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## **Feminised noise and the ‘dotted line’ of sonic experimentalism**

**Marie Thompson**

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*This article outlines various intersections of noise and femininity, through which noise has been feminised and the feminine has been produced as noisy. Feminised musical genres, such as mainstream pop, have been dismissed as excessive, banal and extraneous noise. Noise has also been feminised by a number of recent historiographical and curatorial projects that have sought to amplify the creative work of women in experimental and electronic music. Using a cybernetic understanding of noise as an explanatory metaphor, I suggest that these projects threaten the integrity of a patrilineal ‘dotted line’ that characterises histories of musical noise and sonic experimentalism. This cybernetic metaphor is also applied to Pauline Oliveros’ Willowbrook generations and reflections (1976) and the performances of noise artist Phantom Chips, so as to identify the production of a feminised noise in and through music. I suggest that these curatorial projects and musical practices raise important questions as to if, when and how feminised noise becomes feminist noise.*

**Keywords:** Noise; Gender; Feminism; Sonic Arts; Experimental Music; Cybernetics

In September 2014, a YouTube video of Courtney Love went viral. The video shows Love’s band, Hole, performing their hit Celebrity skin at a show in New York four years earlier. The audio that accompanies the video, however, does not sound right at all—it sounds (and is intended to be heard as) ‘bad’. The video shows the whole band playing but what we hear is, allegedly, Love’s isolated guitar and vocal tracks. The guitar playing sounds particularly ‘off’: it is out of tune and out of time. The audio was supposedly leaked by a sound engineer who had been hired to record the show but had not been paid (Ladd, 2014). This ‘shaming’ YouTube video was met with sneering, mockery and performative outrage. Love’s vocals and guitar playing were described in the media as ‘cringey’ (Huffington Post Canada, 2014), ‘even worse than you’d imagine’ (Ozzi, 2014) and ‘horrible’, ‘truly awful’ (McGinley, 2014).

The leaked audio and subsequent reactions exemplify how female artists are often received, particularly when playing with instruments or in musical genres coded as ‘male’ or ‘masculine’. As Gibsone notes, isolated performances of female musicians—from Linda McCartney to Taylor Swift—are often leaked with the intention of exposing them as frauds. Male artists, by comparison, are rarely exposed in the same way; and if they are, they rarely generate the same reaction (Gibsone, 2014). Perhaps less obviously, the video and the reactions to it also serve as a reminder of the ways in which ‘feminised’ speech, sounds and music-making are often equated with noise, whether the term is understood as extraneous, unwanted, unpleasant, disruptive or meaningless sound (Carson, 1992; James, 2015; Thompson, 2013). Love’s performance appears to fail as music, and so the video is a testament to Love’s apparent ‘failure’ as an artist. The (intended) reception of the video invokes the notion of noise as ‘sound out of place’

(Bailey, 2004, p. 23) and as such is heard as ‘horrible’. It isn’t music: it’s ‘just’ noise.

In this article, I outline various intersections of noise and femininity through which noise has been feminised and the feminine has been produced as noisy. I argue that in Eurocentric cultures, noisiness has been understood as characteristic of certain ‘bad’ femininities. The perceived noisiness of femininity, moreover, is intensified by certain co-constitutions of race and class. Noise’s association with femininity (and vice versa) is also evident in relation to music-making, as is suggested by the reception of the Courtney Love video. While noise has been celebrated as a radical and rejuvenating artistic resource, its generative, creative potential has been primarily discussed in relation to a patrilineal ‘dotted line’ of sonic innovators, inventors and agitators. Meanwhile, feminised musical genres, such as mainstream pop, have been dismissed and trivialised as ‘just noise’. Consequently, I argue that how noise is evaluated—as good or bad, innovative or extraneous—is mediated and shaped by, and co-constituted with, gender.

Noise has been feminised by a number of recent historiographical and curatorial projects that have sought to amplify the creative work of women in experimental and electronic music, the most prominent of which are the Her Noise project and Tara Rodger’s Pink Noises project (both discussed below). Using a cybernetic understanding of noise as an explanatory metaphor, I suggest that these projects work to generate complex and decentred networks of sonic experimentation. In doing so, they challenge the authority and plausibility of the naturalised patrilineal ‘dotted line’ of sonic experimentation. I also apply this explanatory metaphor to the work of two artists featured in these projects—Pauline Oliveros’ 1976 piece Willowbrook generations and reflections, and noise artist Phantom Chips (Tara Pattenden)—so as to identify the production of a feminised noise in and through music.

