

The Political Force
of Musical Beauty



BARRY SHANK

The Political Force of Musical Beauty

Refiguring American Music

A series edited by Ronald Radano and Josh Kun

Charles McGovern, contributing editor

The Political Force of Musical Beauty

BARRY SHANK

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS | DURHAM AND LONDON | 2014

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Printed in the United States of

America on acid-free paper ©

Designed by Amy Ruth Buchanan

Typeset in Chaparral Pro and Avenir

by Tseng Information Systems, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Shank, Barry

The political force of musical beauty / Barry Shank.

p. cm — (Refiguring american music)

ISBN 978-0-8223-5646-2 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-8223-5658-5 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Music—Social aspects. 2. Music—Political
aspects. 3. Group identity in the performing arts.

I. Title. II. Series: Refiguring American music.

ML3916.S53 2014

781.1'1—dc23

2013042799

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Acknowledgments

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The first lie in every book can be found on the cover and the title page. Although the concept of social authorship is widespread and everyone knows that no author works alone, only a single name appears on the publishing contract. The name of the book graces only one CV. When the work is cited, algorithms accumulate the total for only one career. I sincerely apologize for this first lie. The second lie in every book is most often found in the acknowledgments, where the credited author tries to make up for the first lie by thanking all those who made the work possible. Where the first lie is one of commission, the second is most often one of omission. It is nearly impossible to thank all who contributed to the creation and publication of this book. If your name is not here, you know you helped. And you may berate me for my lying ways the next time you see me. I'll buy you a drink.

I am grateful for the institutional support of the division of Arts and Humanities at The Ohio State University, who provided me with a two-quarter leave that resulted in drafts of three chapters of this book as well as helping support trips to the United Kingdom in 2011 and to Germany in 2010 and 2012. Considerably more gratitude is owed to the Department of Comparative Studies, especially the two chairs, David Horn and Eugene Holland, who recognized the value of yet another book on popular music. Many colleagues at OSU helped both intellectually and emotionally, including especially Hugh Urban, Philip Armstrong, Ruby Tapia, Arved Ashby, Graeme Boone, Brian Rotman, Dorry Noyes, Joe Panzner, Ricky Crano, Lindsay Bernhagen, RaShelle Peck, and Brian Murphy. Arguments and materials that ended up in this book were presented to sharp critical auditors in departmental colloquia for Comparative Studies and the Musicology Lecture Series, at various meetings of the American Studies Association, the U.S. branch of the International

Association for the Study of Popular Music, the EMP Pop Conference, the Annenberg Research Series at the University of Southern California, and the Post-45 group. Many colleagues in those organizations helped me to sharpen my arguments, but I want to give special thanks to Jason Toynbee, Charles McGovern, Eric Weisbard, Josh Kun, Bernard Gendron, Ronald Radano, Cotton Seiler, Caroline Polk O'Meara, Karl Hagstrom Miller, Kevin Gaines, David Suisman, Steve Waksman, Diane Pecknold, Alejandro Madrid, Keir Keightley, Kevin Fellezs, Penny Von Eschen, Alice Echols, David Hesmondhalgh, Shana Redmond, and Roshy Kheshti. My dear friend Jason Toynbee helped to organize a trip to the United Kingdom in 2011, during which parts of this book were presented to frighteningly astute audiences at the University of Leeds and the University of East London, and to an excellent conference the following year titled "Music, Methods and the Social" at the University of Leicester. With the help of the Fulbright Commission and the unequalled organizational skills of Udo Hebel, I enjoyed the opportunity to present some of this material to groups at the University of Regensburg; the Ludwig Maximilian University, Munich; the University of Rostock; the Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg; and the University of Leipzig. Early versions of arguments from chapters 1 and 3 appeared as "The Political Agency of Musical Beauty," *American Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (September 2011); "Productive Orientalisms: Imagining Noise and Silence Across the Pacific, 1957–1967," in Alejandro Madrid and Ignacio Corona, eds., *Postnational Musical Identities: Cultural Production, Distribution and Consumption in a Globalized Scenario* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007); and "Abstraction and Embodiment: Yoko Ono and the Weaving of Global Musical Networks," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* (Winter 2006). Portions are reprinted with the permission of the publishers.

I would like to thank the editorial staff at Duke University Press, particularly Ken Wissoker and Elizabeth Ault. Ken found two incredibly helpful readers who provided immense aid, Bernie Gendron and Ron Radano. Although I did not always take their advice, this book is much better for their having offered it. Sara Leone helped guide this book through production, and Rebecca Fowler contributed an immense amount of copyediting advice. Out of nothing but their own good will, many friends also read and commented on drafts of several chapters. Big thanks to Jason Toynbee, Cotton Seiler, Philip Armstrong, Benjamin Piekut, Eric Weisbard, and Ricky Crano. Ricky also contributed yeoman work at two different stages of this project. He tracked down many of the sources that helped structure the earliest drafts of many chapters. More

recently, he helped me find photographs and obtain permissions for the use of these photographs. He even drove to Cincinnati to take photographs of Tinariwen for the book's coda. Glen Friedman and Charles Peterson allowed the use of their amazing photographs. I am most grateful for the time and sincerity with which members of Alarm Will Sound patiently answered my questions and for the grace with which they allowed me to watch their rehearsals: Alan Pierson, Gavin Chuck, Stefan Freund, Jacqueline Leclair, Payton MacDonald, Courtney Orlando, Jason Price, and John Richards. Special thanks to Michael Harley, who introduced me to his friends and convinced them that this project had some value.

