
Review Essay: "Free Radical: Music, Violence and Radicalism"

Lisa Gilman. *My Music, My War: The Listening Habits of U.S. Troops in Iraq and Afghanistan*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2016. 226 pp.

Jonathan Pieslak. *Radicalism and Music: An Introduction to the Music Cultures of al-Qa'ida, Racist Skinheads, Christian-Affiliated Radicals, and Eco-Animal Rights Militants*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2015. 338 pp.

Benjamin R. Teitelbaum. *Lions of the North: Sounds of the New Nordic Radical Nationalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. 210 pp.

Ten years ago, I co-edited a volume titled *Music and Conflict*. In it, many contributors noted the paradoxical character of music in conflict, music being used both to promote peace and to incite war. Most worryingly, they pointed out, music can be employed to disguise conflict in the guise of conflict resolution. That is, music may be sponsored by governmental bodies in peace initiatives to hide social inequality and political injustice. Here, music is both ambivalent and multivalent. In this essay, I wish to explore the volatile character of music in violent contexts and radical organizations. Invoking the chemical concept of free radical, I explore the explosive potential of music to excite an ideological reaction, be it in the realm of the sacred or the secular, the autocratic or the democratic. Like the free radical in chemistry, the free radical in music is as explosive as it is temporary, its character changing frequently in its dialogue with extremism.

In this essay, I review three recent publications that concern either music and violence or music and radicalism. The monographs are complementary in that they consider similar issues in distinctive ways. By way of juxtaposition, I elicit similitude and difference in their treatment of the principal issues. The first is *My Music, My War* by Lisa Gilman, a folklorist at George Mason University. Gilman is also renowned for her war documentary *Grounds for Resistance*. The second is *Radicalism and Music* by Jonathan Pieslak, a composer and musicologist at the City College of New York. Pieslak is also noted for his war-time monograph *Sound Targets* (2009). The third is *Lions of the North* by Benjamin Teitelbaum, an ethnomusicologist at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Of especial interest, all three scholars utilize ethnographic methods with scholarly finesse in their individual readings of popular culture.

My Music My War concerns the musical tastes of military personnel who fought in the American wars that followed 9/11, specifically those wars that occurred in Afghanistan

and Iraq. Based upon an extended period of ethnographic research among veterans on the West Coast of the United States, Gilman focuses on the listening habits of American troops both within and outside combat zones. Conducting in-depth interviews with more than thirty subjects, she impressively encompasses a representative sample of the armed forces both in terms of service affiliation and ethnic composition. Significantly, Gilman does not ignore the different perspectives of her male and female interlocutors. Like other scholars, Gilman notes the ambivalent position of music in conflictual situations, for her music being used to express or suppress emotion (in its various forms) or music being employed to articulate gender (in its different guises). The sections on music enabling combatants simultaneously to engage and disengage or to conform and rebel are noteworthy. The final discussion that concerns veterans against war is especially important.

The book is organized into eight principal chapters. Each addresses specific themes that range from gender to emotion, technology to ideology. In Chapter One, Gilman locates her study concisely within the recent scholarship that considers music and conflict, her contribution to this literature being her interrogation of music media and music reception among combatants. Here, Gilman argues that music is shared to cement relationships in extreme circumstances, music being at once pervasive but at times invasive depending upon the aesthetic sensibilities of the groups involved or individuals represented. In Chapter Two, Gilman contextualizes recruitment, the issue of job opportunity often taking precedence over patriotic loyalty as a principal motivation for enlisting. She pays attention here to aesthetic preference with relation to rank and race, with recruits on the battle front showing a strong preference for heavy metal and rap. In Chapter Three, Gilman explores the role of music listening in combat zones. Mapping out the different contexts for listening, she notes the importance of sharing soundtracks for facilitating comradeship.