At the centre of this article lies an important question: When and how does the feminised become feminist? These two terms pertain to different analytical moves. Where the former primarily refers to forms and qualities that have been designated as feminine within Eurocentric culture, the latter, as I understand it, primarily refers to action, a ‘doing’. When I suggest that certain arts practices might be interpreted as ‘feminist’, this does not refer to the intent or political identity of the producer; rather it refers to what these practices are understood to do within a particular context. By extension, I propose that whether the feminised can be interpreted as feminist depends on what it does: What is perturbed by and through the feminised? What work does the feminised do to unsettle and transform normative gendered relations? What are the outcomes and effects of this process of feminisation? Consequently, although their relationship is complicated, I caution against the conflation of these two terms and, by extension, the hurried labelling of projects and artworks that invoke the feminine/feminised as inherently ‘feminist’—or indeed ‘not feminist’.

## **Feminised Noise**

Though often associated with silence and silencing, Eurocentric concepts of femininity

have significant metaphorical resonances with notions of noise. The feminine shares with noise connotations of disorder, chaos, complexity and excess. Feminine silence has been construed as 'virtuous': for Aristotle, 'silence is a woman's glory but this is not equally the glory of man' (trans., 1905).

Conversely, sounds, vocalisations and speech deemed feminine have often been construed as negatively noisy. As Carson notes in her essay on the gender of sound, 'putting a door on the female mouth has been an important project of patriarchal culture from antiquity to the present day. Its chief tactic is the ideological association of female sound with monstrosity, disorder and death' (1992, p. 121). Consequently, there are a great number of pejorative stereotypes, characterisations and archetypes that have cast 'bad' women as noisy: from shrieking and hysterical madwomen, deadly sirens, meddling gossips and hectoring scolds, to the 'toxic' twitter feminists chastised for their tone when challenging others (Carson, 1992; James, 2015; Thompson, 2013).

The purported 'noisiness' of femininity is intensified by certain co-constitutions of race, class and gender. Noisiness is often heard as a marker of class (or lack thereof), while working-class women are understood to be noisier than middle-class women. In contemporary British culture, the intersection of gender, class and perceived noisiness comes to the fore with the figure of the working-class 'hen-partying' woman (see also Gadir, 2016). The hen-partying woman is characterised (and demonised) in relation to middle-class aesthetic sensibilities as loud, brash, vulgar and disgusting: she 'exists to embody all the moral obsessions associated with the working class now contained in one body; a body beyond governance' (Skeggs, 2005, p. 965). The working-class, hen-partying woman is commonly portrayed as excessive in terms of her sexuality, her corporeality (in that she is often characterised as inappropriately or obscenely dressed) and her 'noisiness'. Her auditory and physical presence is understood to disrupt and disturb social space and, consequently, to make her intolerable. In other words, in both visual and sonic registers the hen-partying woman is perceived as excessive, disruptive, unruly and out of place.

In societies in which whiteness is normative, some women of colour (and some people of colour more generally) are invariably heard as exceptionally noisy. 'Blackness', in these contexts, is often connected with loudness, disruptiveness and aggressiveness (James, 2014). The association of blackness with loudness and, by extension, noisiness is manifest in relation to what Myers identifies as the stereotype of the poor 'bad' black matriarch: 'the black single mother who is held responsible for every problem in the black community including poverty and crime' (2005, p. 105). The bad black matriarch is what Hill Collins calls a 'controlling image': it is a construction that is 'designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear natural, normal, and inevitable parts of life' (2000, p. 69). This matriarch figure is characterised as 'aggressive and overbearing ... she is loud, obnoxious, disrespectful and ungrateful for all that she is' (Myers, 2005, p. 105). Like the working-class, hen-partying woman, then, the figure of the bad black matriarch is constituted both sonically and behaviourally.

To talk of feminised noise raises important questions as to whether doing so requires or rests upon an essentialist understanding of gender. Indeed, the association of noise with

femininity stems from a misogynist and essentialising historical narrative that frequently casts women as ‘naturally’ noisy. This narrative draws binary distinctions not only between ‘male’ and ‘female’ but also between ‘good’, ‘cultured’ and ‘virtuous’ women, who have learnt when to remain silent, when to listen and when to speak—those women who can be incorporated and included; and ‘bad’, ‘uncultured’ and ‘disruptive’ women, who remain too noisy or succumb to their ‘natural’ noisiness—women whose sonic presence needs to be minimised. In drawing attention to these long-standing ideological constructions, I am not arguing that noise is women’s ‘essence’; nor do I intend to speak of ‘woman’ as a pre-political, pre-given identity. Rather, I understand gendered categories as mutable, socio-historical constructions, but ones that are lived and very real, and that are partly constituted through the sonic.

Certain ‘bad’ femininities that are produced in contemporary Euro-American discourse, however, evidence sonic characteristics that complicate the simplistic dualism of ‘good’, virtuous women who know when to make noise and when to stay silent, and ‘bad’ women who succumb to a natural noisiness. A notable example is the colonial, orientalist fantasy of the veiled Muslim woman whose silence testifies to her continued oppression within a ‘primitive’, patriarchal society, and so her need for liberation. This figure of the silent Muslim woman is brought into relief by contrast with her ‘progressive’ Western counterpart, who has overcome her patriarchal silencing and is ‘free’ to speak and express herself (Pedwell, 2010; Power, 2009). It is therefore in reaction to (non-Western) feminine silences that are deemed to be ‘bad’ and oppressive that the inclusion of some (but by no means all) feminine and feminist voices is welcomed from the perspective of a putatively ‘post-racist’, ‘post-sexist’ and ‘post-feminist’ Western (neo)liberalism, signalling its cultural-political superiority (James, 2015). The equation of femininity with noisiness, then, should not be viewed as ahistorical, universal or static.