Most important, Shari Speer and Claire Shank put up with a house endlessly echoing with the sounds of Vera Hall, Pete Seeger, Sam Cooke, Yoko Ono, Takemitsu, the Velvets, Patti Smith, Bad Brains, Beat Happening, Bikini Kill, Alarm Will Sound, and Tinariwen. Shari and Claire's patience and love make everything else possible.

Introduction

A Prelude



The Political Force of Musical Beauty describes the relationship between a set of powerful musical experiences and the incoherence of political belonging. The book's basic argument is that the act of musical listening enables us to confront complex and mobile structures of impermanent relationships—the sonic interweaving of tones and beats, upper harmonics, and contrasting timbres—that model the experience of belonging to a community not of unity but of difference. The pleasures that derive from this experience are both aesthetic and political. The task of this book is to explore that experience in search of the abstract connections between those two realms. Its key terms are: *music*, *musical listening*, *political community*, and *beauty*. Through an analysis of these terms and a series of close readings of a group of musical texts, I try to demonstrate the intricate and incalculable relation of mutual determination between the experience of musical beauty and the feeling of political belonging.

We all know this feeling: the joy of mutual recognition that leaps within us during moments of dance-floor communion, when the DJ or the musicians *hit it*. We also know this feeling: the profound disappointment that comes over us when later conversation with our dance-floor compatriots reveals vast gulfs of mutual incomprehension. I am interested in both of those feelings. Why is it that we feel as though those with whom we share brief moments of musical bliss must be like us in some important ways? Why do we feel so frustrated when they turn out to be unlike us in matters of equal significance? What is it about this combination of communion and disappointment, of joy and frustration that captures the sense of both shared musical pleasure and political struggle?

Many scholars, musicians, and activists have written and sung about the entanglement of music and politics. In most cases their attention has been focused on the political use of music. In most cases, even in high-quality studies such as Craig Werner's *A Change Is Gonna Come*, Marc Anthony Neal's *What the Music Said*, and Robert Cantwell's *When We Were Good*, the central topic is the ways in which political actors used music to forward their goals.¹ These books and others like them have documented the importance of music in social movements. Nearly anonymous Civil Rights marchers sang together to keep their spirits up and to remind each other of their shared purpose. The drive for social justice and the continuity of black community was a central topic in songs written by and sung by Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, Nina Simone, and countless others. The right to sexual autonomy has been carried atop melodies sung by Patti Labelle, Gloria Gaynor, Frank Ocean, and so many more. But in almost every discussion of the convergence between music and politics, the music has simply served as a vehicle, conveying already shared political sentiments back and forth among singers and listeners.

The Political Force of Musical Beauty tries to do something else. In this book, I show how music, mostly popular music but also some religious and some postclassical music, enacts its own force, creating shared senses of the world. The experience of musical beauty confirms within its listeners the sense that this moment of listening has within it the promise of things being right, of pieces fitting together, of wholes emerging out of so much more than assembled riffs and rhythms. That affect is powerful. It can overwhelm the most cautious and sober rationalist. Just think of Theodor Adorno trying to explain the power of Beethoven, reaching for precision yet achieving only delicate metaphor.² When we hear the exquisite combination of right sonic relations, of auditory sensations of tension and release, of concentrated effects of sounding pressure and muscular response, we sense a commonality that feels right, that announces that this *we* that we are at this moment is the right *we*, the *we* that we are meant to be. Dave Hickey describes it this way: "The experience of . . . beauty is inextricable from its optimal social consequence: our membership in a happy coalition of citizens who agree on what is beautiful, valuable, and just."³

Of course, this is not literally true. Even when sharing experiences of beauty, we do not agree on all that is beautiful or valuable or just. It simply feels as if we do. This contradiction, the coexistence of a feeling

of unity and shared beauty with the knowledge that those with whom we are sharing that feeling can and do disagree with us deeply on fundamentally important matters, has defeated many attempts to understand the force of musical beauty. How can both of those conditions be true? If we belong to a group forged from musical beauty, not a group brought together by an already existing shared political sensibility, then most often we contain multitudes characterized by difference, not unity. If this is a group formed in the late twentieth or early twenty-first century in the United States, this *we* could include free-market absolutists with proponents of economic redistribution. It could blend Young Earthers with Darwinists, advocates of marriage equality with antihomosexual activists.

In what sense, then, can this be a political community? Simple: political community is not characterized by sameness. A political community does not consist of those who agree on the matters at hand, but instead is made up of those who recognize each other as speaking with legitimate political voices. It is precisely that group which is characterized by the existence of meaningful difference among its members. A political community is one that disagrees. It is one where agonistic struggles for power constitute its daily activities. But not all difference. A political community embraces only some differences, only those differences that are felt to be legitimate. This is the understanding that Jacques Rancière brings to the intersection of aesthetics and politics. The aesthetic and the political converge on what he calls “the distribution of the sensible.”⁴ A truly aesthetic musical act is one that reveals the political significance of sounds previously heard as nothing but noise. In this way, an aesthetic musical act changes the shape of the political. It can render previously inarticulate voices in such a manner that their beauty cannot be denied and, in so doing, extend the range of the political to include these voices in its incoherent communion.