In Chapter Four, Gilman investigates the relationship between music listening and socio-spatial control. Noting the close connection between soundtracks and sound memories, she shows how listening habits among combatants were employed to create “sound bubbles.” In these, headphones were used to help create individualized spaces in overcrowded and overwrought conditions. Interestingly, she shows how specific genres were equated with particular sentiments; for example, metal was associated with militarism and country with patriotism. In Chapter Five, Gilman presents a sophisticated interpretation of gender and genre. In particular, she focuses on metal (by way of timbre) and rap (by way of text) to explore distinctive constructions of manliness both among men and women. Here, she investigates musical taste in terms of the masculine and the feminine. As a particular performance of manliness, hypermasculinity is expressed (especially through rap) by means of misogynistic and homophobic rhetoric. By extension, music listening allows recruits to conform to yet rebel against societal norms and social hierarchies that are especially marked in the armed forces.

In Chapter Six, Gilman explores the relationship between music and emotion. She argues that music listening enables combatants to manage feelings that range from anger to fear, from isolation to connection. Where the expression of emotion in the military might be considered feminine, the control of emotion is considered to be masculine, and

music listening helps combatants navigate this ambiguous distinction. In turn, music helps recruits to manage memory by providing an audible structure to make sense of seemingly contradictory emotions both in conflict and post-conflict situations. In Chapter Seven, Gilman moves from war to peace. She examines the difficult transformation of warriors who become civilians in terms of emotional suffering or as she calls it “invisible wounds” (123). She argues that music provides an important medium for social interaction and for sharing memories to counteract trauma. Her study of the artist called Soldier Hard is especially valuable since it represents an important case study for looking at support networks among veterans made possible by music-making. As Gilman might contend: where talking fails, musicking succeeds.

In Chapter Eight, Gilman concludes with a study of warriors who become pacifists. Using individual case studies, she shows how volunteers became disillusioned with war, with emphasis on issues of unreasonable expectations and inadequate supplies. That volunteers were at war to bring about peace was voiced as being especially ironic. Of course, music-making helped articulate this disenchantment. Gilman here analyses a song titled “Camillo” by State Radio, which concerns the corporate interests that benefit from warfare. The line: “Is blood money just money to you?” is especially poignant. Interestingly, rap is employed here both to represent an emboldened pacifism and an aggressive militarism. In sum, Gilman invokes an impressive range of interdisciplinary sources to make sense of her ethnographic engagement with her principal subjects. Her ethical yet reflexive interpretation of interviews demonstrates her established skill as a folklorist. Although Pieslak (2009) deals with similar genres, Gilman’s focus on the listening habits of American recruits is as innovative as it is productive. Here, her consideration of soundtracks as a form of personal diary is especially intriguing.

My Music My War for the most part explores music listening with reference to a specific technology (the iPod). Other technologies and other media are not extensively investigated. For example, Gilman notes that recruits read books and viewed videos among other activities in war zones. The significance of dance for socializing is only mentioned in passing, and this is achieved in a somewhat voyeuristic fashion. That is, Gilman’s focus on music listening seems to prescribe the outcome of her interviews so much so that some exchanges seem forced or constrained. Since this is a book about musical discourse, a discourse analysis of ethnographic dialogues might have been fortuitous. Further, the chapter structure is not always discrete, information is repeated and themes are dissipated. That the listening habits of volunteers are essentially confined to Euro-American popular genres is problematic, especially in warzones that were often permeated with the sounds of non-“western” musics. This is an issue that is redressed by Jonathan Pieslak in the next book under review.

As Pieslak succinctly states, “*Radicalism and Music* is a comparative study of the music cultures of four diverse radical groups” (2). Employing a methodology in comparative anthropology established by Marilyn Strathern, Pieslak juxtaposes “disjunctive contexts” to establish similarity and difference between extremist groups that range from jihadists to skinheads, evangelists to environmentalists where music is employed to incite violence or to propagate fanaticism. Like Gilman, Pieslak notes the importance of the iPod as a tool

in violent circumstances. In contrast to Gilman, Pieslak investigates radicalism with reference to non-“western” and “western” musics, not limiting himself, as she does, to popular genres and secular styles. The monograph is organized into five chapters, four of which consider particular issues with reference to a specific organization. The final chapter is an extended analysis and interdisciplinary overview of radical cultures, music here being used to facilitate indoctrination and to promote “groupness.” The publication features elegant ethnographic vignettes and, unusually, includes an Interlude that concerns the role of musical taste in establishing racial supremacy.