### **Noise as Music, Music as Noise**

While noise has been pejoratively associated with feminised sound and speech, it has held more ‘positive’ connotations in some musical contexts. Noise has been celebrated for its ability to reconfigure conservative musical orders (Attali, 2003), to reawaken the senses (Russolo, 2009), and to unlock sonic and sensuous ‘hidden delights’ (Cowell, 2006). However, historical and critical accounts of noise’s use in or as music have primarily focused on the sonic experimentalism of twentieth-century male ‘pioneers’, among them Luigi Russolo, John Cage, Erik Satie, Edgard Varèse, Pierre Schaeffer, Karlheinz Stockhausen, George Brecht, William Burroughs, Alvin Lucier, Lou Reed, Steven Stapleton, Masami Akita (Merzbow), Yasunao Tone, Ryoki Ikeda, Markus Popp, Sébastien Oschatz and Frank Metzger (Oval). These ‘pioneers’, moreover, have often been represented, somewhat paradoxically, in terms of a chronological, linear progression of key musico-historical moments. In Hegarty’s words, ‘the path of noise in music is deceptively clear’ (2008, p. 14). Yet equally, it needs to be acknowledged that this path is connected by ‘rupture, disturbance and refusal ... rather than there being a smooth developmental curve’ (Hegarty, 2008, pp. 13–14). Consequently, the history of noise in music, and of sonic experimentalism more generally, frequently creates a patrilineal ‘dotted line’ of innovators, inventors and agitators. Yet the gendering of this lineage is often obscured. Sonic experimentalism is imagined as autonomous from gender; its

musical spaces are thought of as ‘post-gender’ or ‘gender-neutral’: ‘the avant-garde is supposed to have risen above such petty definitions [of gender difference]...electronic music promises to liberate us from biology; and the transgressive space opened up by noise and extreme music allows the abhuman to emerge’ (Morgan, 2014, p. 54).

Meanwhile, the participation of female artists in the noisy fields of experimental and electronic music has been sidelined. As Rodgers notes, ‘Just as recording engineers use the processing tool known as a noise gate to mute audible signals below a defined threshold of volume ... arbitrary thresholds have silenced women’s work in historical accounts’ (Rodgers, 2010, p. 11, emphasis in original). As well as having been excluded from artistic canons, women’s contributions to these fields have often been marginalised in canonical written texts. To exemplify with three core texts: female artists are tellingly absent from Nyman’s *Experimental music: Cage and beyond* (1999). Kahn’s *Noise, water, meat: A history of sound in the arts* (2001), despite referring to rhetorical figurations of women and femininity, deems the historical participation and creative work of female artists beyond the scope of the book. While in Cox and Warner’s anthology, *Audio culture: Readings in modern music*, only 3 of the 57 entries are by women (feminist musicologist Susan McClary, critical theory scholar Mary Russo and composer Pauline Oliveros).

It is important to note that such exclusions are by no means particular to experimental and electronic sonic arts histories. Rather, they can be understood as symptomatic of a more general devaluation of women’s music-making practices in musicological discourse (Cusick, 1999). Indeed, the pejorative association of femininity with noisiness has often carried over into and been reinforced by feminised music genres insofar as they have been trivialised and dismissed as sonically monotonous, dull, banal and meaningless. As the Courtney Love video exemplifies, ‘bad’ music is often feminised; and feminised music is often deemed ‘bad’. Mainstream pop, for instance, has been historically characterised as ‘feminine’ (contra ‘masculine’ rock) and received by critics as contemptible, merely repetitive and extraneous ‘noise’ (Frith & McRobbie, 1990). Pop’s (pejoratively) feminine noisiness is apparent in McRobbie’s dismissal of the girl group Bananarama as sounding ‘like a group of girls upstairs on the bus home from school’ (cited in Bradbury, 1990, p. 313). Thus, while male pioneers have been construed as innovatively bringing noise into music or using noise as music, feminised music has frequently been dismissed as ‘mere noise’.