This is why I insist on beauty as the locus of music’s power. The experience of beauty is the recognition of the way things could be, the way things should be. The ability to produce beauty, therefore, is an index of the ability to imagine a better future. It is important not to confuse musical beauty with prettiness or quickly achieved consonance. Many of the examples of musical beauty that I analyze delay resolution, refuse traditional harmonic progressions, and avoid melodies that end where they began. They largely eschew clean timbres, replacing them with rasping voices, scraped strings, and electronically enhanced distortion. It is also necessary not to link musical beauty too quickly with an assumed

teleology of musical advance. Although some of the music I discuss was initially heard as avant-garde, other examples were aimed at commercial success and some were deliberate throwbacks to previous forms of musicking. Sometimes the music I analyze is out of tune and out of time. Nonetheless, each of these examples creates a particular set of terms whereby the sounds within them emerge as beautiful. They all produce a sonic image of right relations, an audible constellation of mobile forms shifting in time, performing and occasionally transforming one's sense of the world.

Let me rephrase that last sentence. To be honest, every one of the musical examples I analyze transformed my sense of the world. From "A Change Is Gonna Come" to "The Star-Spangled Banner," from "Revolution 9" to "Philosophy of the World," from "November Steps" to "Heroin," from "Rebel Girl" to "Pay to Cum" to Patti Smith's versions of "Gloria" and "Hey Joe," every one of these and the other examples I discuss hailed me instantly, and in so doing, changed me and changed the world that I had been living in, making it somehow new. In this book I insist that those changes were brought about musically, through the "tonally moving forms" that made up the substance of their sounds.⁵ I spend a considerable amount of time, therefore, explaining how those sounds worked. The articulation of particular sonic forms is a necessary condition of possibility for the beautiful power of these songs. These forms were combined at the moment of the music's production, capturing an emergent sense of the world. They are historically specific both in terms of the musical conventions they engage (including the social ground of those conventions) and in terms of the political effects they generated. The forms' effects, however, are not frozen at the time of production. They resonate anew with each hearing. Against music absolutists, I argue that the real moment of musical beauty comes in the time of listening. That is when the effects spread, when sounding sources meet musical listening.

Musical listening transforms our auditory attention just when we decide that the sounds we are hearing are music. Musical listening carries the expectation that a set of sounds can be apprehended as formal relations interacting with each other. As awareness shifts, attention focuses. I am not talking about rarified "structural listening" here.⁶ Instead I am talking about an everyday occurrence. Everyone listens to music in this way. Even those who have no musical training at all hear some sounds as music and others as noise. The capacity to make that judgment is in-

cumbent upon the phenomenon of musical listening. Musical listening brings together the distributed sensible of the world of the listener and musical beauty's potential to transform that world.

The Political Force of Musical Beauty examines several cases of the musical redistribution of the sensible. It begins with an analysis of the layering of misplaced intentions upon the golden voice of Vera Hall. In 1999 the electronica artist Moby released his version of Hall singing "Trouble So Hard," retitled "Natural Blues." While some heard this re-contextualization of her voice as little more than theft, I argue for hearing Moby's work as a means of working through the history of multiple thefts of her voice. The second chapter discusses anthems, the music most commonly thought of as political. It traces the development of anthems from their religious origins through the rise of the nation-state to Civil Rights songs and eventually the pop anthem. Traditional anthems reinforce already existing political communities. Pop anthems are more momentary in their effects. But they have the potential to evoke a new sense of the world. In so doing, pop anthems help to produce the mass-culture phenomenon that Lauren Berlant has named "intimate publics." An intimate public is an achievement. Participants in an intimate public, one created by a pop anthem, for example, feel as if they "*already* share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience."⁷ This moment of commonality is both deeply felt and recognized as tenuous and fragile. A song such as Sam Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come" precisely captures that blend of vulnerable intimate commonality.

Following the analysis of the anthem comes a discussion of two Japanese musicians' attempts to escape the constricting effects of historical experience. In the first half of the twentieth century, traditional and Western forms of music were both mobilized in service of the imperial state. Western "classical" music became strongly associated with the Japanese state's modernizing efforts, while traditional court music retained its associations with the cultural elite. Japanese composers took a variety of stances in response to these conditions, but found it very difficult to escape the widely shared sense that the state was the proper organizing frame for thought and musical expression. In the 1960s, two young musicians paradoxically chose to dive deeper into traditional Japanese musical sounds and strategies as part of an effort to escape that organization of the sensible. Takemitsu Toru and Yoko Ono took up the sounds of ancient Japanese instruments and traditional singing

styles in an effort to forge new connections with Western music and to wrest those sounds from their subservience to the Japanese sphere of influence.

The next two chapters address similar cases. In both, a critical re-evaluation of inherited forms enabled a reformation of the beautiful and a transformation of the musically sensible. Theoretically, these chapters rely on the concept of musical beauty to link Pierre Bourdieu's concept of a field of cultural production to the world of power, a linkage that Bourdieu leaves only at the level of homology.⁸ In the mid-1960s, a manufactured pop group that had formed in order to promote a hastily written and recorded single was recruited for an art project funded by Andy Warhol. With that endorsement, the Velvet Underground was able to reorganize the concept of the hit. As a rock 'n' roll band, the Velvets were driven by a desire to attract a large audience. But they were also freed to rethink the combination of sounds and approaches that could combine into a hit. Making the most of that freedom, the Velvets created a distillation of the longing within the pop commodity. Despite its length, topic, and droning sound, "Heroin," their first single, was truly intended for the pop charts; because of its length, topic, and droning sound, "Heroin" achieved a level of conceptual purity that exposed the empty hunger at the heart of the popular. In its beautiful sound, this emptiness was shown to be constitutive of the most normative of desires, linking those desires to the secret longings of the marginal.