In Chapter One, Pieslak considers the ways in which “music” is employed by Jihadists. With specific reference to the religious genre called *nashīd*, he argues that “music” is permissible in Islamic contexts by virtue of its lyrical content rather than musical setting. By way of contextualization, Pieslak provides an extended discussion of the legal status of “music” in Islam (known as the “*samāʿ* polemic”) arguing that the Jihadi *nashīd* occupies an ambivalent position in this debate, the genre being sanctioned by contravening religious edicts. Pieslak shows how different radical groups in the Muslim world have historically attempted to negotiate this apparent paradox especially in their distinctive usage of musical instruments and musical textures. The musical group Blackstone is a case in point. As Pieslak contends, the band employs rap in English to convey a militant ideal, a secular style being employed to deliver a sacred message. Here, the musical setting is at odds with the lyrical content. It is a musical compromise between melody and text that is used by radical Muslims to recruit and to motivate.

In Chapter Two, Pieslak examines the relationship between music and racism with reference to skinheads. Noting that skinheads came to America from Europe, Pieslak shows how music provided a medium for advancing indoctrination, that is, skinheads were not necessarily racist before they engaged with music (especially punk). Here, the symbols worn (such as Celtic crosses) and the actions undertaken (such as Nazi salutes) by skinheads at relevant concerts served to reinforce a supremacist agenda, with skinhead attire and skinhead activity as an assemblage representing a “choreography of belonging” and an articulation of hypermasculinity (81). In this matter, Pieslak provides an interpretation of performed masculinities distinct from Gilman’s. Pieslak then traces the connection between racist skinheads and white power. Here, the notion of a holy war to preserve the white race is reminiscent of a Jihadi precedent. Although not explicitly stated, Pieslak might have noted that Islamic fundamentalism is not so different in character from Christian fundamentalism. Moreover, music is used by both radical movements to realize acts of terrible violence.

In Chapter Three, Pieslak investigates the use of music for articulating intolerance and for inculcating fanaticism on the evangelical fringe. With specific reference to the Westboro Baptist Church, he shows how a radical sect employs music to structure a protest against combat veterans by regulating engagement and by cementing fellowship. Music, by way of parody, also allows for the vocal expression of antagonism and, when used in blockades, enables the sonic suppression of opposition. All this is done in the name of homophobic bigotry. Pieslak delves into the mindset of such groups. In particular, he interrogates the ways in which music is employed to indoctrinate children. Disturbingly,

he shows how chauvinistic views are inculcated by means of trance-like states, glossolalia (speaking in tongues) helping to embed prejudice in the minds of young adepts. Crucially, music is employed here to organize and to regulate such sessions. Pieslak makes an insightful comparison between Islamic and Christian modes of religious instruction where a literal reading of the Qur'an and the Bible, respectively, serves to validate extreme acts of appalling terror.

In Chapter Four, Pieslak presents his final case study, which deals with music and the radical left. With specific reference to the environmentalist movement and animal activism, he shows how song lyrics are employed by different groups to endorse violence and promote disruption. Providing a lengthy history of relevant organizations, Pieslak demonstrates how individual bodies have progressed over the years from pacific intervention to anarchistic confrontation, the remit of some groups being expanded to embrace larger ideological issues. Importantly, this transformation was marked musically. By way of example, Pieslak looks at the musical output of the faction called "Earth First!" Starting with an anthology (1981) of folk numbers arranged for acoustic guitar, through an album (2009) of diverse styles ranging from rap to reggae, to a CD (2011) of hardcore genres that foregrounded punk and metal, Pieslak traces the sonic transformation of this ideological change. Like his reading of racist skinheads, he argues that musical style is more important than the political message in the attraction and the indoctrination of leftwing radicals.