### **Feminised Noise and Cartographies of Sonic Experimentalism**

Against this background, in recent years a rising number of publications, projects and events have sought to address the comparative invisibility and inaudibility of female musicians, sound artists and producers in histories and anthologies of experimental and electronic music. Some of these projects have framed women’s creative practice in relation to notions of noise. The *Her Noise* project (*Her Noise* is an anagram of ‘heroines’), initiated in 2001 by Lina Džuverović and Anne Hilde Neset, explores sound and music histories in relation to gender (see also Ingleton, 2016; Lane, 2016). *Her Noise*

arose out of ‘a mixture of activism, wishing to question dominant histories and hierarchies, a wish to redress [an imbalance] and sheer fandom’ (Džuverović, 2012). The project has amplified the creative work of female artists who use sound as a medium through a series of exhibitions, performances and events. Although Her Noise has engaged with a range of artists, it focuses primarily on those in the fields of sound art, experimental and electronic music. By drawing connections between artists, Her Noise presents a decentred and ‘tangled cartography’ of creative participation and practice, providing ‘an inroad into the hazy continent that is female experimental composition, punk, electronics, sound art, [and] performance’ (Neset, 2007). The Her Noise project, furthermore, aims to be inclusive of various modes of creativity. As Busby notes, Her Noise takes a broad approach to what activities constitute sound art and experimental music: it traverses distinctions between the specialist and the amateur, professional and domestic, avant-garde and popular, contemporary and historical (2015). However, Her Noise makes no attempt to provide a complete or unified overview of women’s sonic arts praxis: it is ‘in no way an attempt to define history or make a definitive statement. Omissions are admitted’ (Neset, 2007).

In turn, Tara Rodgers’ feminist media project, Pink Noises, discusses and promotes the work of women who are DJs, electronic musicians and sound artists, as well as aiming to make educational resources on audio production more accessible to women and girls. The project began as a website ([www.pinknoises.com](http://www.pinknoises.com)) in 2000 and was one of the first online communities dedicated to women who create electronic music: it hosted discussions, information sharing and artist interviews. The website is no longer active; however, Pink Noises continues to promote female artists and relevant sources through Facebook, and in 2010 Rodgers published a related book consisting of 24 artist interviews. Like Her Noise, Rodgers’ book primarily focuses on artists working in the fields of electronic music, experimental music and sound art: featured interviewees include Pauline Oliveros, Éliane Radigue, Pamela Z, Annea Lockwood, Ikue Mori, Jessica Rylan, Maria Chavez and Bevin Kelly (Bevin Bleckum). As with the website, the book stems from using ‘friendship as method’: discussions of methods, techniques and processes have developed through and alongside cultivating friendships and professional support (Rodgers, 2010, p. 3).

According to Rodgers, the title of her book ‘embraces “pink” for its gendered connotations, “noise” as a metaphor for disturbance, and “pink noise” as an audio-technical term describing equal distributions of power across the frequency spectrum’ (2010, p. 19). Rodgers notes that the familiar tropes of electronic music discourse such as ‘noise’ and ‘experimentalism’ have typically ‘conjured a canon of male composers and writers’ (2010, p. 5). Pink noises refutes this tendency, insofar as the ‘sonic interventions’ presented aim to ‘destabilise dominant gendered discourses and work toward equal power distributions in the cultural arenas where sounds reverberate’ (Rodgers, 2010, p. 19). Through the interviews, the book works to deconstruct and reassemble the relationships between sound technologies and gender, calling into question normative representations and discursive formations of electronic music. However (as with Her Noise), Pink noises does not give voice to a unified gendered experience or indeed gendered identification. Some interviewees consider gender contingent to their artistic experiences; the contemporary composer and sound engineer Maggi Payne, for instance, suggests she

never really thought about her gender when she was developing her practice (Rodgers, 2010, p. 71). Other interviews are expressive of the ways in which socio-cultural ideas of gender, alongside and in relation to other social categories such as race, ethnicity and sexuality, inform the ways in which the music has been produced, mediated and received. Maria Chavez, for instance, talks about how, as a Hispanic female turntablist, her work is treated as both 'exotic' and a 'novelty' (Rodgers, 2010, p. 102).

In addition to these historiographical projects, there have been music compilations that allude to feminised noise. The provocatively titled *Women take back the noise* (2006), for example, 'showcases a collection of forty-seven women artists worldwide who experiment with sound in various ways, ranging from ambient-organic to quirky-glitch-beat to harsh or extreme noise, as well as categories yet to be defined', including works by Cosey Fanni Tutti, Fe-Mail (Maja Ratkje and Hild Sofie Tafjord) and Fari B, as well as Tara Rodgers as Analog Tara. In keeping with the 'do it yourself' ethos of much experimental sound-making, the release comes with a circuit bent flower device which can be used by the recipient to make their own noise. In turn, the compilation series *Ladyz in noyz* (2011–2015), curated by experimental sound artist Marlo DeLara (Marlo Eggplant), celebrates women working within experimental and noise music scenes. According to DeLara, these collections are 'a celebration of connection, not exclusion...Ladyz in Noyz is about staying connected and being inclusive' (Mobayad, 2015). There is also Lauren Boyle's documentary *GUTTER: Girls of noise* (2011), which consists of performance footage and interviews with a number of experimental noise artists active in the United States. The documentary is said to portray 'what it's like to be a girl of noise'. However, despite this unifying tagline, the documentary contains within it multiple and divergent perspectives. It shows performers, among other things, comparing bruises, talking about aesthetics, families, personal musical histories and their different gendered experiences of performing in what are often male-dominated environments.<sup>1</sup> The documentary also exemplifies the fragmented nature of the noise 'scene', emphasising that it is less a coherent whole and more a network of small, localised collectivities. Likewise, noise music is portrayed as aesthetically fragmented—there is no consensus suggested as to what constitutes 'noise' as a musical style. Indeed, the documentary works to refute any notion of a singularly 'female' approach to noise-as-music, insofar as the work of the participating performers is aesthetically and sonically diverse.