In the middle of the seventies, rock developed a self-consciousness that built on the conceptual purity of the Velvets. Artistic amateurism, coded as authenticity, applied a critical attention to rock's conventions as artistic amateurism linked those conventions to the extramusical. Rock was an impure style that borrowed, indeed stole, from R&B, soul, jazz, country, folk, and even music-hall pop. Rock's conventions were not rooted in a coherent musical tradition, but instead were revised and reformed with irregular passion. Patti Smith's highly reflexive reconfiguration of the poet-rock star audaciously revealed the racialized and gendered requirements of the role first inhabited by Bob Dylan. Through her studied performativity, Smith revealed the limits of rock's comprehension of the world. A rethinking of musical authority resulted. Bad Brains emphasized the virtuosity required from marginalized groups. Their focus on speed and precision invigorated the DC scene, challenging (but not defeating) rock's racialized limits even though it reinforced the individualist masculine competitiveness that quickly dominated American hardcore. This competitiveness turned inward as the form of authen-

ticity it generated demanded an ever-greater purity from each person. Following on the dominance of this approach, a rethinking of musical authority resulted. Beat Happening refused virtuosity with an equally focused intensity. The authority of this band grew from its attention to emotional honesty. By rigorously performing imperfection, Beat Happening shifted attention away from the means of performance to its end. Where hardcore's authenticity retained a vigorous individualism and an insistent personal equals political equals personal equation, indie instilled incompleteness, contradiction, and an insatiable hunger for constantly deferred meaning. Riot grrrl's musical genius was to reforge the connection between those two approaches. "Rebel Girl" was an ambivalent anthem that claimed legitimate authority in a world of power to which it did not wish to belong.

Both of these chapters proceed through close readings of recordings. One of the main points of this approach is to draw attention to the specificity of rock's generic conventions. I use a listening method attuned to the antisystematic means whereby great rock recordings create their aesthetic intervention into the political. In each of the recordings that I analyze, a particular performative imprecision becomes an audible hook, a quality of sound that demands the listener's attention. Lacking conscious intention, these musical gestures are nonetheless the key to rock's beauty. They mark the gaps in the capacity of the inherited understanding of the world to generate meaning and value. Again, many of these songs do not fit into traditional understandings of the beautiful. Their beauty and, therefore, their power come from their ability to produce sonic images of a sense of the world just beyond what already is. *Beyond* is the key word here because rock's impulse was never fully utopian; instead it creatively imagined a more intensely responsive world of greater satisfaction but not one where satisfaction itself was thought anew. Rock's beauty derived from a teasing alertness to an inwardly directed formal innovation even as it denied formalism, insisting instead on a direct relationship to the extramusical, which in turn was nothing more than a generic convention. Rock's formal inversion of itself continues to drive its cycle of critical transformation (as we shall see in the concluding chapter).

A sense of lost possibilities, of a kind of melancholy that comes from recognizing the limits of musical beauty's political force, is the subject of the penultimate chapter. Alarm Will Sound is a postclassical new music ensemble that initially formed at the Eastman School of Music. Their concert collage, 1969, imagines a musical collaboration between Karl-

heinz Stockhausen and John Lennon, setting this musical association between two of the most highly regarded musicians of the time in the year after 1968's global challenge to the political status quo. 1969 registers the sense of loss felt by cultural elites as efforts to form a meaningfully broad-based political alliance through musical beauty fail. But 1969 also reminds us of the centrality of musical listening, of the true political force that musical beauty generates. While the melancholy of lost possibilities saturates the piece, the beauty of its own performance in our time is highlighted by Alarm Will Sound's acoustic version of the Beatles' "Revolution 9." By changing the sounding sources from tape collage to strings, winds, pianos, handclaps, and shouts, Alarm Will Sound encourages its audience to listen musically. In the process, the longing for an emergent and decentered collective spreads throughout the performance space.



The concluding coda recollects a number of themes that wound their way through the preceding chapters, returning in particular to the first chapter's development of the book's central theoretical framework. The coda also foregrounds a particular problem of listening. Phrased in one way as the Alan Lomax problem and in another way as the "aural imaginary," this problem emerges from the inescapable limits that listening places on the political force of musical beauty. Even if one truly reaches out for new sonic combinations, the listener cannot escape the structuring effects that previous listenings have had on one's ability to hear the new. In fact, innocent listening, a listening that hears only the newness, is impossible. We always listen through previous listening. We always encounter the music of others through our imaginary relation to that otherness. These limits are not debilitating, however. They simply mark the ground on which musical listening takes place. The encounter between the indie rock band TV on the Radio and Tinariwen, a band of Tuareg musicians, figures the practice of musical listening across commonly recognized borders and differences, not as a utopia of commonality but as a leaning gesture, a practice that continues, over time, to recognize the beauty of new sounds, the force of that beauty, and the extension of the political community of difference.

