Indeed, it is pertinent that activist organisations seek to defend their community, in part, through interventions into their social reproduction: Servir al Pueblo states that they initially came across the opera in Hollenbeck Park when distributing food. By bringing an (affluent, predominantly white) audience into a (poor/working-class, Latinx) area, and in treating this area as a musical ‘stage’ without consultation and the consent of residents, *Hopscotch* was heard as contributing to the gentrification of Boyle Heights, which threatens the local community’s capacity to reproduce themselves. However, gentrification does not simply restrict but reconfigures reproduction: it tends to promote the social reproduction of an urban, middle-class in alignment with a white spatial imaginary at the expense of socially marginalised, racialised and working-class communities. Incoming artistic, or ‘alternative’ communities, meanwhile, who themselves may be unemployed, underemployed, or informally employed, can function as an intermediary between the two. The disruption of the opera is therefore
symptomatic of attempts to resist reproductive crisis and its intensification through gentrification.

**Conclusion**

One of the principal lessons of Marxist feminism is that there is no production without reproduction. Although, in this context, production is ordinarily defined in relation to the commodity form, I have suggested that contemporary music—as a mode of artistic production—is also indebted to socially reproductive labour. This relation, I have suggested, can be heard in Ainé O’Dwyer’s *Music for Church Cleaners*. In addition, contemporary music can be heard as implicated in the relations of social reproduction and the struggles against contemporary reproductive crisis, as illustrated by the sonic disruption of The Industry’s *Hopscotch*. In *Music for Church Cleaners*, reproductive labour is audibly represented via the noisy traces of cleaning activities and childcare. While the composite pieces can be understood to make audible the arcane of reproductive labour that is often passed over in silence, they nonetheless maintain a distinction between the domains of production and reproduction. As I have noted, *Music for Church Cleaners* is a work for and about church cleaners, but it is not by them. There is a similar issue at play in *Hopscotch*, insofar as the opera being performed with a ‘diverse’ cast in ‘the street’ should not be mistaken for community engagement or participation. The Boyle Heights activists, meanwhile, might be understood as enacting a refusal of both (certain forms of) reproduction and representation. The disruption of *Hopscotch* makes audible reproduction as a contested terrain, as well as contemporary music’s proximity to gentrification and reproductive crisis.

I have argued that using Marxist feminist notions of reproduction as a critical apparatus through which to address contemporary music provides an alternative perspective on contemporary music’s gendered formations, its relationship to value, and its connection to social life. While there are many insights to be gained from using it as a framework through which to understand music and its position within capitalist social relations, attending to music’s imbrication with social reproduction—and with it, the social division of labour—becomes particularly pertinent at a time when various music scenes and cultures are being ‘diversified’, with a number of initiatives and events aiming to address longstanding gender disparities. Yet, as *Music for Church Cleaners* illustrates, increased audibility does not necessarily cohere with transformations in the conditions of artistic, economic, and social re/production. A Marxist feminist perspective thus suggests that attempts to reconfigure contemporary music’s gendered formations need to address the relationship between the field of artistic production, capitalist accumulation, and relations of social reproduction.

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http://www.coma.org/about/.


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**Notes**

1 This rhetoric is often elicited and mirrored by funding bodies: for example, with reference to ‘Combined Arts’, including ‘festivals, carnivals, arts centres and presenting venues, rural touring networks and agencies’, The Arts Council England state that: ‘we want to offer audiences new experiences through high quality, ambitious art in a variety of spaces. We hope that this will provide more opportunities for a wide range of people to get involved with creating and experiencing art and culture.’ (Arts Council England, 2019)
This sonic economy is also gestured towards by David Grubbs, who notes how music forms of the 1960s might be considered a response to mechanical reproduction and reproducibility: ‘Avant-garde approaches…such as indeterminacy, minimalism, live electronic music, and free improvisation to a varying extents presented themselves as alternatives to the experience of listening to recorded music. The explicit goal….was to engage in a musical practice that would be unique with each instantiation.’ (Grubbs, 2014: 103)

For a similar argument to this, see Paul Rekret (2017) ‘Repetition & Reproduction in Popular Music Imaginaries’.

The question of reproductive labour’s relationship to value has been a subject of much debate. For an overview of some of these discussions in relation to Fortunati’s work see Gonzalez, 2013.

For a similar argument concerning the relationship between socially reproductive labour and contemporary art see Stakemeier and Vishmidt, 2016.

For more of an overview about Self Help Graphics and its relationship with anti-gentrification struggles in LA see Huante and Miranda 2019.

There remain important questions as to who speaks by, for and as community; and who is considered representative of anti-gentrification struggles and actions, given the heterogeneity of organisations involved. Indeed, it is notable there has been conflicts within and between activist groups, arising from differing ideological investments, disagreements over tactics and the behaviour of some members. Serve the People LA and associated organisations have recently been the subject of public calls for accountability and testimonies of abuse by activist group and ‘womyn of color bike brigade’ Ovarian Psycho-Cycles. A former member of the Defend Boyle Heights coalition but were recently expelled, the Ovarian-Psycho-Cycles have sought to challenge gender-based harm within anti-gentrification activism. In a recent Facebook post they state: ‘what’s the point in housing if there’s gender violence going on within the home. The two are not separate from each other.’