The framing of these diverse historiographical and curatorial projects in such terms seems to suggest that noise has some promise from a feminist perspective: they point to a shift from feminised noise to feminist noise. This is a move that might be connected to the long history of queer, feminist and anti-racist movements that strategically appropriate and reclaim oppressive language as part of anti-oppressive praxis (Kapur, 2012; Rand, 2014). However, Rodgers' *Pink Noises* notwithstanding, it is not always obvious how projects that invoke the idea of feminised noisiness intend to use noise as a metaphor—that is, what is the work the term is expected to do in the specific contexts of each of these projects? For instance, is noise a generic descriptor, a methodological approach, a conceptual strategy or a mixture of all three? Moreover, it is not always obvious as to how gendered categories are understood in relation to these projects: What and whom do

the terms ‘female’, ‘woman’ or ‘girl’ denote? Who is included and excluded by these gendered terms? The answer(s) to these questions will vary between projects, insofar as each project is specific and distinct—what an academic book tries to do is different to what a compilation or an archive tries to do. Likewise, as Rodgers’ book exemplifies, how individual artists relate to gendered signifiers—and equally to ‘noise’ as a signifier—varies across and between certain contexts.

In the context of these diverse projects, then, signifiers of noise and signifiers of femininity remain—perhaps wilfully—ambiguous. Yet if the association of femininity with noisiness has a number of its roots in misogynist, racist and classist narratives and imaginations, then the coupling of women’s creative practice and participation in sonic art cultures with noise needs to be treated carefully and critically. Caution is needed insofar as this terminology has been used to dismiss, trivialise and exclude the creative work of female artists. Indeed, it is significant that one of the few main-stream media reviews of the Her Noise exhibition resulted in the art critic Adrian Searle responding, in an article tellingly entitled ‘Quiet please’, that there needed to be more ‘real work’ (sic) as well as ‘more structure, more sound, less noise’ in the exhibition (Searle, 2005). Searle’s (dismissive) reaction seemingly resonates with the suggestion of Le Tigre’s Joanna Fateman and Kathleen Hanna that the relationship between error and innovation is itself gendered: while the mistakes of male artists are often ‘fetishised as glitch’ and ‘as something beautiful’, when produced by women, errors are deemed to be simply markers of failure, rather than expressions of innovation, creativity or artistic intent (Rodgers, 2010, p. 249). This suggests that there are critical questions to be raised regarding who is able to use noise strategically, as an expressive or artistic resource, and against whose and which standards these uses are judged. As noted previously, whether noise is perceived as a marker of innovation or failure is shaped by and mediated through gender—whether it becomes aesthetically radical, interesting or original, or remains ‘just noise’. Thus, while it is understandable why noise, with its connotations of rupture, disorder and distortion, is appealing to feminist projects (and political projects more broadly), its pejorative, gendered connotations mean that we should be wary of too hastily or uncritically using it to frame the work of female artists.

### **Disrupting the Dotted Line**

These issues notwithstanding, I want to suggest that noise can be used as a conceptual lens through which to interpret what these historiographical and curatorial projects collectively do. By employing noise as an explanatory metaphor, I point to one possible answer as to what the notion of feminised noise does in the context of these sonic arts projects.

Feminised speech, sounds and music-making connect, as I have shown, to multiple ideas of noise—as extraneous, improper, out of place, disruptive, loud, unpleasant and aesthetically displeasing. More generally, feminised noise is heard as unwanted, negative and detrimental. However, an alternative definition of noise can be found in cybernetic theory, and one that is not imbued with the same negative connotations. Cybernetics refers to the study of organisation, information processing and feedback in communication, technological, social and biological systems. According to Plant,

‘cybernetics is feminisation’ insofar as it pertains to feminised forms—decentralised systems, dynamic webs and complex matrixes (1996, p. 37). If understandings of noise that are associated with dualisms of good/bad, wanted/unwanted, included/ excluded might be considered ‘masculinist’, in that they rely upon a binary logic, then cybernetic conceptions of noise, which to some degree break with this binary logic, might be understood as feminised.