Musical listening requires listeners, socially located listeners with their own specific aural imaginaries, to shift the resonance of the tonalities they hear. The purpose of this book is to call attention to that pro-

cess, not to document its spreading multiplicity and certainly not to account for each individual listening act. *The Political Force of Musical Beauty* draws the bulk of its evidence from readily available sources, from sounds recorded on tape and transferred to wax or encoded into digits and bonded onto plastic and metal. The book describes acts of listening that cannot be replicated completely but from which echoes emerge, mapping aural pathways that you can trace with your own ears and your own leaning capacities. Real moments of musical beauty capture the infinite specificity of that listening. When you and I hit the dance floor together, listening to the elegant dynamism of a perfect beat, we will feel a community that will never be exactly the same for either of us. The force of that difference is what propels us.

Chapter One

Listening to the Political



In 1999 Moby released his multiplatinum-selling album *Play*. Most of this album consists of a blend of sampled gospel and blues with electronica-dance instrumentation and beats, exemplifying through its mixture of racially coded genres one of the most common strains of crossover success in American popular music, the recasting of black musical traditions for the profit of white musicians. Initial critical response was mixed, with quite a bit of commentary focusing on Moby's use of the older material. At *Pitchfork*, Brent DiCrescenzo wrote, "The sampling and processing of passionate folk and blues roots music drains whatever emotional ballast kept the music so spiritually afloat. . . . A performance loses raw magnetism after being chopped up in ProTools, cut from its atmosphere, cleaned, and gutted from its accompanying guitar." In the *Village Voice*, Frank Owen was slightly more positive, misdescribing Alan Lomax's source recordings as "field recordings from the '20s, '30s and '40s," but also noting that the "weary but hopeful '40s gospel singer Vera Hall in 'Natural Blues' . . . wouldn't sound out of place at the old Paradise Garage, a dancehall where space-age Baptists regularly congregated in the '80s." Writing for *Salon*, Scott Marc Becker noted, "She's [Hall] as potent in Moby's hands as she was a cappella, the ghost of her voice resonating as if she were still alive." But "luxnigra," writing as recently as 2007 for a blog titled *The Last Angel of History*, declares that Moby is just another in a long line of white appropriators of black music: "Moby is the Elvis or Benny Goodman or Beastie Boys of his genre and generation. He directly appropriates African-American music, such that he is the white mediator through which the blues records he samples are 'brought to life,' as one critic, in 'The Big Takeover,' commented. In fashioning a career while seemingly unaware of how his whiteness functioned and functions at

every point in his career, he is fully complicit with white supremacy in the US.”¹ Well, yes. And no. Not fully. To racially code technology as white and heartfelt emotion as black is complicit with the history of white supremacy. Although Moby cannot be held uniquely responsible for that—the critical response to the album indicates that the racial coding of its musical signs preceded the album itself and structured its reception for many listeners—it is clear that *Play* does not resist that reading. What is also clear is that *Play*—one song in particular, “Natural Blues”—is a way of working through that history.

Throughout the twentieth century, white musicians drew heavily from black musical traditions in an effort to achieve major commercial success. A continual strain of critical debate accompanied this phenomenon, arguing the merits and the crimes of such cultural borrowing. The market success of such acts as the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, Paul Whiteman’s Orchestra, Elvis Presley, Eminem, and so many others has been challenged by critics asserting the superior musical and social value of musicians like Sidney Bechet, Fletcher Henderson, Chuck Berry, and Tupac. Karl Hagstrom Miller has recently shown, however, that the very idea of racially separated music traditions was an invention of the music industry who sought to streamline the distribution of particular musical commodities to specific audiences.² Scholars from Ronald Radano to Marybeth Hamilton have uncovered the deep white investment in the very category of black music even as the aural consistency and political significance of genres identified as black has been demonstrated by generations of scholars and critics, from W. E. B. Du Bois to Portia Maultsby, Samuel Floyd, and Mark Anthony Neal.³ The racial coding of particular sounds and specific genres has varied historically. Before the twentieth century, the sounds of a banjo evoked blackness; after the invention of “old-timey music,” the same sounds indexed an image of white communities. In the past ten years, scholars such as Maureen Mahon, Greg Tate, and Kandia Crazy Horse have insisted that black rock musicians be returned to the discussion of this presumably white form.⁴ Further complicating the racialization of musical genres, George Lipsitz, Rafael Pérez-Torres, Frances Aparicio, and Josh Kun have reminded us of the interweaving of black and Latino styles, while Deborah Wong and E. Taylor Atkins have explored the convergence of East Asian and African American musics.⁵ The ever-more intricate and self-reflexive nature of this struggle over musical traditions and cultural borrowing was captured by Roshanak Kheshti in her discussion of Sasha Frere-Jones’s use

of *miscegenation* to describe the white use of black-identified sounds in rock. Kheshti neatly uncovers the homosocial nature of the white-male use of the musical signs of black passion for cultural reproduction.⁶