Throughout *Radicalism and Music*, Pieslak is careful to draw connections between radical organizations in different contexts, be they Muslim or Christian, right-wing or left-wing. Importantly, he argues that the structure of these factions is remarkably similar, music being employed by most groups to recruit and to motivate, to articulate and to indoctrinate. Most shocking of all: music is used to accompany terrorist acts by providing a "sound bubble" (to cite Gilman) for the perpetrator in order to disengage from and become desensitized to horrific massacres. Here, Pieslak's comparative approach is especially productive. It is also problematic. By examining so many different examples of music and radicalism, he has been forced to provide credible contextualization for each. This explains his over simplistic outline of Arab music (Chapter One), his lengthy consideration of white power (Chapter Two), his historical survey of evangelical radicalism and his convoluted study of hardcore subcultures. Here, Pieslak's frequent use of abbreviations to represent relevant organizations (without providing an index to guide the reader) serves to cloud rather than clarify his important findings.

In *Lions of the North*, Benjamin Teitelbaum also looks at music and radicalism. In contrast to Pieslak, Teitelbaum presents an in-depth analysis of one nationalist movement with reference to one national context, namely Sweden. Where Pieslak traces the gradual inclination towards violence among relevant sects, Teitelbaum shows a contrary development: radical factions in Sweden have increasingly adopted democratic means to achieve extremist ends. Of course, music is foregrounded by both authors to represent these ideological shifts. With its indelible link to a discredited subaltern culture, Teitelbaum argues that music has recently become sidelined in nationalist politics. Demonstrating a sophisticated reflexivity in his multi-layered approach to ethnographic inquiry,

Teitelbaum represents in four chapters particular nationalist issues with reference to specific musical genres. For context, Teitelbaum provides in Chapter One an extended introduction to the history and development of extremist sects in Sweden. Here, he is principally concerned with the ways in which new nationalists have tried to eschew the xenophobic pathway forged previously by radical activists, namely (racist) skinheads.

In Chapter Two, Teitelbaum examines the philosophical underpinnings of new nationalism. Like Pieslak, he shows how right-wing radicals have distanced themselves from “white-power rock.” In the United States and Sweden neo-Nazi punk bands such as Skrewdriver no longer suit the musical tastes or the political interests of more recently established fanatical organizations. In Europe but not in America, however, new nationalism owes its inspiration to the anti-liberal movement called the “new right.” Co-opting a multicultural discourse that concerns diversity and equality, new nationalism advocated the equality of all races, whites being offered the same status as other groups in social policy. Here, two concepts are germane. First, “pluriversum”: the recognition of the plurality of races. Second, “identitarianism”: the exotification of a national culture, that is, new nationalism advanced the veneration of a Nordic past that was pre-Christian and pre-modern, an idealized culture for an idealized nation. In its transformation from thug to politician, new nationalism abandoned its liking for punk and cultivated instead musical genres more consistent with its wish for respectability.

In Chapter Three, Teitelbaum looks at music as a medium for colonization. In keeping with the principle of “pluriversum,” nationalists have exploited the potential of transcultural genres to assert an ethnic particularism. Two genres are foregrounded. First, rap is employed by nationalists to critique multiculturalism and to venerate monoculturalism. In keeping with the ideals of “identitarianism,” prosodic meters and poetic techniques with a Nordic pedigree are adopted by some musicians to articulate an idealized nation state. Second, reggae is used by nationalists to advocate for white liberation. Although traditionally used to represent a homeland for Africans, reggae has been manipulated by nationalists to reimagine a homeland for Swedes. The issue of genre subversion does not end there. Where reggae is usually considered to be a medium for expressing love, it is now invoked by nationalists to communicate hate. Where reggae is usually thought to be homeless, it is now engineered by nationalists to represent home. By appropriating the cultural capital of subaltern groups, new nationalism lays claim to its own place in a “pluriversum” committed to diversity and equality.

In Chapter Four, Teitelbaum explores the sensitive issue of musical style and racial purity. With specific reference to folk music in Sweden, he finds a connection between music and landscape, an association in which the sonic vision of a nationalist culture is to be realized. Aware that other political parties have used a similar strategy, Teitelbaum shows how radical sects employ folk music to position themselves against musical anarchists (such as skinheads) on the one hand and musical cosmopolitans (such as migrants) on the other in their bid to enter the political establishment. Here, nationalists are especially critical of arts policy in Sweden, which foregrounds the musical cultures of immigrants and largely ignores the musical traditions of residents. Critical to his argument is the role of folk musicians in nationalist discourse. Although eager to promote

their national patronage, the same artists are less eager to advance a nationalist agenda. In this context, Teitelbaum demonstrates how fusion in folk music complements hybridity in popular music to advance a nationalist reading of “pluriversum.”