In his seminal work ‘A mathematical theory of communication’ (1998), Shannon outlines what was then a new, formal model of technical communication, which aims to account more fully than previous models for the presence and effects of noise in communication systems. In Shannon’s model, noise is anything that disrupts, interferes with and transforms the signal-message in its passage between emitter, trans- mitter and receiver, resulting in a degree of difference between the message received and the message sent. Noise is a perturbing relation that potentially induces error or miscommunication in the signal-message’s reception. Yet noise is also a necessary component of communication systems, insofar as the medium and the communicative environment always modify the signal to some degree. The noiseless channel is an ideal abstraction, a material impossibility.

The cyberneticist and biophysicist Atlan (1974) builds upon Shannon’s work in order to consider the role of noise in self-organising systems. However, Atlan refutes the characterisation of noise as a negative phenomenon. In Shannon’s model, noise is understood as a necessary evil. The effects of noise are assumed to be negative: it takes communication off track and is thus understood as an unavoidable but obstructing force. Noise, in Shannon’s account, is that which requires minimisation, correction or concealment. Atlan, however, revised this classical perspective on noise in order to allow for noise’s seemingly paradoxical potential to be beneficial. For Atlan, whether noise is considered useful or destructive, good or bad, positive or negative, relates to one’s position within the communication process. For the sender, noise will result in a deviation from an intended message. However, for the receiver, noise can play an alternative role: it may be a source of new information that is of potential interest. Noise threatens the reliability of the original message by distorting it and thus increasing its ambiguity. Yet in doing so, it has the potential to generate new information. In such instances, noise’s ‘positive’ role co-exists with, and alongside, its ‘negative’ role. Likewise, noise can destroy or diminish the functioning of a system, but it can also force self-organising systems to reorganise with greater complexity and variety. In requiring a system to adapt to its effects and organise around its presence, noise helps to generate new, more complex series of relations (Atlan, 1974). In other words, noise is a guarantor of change—it requires the system to remain open-ended and dynamic. From this cybernetic perspective, noise therefore works to generate complexity, new information and new orders. Consequently, Atlan’s insights demand a shift away from a terminology of unwanted, bad and meaningless sound, and towards one of relations, disruption and transformation.

With this revised definition of noise in mind, the recent historiographical and cur- torial sonic arts projects that I highlighted earlier (Her Noise, Pink Noises, Women take the noise, Ladyz of noyz, GUTTER: Girls of noise) can be thought of as sharing an interest

in non-linear and decentralised relationality. By amplifying the often minimised ‘noise’ of women’s sonic experimentalism, which remains largely inaudible within the musico-historical ‘system’, these projects work to generate alternative cartographies, decentralised networks of creative practice, creating connections between artists working in a variety of sonic arts practices—some stylistically similar, others disparate. However, just as the noisy cybernetic system remains open-ended and mutable, the networks of relations that these projects generate are by no means a closed or complete unity. Instead, taken collectively, they are partial, dynamic and expressive of a range of complementary and contradictory perspectives, gendered experiences and practices. The diverse ‘noise’ projects thus work to challenge essentialist ideas of gendered music-making: they exemplify how there is no one ‘female’ approach to sonic experimentalism.

If dominant histories of noise and sonic experimentalism have typically been characterised by a patrilineal ‘dotted line’ of innovators and pioneers, then these counter-projects respond with a nexus of new lineages involving both connections and disconnections. The networks of sonic practice that they generate can be understood as noisily feminine insofar as they are complex and messy. Yet they might also be understood as noisily feminist insofar as they threaten to disrupt the authority and plausibility of the naturalised ‘dotted line’ paradigm. In other words, they call into question not only who is included and excluded from the dominant histories, but the model upon which these histories are predicated. Indeed, these feminine webs threaten a number of curatorial and historical tropes upon which the marginalisation of women’s work has relied. In this regard, these projects, taken collectively, do not simply call for inclusion in the exclusionary linear history of experimentalism; rather they begin to question the structures and categories through which this history is organised. For example, by contextualising women’s creative work in relation to that of others, these projects rupture the notion of the exceptional woman artist—the lone female pioneer who is singular in thwarting gendered musical conventions, creating just a ‘glitch’ in the dominant historical narrative (Bliss, 2013; Goh, 2014). By amplifying and foregrounding women’s sonic experimentalism—previously the minimised, feminised noise in the system—these projects disrupt the functioning of the ‘dotted line’; they require a transformation of historical perspective. It is in relation to this ‘doing’, rather than simply by virtue of their feminised form or even curatorial intent, that these projects might be interpreted as feminist.