Throughout this critical history, musical traditions and their political significance have been linked to racialized populations whose boundaries have been momentarily stabilized in part through the very processes of musical performance and reception that form the heart of the debate. This is the truth that ethnomusicology explores. Ethnomusicology establishes the expressive connection between the social real of an ethnos and the songs that both move and solidify the identity of that group. Within the operating assumptions of ethnomusicology, it is not too difficult to comprehend the musical resonance of social belonging, or the longing to belong. It is not a stretch to imagine the pleasure of identification or the warmth of a social connection that ensures fellow feeling—even where the feeling is in response to a threat. In traditional country blues, a constantly humming minor third is played by a guitarist alternating a down-tuned D with an F natural, bumping that bass line twice a second with the right thumb while the fingers of the left hand map a descending array of sevenths, fifths, and thirds across the fretboard, and a male voice sketches the outlines of a cypress grove within which he sings the insecurity of love; this pattern of harmony and rhythm not only enacts a solidarity of masculine vulnerability, a vulnerability made more palpable by the history of slavery and Jim Crow, but also evokes the work of the hands that counter that vulnerability through the sheer fluid ability to sound and resound again the irrepressible presence of desire. That unending movement back and forth from the D to the F structures the ineluctable. A voice maps a melodic arc that immediately falls upon its rise, that breaks itself in two and then four, and then recombines its wholeness through a downward slope that returns to a home that simply cannot feel safe. Listening to this, it is not difficult to feel the bonds of the community that chases itself into and through that musical metaphorical space. The social formation that produced these sounds might no longer exist, but its musical pleasures, the beauty of the political struggles that defined that social formation, remain. Skip James's "Cypress Grove Blues" exemplifies the quiet power of ethnomusical politics—the construction of an ethnicized community through song. Country blues no longer actively shapes the boundary of a people. Nevertheless, the continued experience of its beauty reaches beyond the historical moment of the song's conception, responding to changing historical circumstances with appeals rooted in its ethno-

musical heritage but branching outward to grasp the attention of differently attuned listeners. The music's meaning grows organically and politically.⁷

In a turn of events that would probably have surprised Theodor Adorno, the most-productive efforts to link the musical and the political have taken shape not in European aesthetic theory or traditional musicology but inside the discipline of ethnomusicology—traditionally understood as the study of the folk and popular musics of the non-Western world. As early as 1973, John Blacking could assert that “because music is humanly organized sound, there ought to be a relationship between patterns of human organization and the patterns of sound produced as a result of human interaction.”⁸ This relationship between patterns of sound and human organization was not merely homological and covarying, according to Blacking. Speaking of the Venda, the particular people whose music Blacking studied, he claimed that their music was political “in the sense that it may involve people in a powerful shared experience within the framework of their cultural experience and thereby make them more aware of themselves and of their responsibilities toward each other.”⁹ The politics of Venda music consisted of the reaffirmation and reinforcement of the human organization named the Venda people. Through expressing an already existing social real, music could reproduce the boundaries of that community. But that was all it could do. Here is Blacking again: “Music cannot change societies. . . . If it can do anything to people, the best that it can do is to confirm situations that already exist. It cannot in itself generate thoughts that may benefit or harm mankind[,] . . . but it can make people more aware of feelings that they have experienced, or partly experienced, by reinforcing, narrowing or expanding their consciousness in a variety of ways.”¹⁰ Insofar as the music of the Venda could heighten awareness of their feelings, it could act in the world; the music could provide an arena for the contestation over cultural values. But these values were the values of the Venda that could only be expressed by Venda music when performed by the Venda people.

Throughout most of the history of ethnomusicology, even the most thoughtful and careful scholars have found themselves working within this frame. When Steven Feld wrote about the music of the Kaluli, the linkage he found between musical style and extramusical meaning was based in a concept of group identity that had to remain stable for the linkage to function. While Kaluli music might be characterized by “lift-up-over sounding” and that quality might also characterize the coopera-

tive nature of Kaluli social organization, the music was an expression of the basic value hierarchy that marked one as Kaluli. If one is Kaluli, one cannot sound otherwise. Social organization and musical style that is not “lift-up-over sounding” cannot be Kaluli.¹¹

Despite its success at demonstrating linkages between music and politics, the fundamental assumption of traditional ethnomusicology is hampered by an inherent circularity. The idea that groups make music that identifies the group and thereby expresses the values of that group relies on a static concept of identity and a relatively firmly bounded notion of the group that frustrates any effort to think about the political force of music. If all music can do politically is to reinforce the already existent values of an already defined group, then music acts more as a conveyor of values constructed elsewhere than as an agent itself. In its traditional formulation, ethnomusicology can conceptualize only the political uses of music, wherein a particular group promulgates its interests through the musical performance of identity.

This problem—the tendency to reduce music’s political force to an expression of a group’s already existing and stable identity—is exacerbated by an accompanying tendency toward essentialism (since essentialism extends an enclosed ethnos indefinitely into the future). In his classic study of racial formation, *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy asks, “What special analytical problems arise if a style, genre, or particular performance of music is identified as being expressive of the absolute essence of the group that produced it?”¹² The special analytical problems are many. But for my immediate purposes, the chief problem is this: linking the relationship between the political and the musical through identity often solidifies that identity. When that occurs, that identity becomes a reified object rather than a subjective set of processes. Identity becomes susceptible to essentialist concepts, and the linkage between music and identity loses its dynamism. Music’s political role is reduced to the advance, or the defense, of this identity, and music loses its capacity for productive action in the world.