In Chapter Five, Teitelbaum looks at music and radicalism from a gendered perspective. Here, he examines the stylistic strategies employed by female artists to communicate a racist position, with women employing a softer style than men to recast a fanatical canon drawn from the repertoire of bands such as Skrewdriver. In this regard, he follows in the steps of Pieslak by conducting research on the singer called Saga. Like Pieslak, Teitelbaum traces the connection between the Swedish artist Saga and the Norwegian fanatic Anders Breivik. Both authors show how this terrorist listened to the music of that artist while perpetrating a terrible atrocity outside of Oslo in 2011: the mass murder of sixty-nine youth workers, among others. Teitelbaum, however, has undertaken in-depth research. By interviewing Saga and by reading Breivik, he argues that Saga performs a lament for the Nordic people, a white race that has become the victim of multiculturalism. In his analysis, Teitelbaum contends that men employ song to scream outrage, whereas women use song to whimper despair. For him, this explains the gendered character of musical styles associated with new nationalism.

It is hard to find fault with *Lions of the North*. The book is beautifully written and cogently argued. Based upon an extended period of field research, Teitelbaum demonstrates his proficiency in ethnographic techniques, be they in his collaborative approach to interviewing or in his reflexive approach to ethnography. Most importantly, Teitelbaum positions himself both as a national and as a “cosmopolitan” in that he has Swedish ancestry and a Jewish background. He is an American who was searching for an idealized identity in Sweden. Much of this was accomplished through music. Although he was never an apostle, his exploration led him along the thorny pathway of radical nationalism. Amazingly, Teitelbaum manages to portray his interlocutors with sensitivity, liking the people but disliking the politics. In particular, Teitelbaum is ethically self-critical in his portrayal of Saga. Writing in a national newspaper about the connection between Saga and Breivik, Teitelbaum inadvertently undermined the Swedish artist’s career. Approaching Saga later, he apologized to the singer in person, the academic being forgiven but not forgotten by the artist.

Music and Radicalism by Jonathan Pieslak is neatly positioned between *My Music, My War* by Lisa Gilman and *Lions of the North* by Benjamin Teitelbaum. Like Gilman, Pieslak explores the power of music to express emotion and gender, and both authors examine the place of hypermasculinity among recruits and fanatics alike. Both also show how music is employed to motivate towards or to isolate from violent action. Teitelbaum, like Pieslak, looks at music and radicalism. Both authors demonstrate how musical taste is clearly linked to ideological affiliation, although Pieslak notes a tendency towards anarchistic activism by way of hardcore genres, whereas Teitelbaum notes an inclination towards democratic participation by way of softer styles. All three authors recognize the significance of rap and metal, in particular, for articulating distinctive subject positions, be they in the expression of violent aggression or peaceful integration, in the service of religious validation or radical indoctrination.

In this sense, music is like a free radical, a sonic electron that acts as an explosive intermediary in social reactions. As a free radical, music can attach itself to distinctive ideologies and different communities by providing a medium for promoting or assuaging violence and for provoking or countering intolerance. As in chemical reactions, the musical connection is often volatile and transitory. As I show in “Music in War, Music for Peace,” music occupies an unstable position in conflict and conflict resolution. Gilman, Pieslak and Teitelbaum all demonstrate how the use of music is often paradoxical, being at once communal and individual (Gilman), sacred and secular (Pieslak), autocratic and democratic (Teitelbaum). The ideologies that music serves, however, are often far from ambivalent. In all three monographs music is used to convey homophobia and misogyny, racism and extremism. With the populist election of far-right organizations in many national legislatures, it is clearly time to be concerned about the violent capacity of music to operate as a free radical. ■

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