The twin generative and disruptive capacities of these projects, however, is somewhat limited by their reliance on accepted, ‘centralised’ formats—the compilation, the academic book, the exhibition and the archive. These formats, in turn, tend to reduce sonic experimentalism and creative practice to a series of artefacts that serve as evidence for, in Searle’s terms, ‘real work’—artist interviews, recorded tracks, installations, images and so on. Indeed, these formats exist in tension with sonic experimentalism more generally, insofar as many practices have sought to problematise and resist the fixity of documentation by emphasising the processual, transient, contextual and un-repeatable. Though they perhaps remain insufficiently noisy (and with this, insufficiently ‘feminised’), a number of these projects might be thought of as attempting to destabilise the boundaries of these ‘closed system’ formats. The flower noisemaker provided with the Women take back the noise compilation gestures towards making as well as listening,

while the Pink noises book's lack of conclusion symbolically leaves the text open-ended. Consequently, these projects pull in conflicting directions: they try simultaneously to foreground and contain the noisy, messy relations of women's sonic experimentalism within conventional historical and curatorial media.

### **Performing Feminised Noise**

Understood in relation to Atlan's cybernetic interpretive framework, the curatorial and historiographical projects that I have described create and map relations between women's experimental and electronic sonic practices that can be understood to function as a generative, transformative feminised noise. This feminised noise, in turn, might be interpreted as feminist, insofar as it threatens the integrity of dominant narratives and tropes upon which the marginalisation of women's practices has relied. The positive cybernetic metaphor can also be used to interpret and identify a feminised noise that is constructed and enacted through musical performance. However, just as I understand the noisiness of the curatorial and historiographical projects discussed to pertain to a function and form, rather than a sonic quality or generic style, the feminised noise of performance has less to do with what is heard, and more to do with the production of relations. In order to further explore this point, I turn to discuss the performance practice of the composer Pauline Oliveros and the noise artist Phantom Chips.

Pauline Oliveros, as one of the best-known composers of electronic and experimental music, is a prominent name within the Her Noise project.<sup>2</sup> She is also one of the artists interviewed for Pink noises. Her work spans a variety of aesthetic and conceptual interests—from experiments with tape delay systems and sound synthesis to meditative listening practices. Her 1976 piece, Willowbrook generations and reflections, for mixed wind, brasses and voices, exemplifies her interest in attentiveness, listening and 'human information processing'. The performance 'system' consists of three groupings of performers: the 'generating' group, the 'reflecting' group and the audience. The 'generating' group features a pair of conductors and up to six pairs of performers, who face one another. A performer plays a very short tone when cued by the conductor. The player's partner then imitates this tone as rapidly as possible. The 'reflecting' group consists of one conductor and a minimum of 15 players, distributed around the performance space so that they surround both the audience and generating group. The reflecting group sustains some of the tones produced by the generating group, resulting in long, slow chords. The audience may also participate, vocally, in sustaining the generating groups' tones. All members of the performance, then, need to listen attentively, taking cues from both the conductor and other musicians within and across the groups. Consequently, the piece complicates the ordinarily hierarchical relationship between conductor, performer and audience, resulting in a multi-directional web of information, instructions, interactions and musical performance.

The performance 'system' that Oliveros constructs for Willowbrook generations and reflections treats noise and error cybernetically, insofar as it allows for its productive potential. Oliveros instructs that when players respond to sonic cues, 'speed of reaction time is more important than accuracy though both are desired'. If a player of the reflecting group makes a mistake and the wrong tone is played, then, according to the

score, ‘it must not be changed but slowly faded out’ (Oliveros, 1977). Likewise, if a player from the generating group plays the wrong tone, this might be drawn out rather than obscured by the reflecting group:

Although I want the players to be accurate, the mistakes that are made through lapses in attention are not necessarily unmusical. Any pitch from the generating group may be picked up and prolonged by the reflecting group. So my program allows for failures in the system to have a positive function. (Oliveros, 1984, p. 188)

Noisy errors, then, rather than functioning as an unwanted deviation, can be used creatively to generate and transform the musical output.

Phantom Chips (aka Tara Pattenden) is one of four artists that feature on the compilation *Ladyz in noyz 3.5* (2015). Phantom Chips’ performances are playful and collaborative, combining noise-based improvisation, audience participation, alien costumes, homemade analogue electronics and wearable soft circuitry. Where Oliveros’ piece ruptures and transforms the relations between listener, player and conductor, Phantom Chips’ performances work to generate, modify and transform relations between artist, sound technologies and audience. Performances often begin with Pattenden playing alone and manipulating the technologies herself, before offering audience members ‘clumsily tactile’ wearable electronic instruments, creating a brightly coloured web of wires and fabric. This disruptive and transformative gesture—the noisy moment—induces a reconfiguration of the relations that constitute the ‘system’ of the performance space. In this way the ordinarily hierarchical distinction between performer with instrument and listening audience member is complicated and reorganised, as audience members work to generate and modify the sounds of the performance through movement and play. Relations are formed and reformed as participants connect and disconnect. Audience members pass instruments to one another, and some come forward as others shy away; while other members of the audience–performer network hold on to the sound-making devices, trying methodically to figure out how they work, attempting to develop connections between what is heard and their individual actions. Yet others get fellow attendees to collaborate in playing wearable instruments. The resulting soundworld is one of electronic beeps, screeches, drones and hums.