In the introduction to their superb collection *Music and the Racial Imagination*, Ronald Radano and Philip Bohlman acknowledge the traps of traditional ethnomusicology, rooting the field’s reliance on a fixed identity in its area-studies origins. Radano and Bohlman go on to argue for replacing the centrality of ethnic identity with a focus on the racializing practices that are entwined with the production of musical meaning. Rather than following traditional ethnomusicology’s tendency to accept “differences as if they were givens,” they argue that “‘race’ defines not a

fixity, but a signification saturated with profound cultural meaning and whose discursive instability heightens its affective power.” Race should be understood as a subjectifying practice, not an object, they rightly insist. The difficulty of following through on this editorial intention can be traced through many of the articles in the collection. Even Christopher Waterman’s otherwise sterling analysis of the crossover hit “Corrine Corrina” by Bo Chatmon depends on a posited hybrid “mulatto” identity for Chatmon as the experiential ground out of which the song’s political significance could grow. It is as though the laudable effort to identify racializing tendencies in musical performance can only be understood as the expression of a preexisting and stable identity.¹³

The tendency to think the political through the limits of a fixed identity haunts not only ethnomusicology but also popular-music studies. In her compelling ethnography of the production and consumption of banda music in Los Angeles, Helena Simonett identifies moments when young Mexican Americans, inspired by hearing banda on the radio, begin a more visible and audible relationship to Mexican culture. In her analysis, this moment of musical identification becomes a reconnection to already existing roots, a reaffirmation of a belonging that was always already there rather than a productive connection that generates new experiences of subjectivity.¹⁴ Aaron Fox’s sensitive ethnography of white working-class culture introduces a degree of collective agency to the performance of “real” country music, seeing this performance practice as a means of maintaining a social identity that is threatened by increasing complexities in the world of work and by the sentimental evacuation of that identity through Nashville-style production and commodification practices. But even here, the musical qualities that distinguish “real country” from its blander competitors can only be identified through these qualities’ capacity to enable members of this social group to recognize each other as real-country people.¹⁵ These are important examples of music’s political action. The musical confirmation of already existing political groups helps to consolidate them as self-aware communities. But I am mainly interested in a different direction that music’s political power can take.

For example, Louise Meintjes’s stunning *Sound of Africa!* reports an informal discussion among a group of musicians about a complex of musical sounds—a musical form. Her analysis of this conversation uses the concept of “the figure” as a doubled formal structure that combines the social notion of a “socially constituted type, or icon, presented and recognized through style” with the musical concept of a figure as a “re-

peating motive or pattern.” Meintjes fuses these two ideas into a socio-musical concept that becomes “a process of arguing musically, by means of repeated and varied motives, over ideas about social relations.”¹⁶ She describes a moment in a recording studio when a particular timbre associated with East Africa is imbricated with an approach to guitar playing that is already identified as South African (using an existent socio-musical link). This timbral resonance, echoing East Africa, shifts the sociocultural reference of the guitar style. The new sound is intended to reference “Africa,” an impossible semiotic object in itself, but a meaningful auditory symbol in the market for world music, particularly when contrasted with “white pop.” Each of these terms, each of these figures, each of these references are relatively fluid concepts that are at play in the conversation among the musicians who are working to create this sound. Their conversation is made up of a set of strategies for marketplace success. But the musicians’ goal is to create a sound that can solidify a musico-cultural reference to Africa that will carry an affective charge beyond the reference’s value as a commodity marker in the world music marketplace. The musicians want to create what could be really felt to be the “sound of Africa.” This analysis reintroduces an element of dynamism into the linkage between music and identity, demonstrating the imbrication of extramusical thinking with formal musical creativity. The analysis is deeply contextualized in terms of the meanings carried by the musical form and the historical moment out of which this element of musical beauty can be heard. My argument will build on Meintjes’s discussion to suggest that this affective charge, if successful, could consolidate an emergent identity with real political force. The affective power of musico-cultural figures can change the relationship of the ethnos to the demos, shifting the relations of those who are legitimately included inside the political community. The fundamental assertion of this book is that music is one of the central cultural processes through which the abstract concept of the polis comes into bodily experience. Music’s ability to effect this experience must have already taken place before any of the debates about genres and peoples, of sounds and identities, can begin. Simply put, the political force of music derives from its capacity to combine relations of difference into experiences of beauty.

The experience of musical beauty can reinforce already existing political communities with familiar sounds and a seemingly coherent and regular resolution of tension. This musical conservation of existing community is the work of anthems, and it is the object of much traditional ethnomusicological and popular-music study.¹⁷ More interesting for me,

however, is the work that musical beauty performs when it moves beyond the intentions of its creators and outside the preformed identities of its fans. I am interested in the ways in which the experience of musical beauty complicates the experience of group identity as well as confirming it. Further, I want to understand music's ability to consolidate an entirely new sense of the self and its relation to others. I am looking to explore the ways that music both constitutes and disrupts the political, where *the political* is understood as that arena within which diverse collectivities of people come together to explore and define themselves as a group. I am interested in music's capacity (in the words of Georgina Born) not only to "*reproduce, reinforce, actualize, or memorialize extant sociocultural identities . . . [but also to] prefigure, crystallize, or potentialize emergent, real forms of sociocultural identity or alliance.*"¹⁸ The experience of musical beauty, when it emerges from unfamiliar sounds or surprising combinations of sounds quite common, has the capacity to redistribute an auditory sensible and to change, thereby, the sonic *sens*¹⁹ of the political.