Oliveros’ and Phantom Chips’ feminised noise perturbs the ‘system’ that is the performance space. They transform the linear and hierarchical relations of, in Oliveros’ case, conductor, player and listener and, in Phantom Chips’ case, performer, instrument and audience, replacing these hierarchies with a complex web of sonic, social and kinetic interactions and exchanges. In this regard, their feminised noise might also be interpreted as feminist—or rather understood to do feminist work—insofar as the aforementioned linear, hierarchical relations and structures of musical performance are normally gendered (as well as racialised and classed). By awarding some agency to the audience (albeit within restricted parameters), the music-making process is to some degree democratised.

However, this suggested interpretative move from the feminised to the feminist is complicated and perhaps limited (although not necessarily refuted) once it is recognised

that the disruption and reconfiguration of performer–audience relations by Oliveros and Phantom Chips are by no means peculiar to their work. Indeed, in many ways, they are expressive of experimental music’s long-standing concern with counter- ing the traditional (i.e. Western classical) musical hierarchy of ‘active’ composer, ‘mediating’ performer and ‘passive’ audience member (Born, 2005, pp. 26–27; Cox & Warner, 2006). This complicates a reading of this reconfiguration of the power relations of performance as straightforwardly, unequivocally or exclusively ‘feminist’. It also draws attention to an important tension between the ‘feminised’, ‘female’ and ‘feminist’, insofar as these terms do not necessarily correlate. The feminised noise of Oliveros’ and Phantom Chips’ performances does not arise from their gender identities as composer and performer: there is no causal relation between female producer/per- former and feminised noise. Indeed, the primacy of audience collaboration makes it difficult to speak of a singularly gendered ‘performer’. It is possible that male artists (as well as artists of other genders) might be understood to generate feminised noise, just as male writers can partake in l’écriture féminine (Cixous, 1976). Experimen- tal music itself could be conceptualised as ‘feminine’, in as much as it frequently prior- itises fluidity, messiness and dynamism (Cox, 2005). As *Her Noise*, *Pink Noises* and other curatorial projects attest, it is certainly a field that has attracted a significant pro- portion of female practitioners, despite their work being rendered largely inaudible by dominant historical accounts.

However, these considerations highlight the ways that gendered power relations shape various dimensions of musical worlds: although many women have participated in experimental music as a genre, and even if much experimental music has sought to undo normative structures of musical organisation by promoting a feminised form, its dominant historical narrative and canon remain conservative insofar as they privilege the activity of individual male ‘pioneers’. As this suggests, the issue is not just about what is disrupted and transformed by the feminised; it also about what power relations and gendered norms remain unperturbed. The feminised might impede but it can also exist within patriarchal structures. Thus, just as feminine/feminised and female should not be conflated, the feminine/feminised should not be uncritically equated with the feminist.

### **Conclusion: From Feminised to Feminist Noise**

In this article, I have drawn attention to multiple intersections of noise and femininity. I have suggested that noisiness has been deemed characteristic of some ‘bad’ femininities, while noisily ‘bad’ music is often feminised. I have highlighted some of the recent historiographical and curatorial projects that have invoked ideas of feminised noise in their attempts to amplify the contributions female artists have made to experimental and electronic music. These projects counter those histories of sonic experimentalism that present them in the form of a naturalised ‘dotted line’ of male innovators and pio- neers. Using a cybernetic understanding of noise as a metaphorical framework, and particularly Atlan’s positive reading of noise, I suggested that these projects suggest a move from a feminised to a feminist noise, insofar as they disrupt the functioning of the patrilineal ‘dotted line’.

The cybernetic understanding of feminised noise, I have argued, can also be applied to

experimental sound performance, as exemplified by Pauline Oliveros' Willowbrook generations and reflections and the participatory performances of Phantom Chips. In this context, feminised noise reconfigures the hierarchical relations between performer, player, conductor, instrument and audience. The feminised noise of these performances might be interpreted as 'feminist', in that it perturbs the conventional (gendered, racialised and classed) power relations of musical performance. However, I have also cautioned that the move from a feminised to a feminist noise cannot be assumed, nor should the feminised and the feminist be uncritically conflated. Feminised noise, as it has been cybernetically conceptualised, might be interpreted as feminist; however, this depends on what it is understood to do—what structures and systems this feminised noise disrupts, and how and what it transforms.

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### **Notes**

- . [1] It is difficult to provide a summary of the gendered dynamics of noise music in that it consists of disparate and fragmented 'micro-scenes' that are ideologically and aesthetically varied. Though some of these scenes are male-dominated, others are or are becoming more balanced in terms of gendered participation, as suggested by a number of participants in Boyle's documentary. A more detailed consideration of the gender politics of noise music is beyond the scope of this article.
- . [2] In 2012 Her Noise hosted an artist talk with Oliveros and performance of some of her works. She also features on the Her Noise map.

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