MUSICAL BEAUTY

My thesis builds on the observation that the affective power of music produces in listeners a capacity for taking pleasure in difference and in the organization of difference. Even to experience music is to make a judgment about sound. From the moment of John Cage's "4'33'" on, it has been clear that sounds enter into a special category of perception once they have been deemed to count as music.²⁰ To categorize an auditory experience as music is to make the decision that what is heard is coherent: an architectonic combinations of timbres, rhythms, competing and overlapping structures, auditory pressures of tension and release. The political force of music derives from its capacity to entrain subjects to feel pleasure in particular combinations of auditory difference and to reject other combinations as noise. The pleasure taken in the experience of musical beauty is a consequence of formal musical attributes that build affective attractors from abstract relations of sonic difference. Musical beauty is a subset of the larger category of sonic beauty. To perceive sonic beauty as musical beauty is to hear a set of sounds as a coherent whole, the coherence and continuity of which enables a felt connection between the sounds themselves and the social world from which they emerge. Whereas sonic beauty can come from attentiveness to the natural or even the mechanical world, musical beauty always emerges

from the social.²¹ This is not to say that musical beauty can be purely and totally reduced to social concerns. Music is commonly said to be non-referential. But the pleasures produced through the experience of musical beauty affectively bind our sensibilities into patterns of engagement with the social world. The semantic emptiness of musical structures begs to be filled in with social content even while musical beauty escapes any final concrete social articulation. The experience of musical beauty is a compelled but willing acquiescence to what are felt to be right relations of difference. When the sonic relations that construct this experience are familiar and comforting, they reinforce existing political relations. But when music redistributes the auditory sensible, the experience of musical beauty generates a sonic reshaping of the experience of relations of difference. New possibilities for political community can emerge from the pleasurable experience of new formations of difference. This suggests that the emergence of political community is, in part, an aesthetic experience. It cannot, therefore, be understood as a singular historical event. Instead the political force of musical beauty repeats as and when necessary, changing the shape of any community it reproduces. In setting forth these propositions, I do not mean to suggest that there is a one-to-one relationship between musical taste and particular political positions. The political force of music does not act at the level of policy or program. Instead the experience of musical beauty, the instant judgment that a set of differences is in proper relation with one another, should be understood as an experienced emergence of political community.

We all experience the political force of music. Yet it is a force that operates most powerfully when we are not quite aware of it. Music's political power does not result in easily measurable direct effects; instead, it operates indirectly, obliquely. Wherever we find musical beauty, it results from an attentive (even when not fully conscious) engagement with sound—the flow of rhythms; the assonance of harmonies; the resolution of pitch-based tensions; the surprising splashes of color, tone, timbre; and even the disturbing clashes of chaos, dissonance and silence, all of the coordinated violence and peace shaped by the ludic synchronization of sound. The undeniable physicality of sound vibrates the eardrums, sends pulses down the synapses, snaps muscle fibers into action, and stimulates interpretation machines. Hairs inside the auditory canal, hairs on the back of the neck, hairs that line folds of skin, and skin that crinkles and stretches, all respond to air pressure, tripping us into a choreography of meaning. Music, the most fully embodied symbol, revels in the physical experience of subjectivity. Embraced by the ex-

perience of musical beauty, our most private feelings become recognizable in their social fullness. Music is the absolutely undeniable evidence of the sociality of human feeling. Music confirms the belief that we feel as collective beings. The experience of musical beauty is the experience of the collective nature of subjectivity. As Jacques Attali puts it, "All music, any organization of sounds[,] is then a tool for the creation or consolidation of a community, of a totality."²²

Traditionally, the production of musical beauty has been studied by musicologists who focus on the internal relation of parts in a practice of articulating a purely musical meaning, purified of political and social constraints.²³ Countering that tradition, the cultural musicologist Lawrence Kramer has argued that extramusical meaning accompanies every act of music making and is the paradoxical result of the oft-remarked nonreferentiality of music. Rather than reducing the potential meaning of music to a self-referential engagement with its own processes, Kramer understands that the lack of ostensive indexing sets music up to function precisely as the object of projective subjective desire. In Kramer's words, "In music . . . the structure of prejudgment," by which he means the set of predispositions necessary for the production and comprehension of any meaningful utterance, "becomes lived experience more plainly, palpably, and dramatically than virtually anywhere else," as a result of the apparent absence of purely musical meaning.²⁴ As Kramer insists, this projective aspect of meaning, filtered through subjectivity, is an ineradicable aspect of all meaning making. Music, by virtue of its abstract formality, simply renders that aspect more palpable. The attentive engagement with musical beauty necessarily builds from a subjective positioning, but its allure pulls the listening subject out from that position in an effort to understand the beauty that escapes the mere repetition of the known. The projective production of extramusical meaning works through the subject, but it is instigated by an experienced gap (of seeming meaninglessness) between the musicality of the musical object and the position of the listener. In a cyclical process that presages recognition, the experience of musical beauty engages the listener in a search for the extramusical. But even as the listener enfolds sound and world in the moment of audition, the world rebounds as the sound echoes away. A gap between the listener and the world remains, despite our efforts to fill it.

For the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, it is precisely the interaction of the desire for meaning with this unbridgeable gap that results in musical listening: "Musical listening seems, then, to be . . . a relationship to

meaning, a tension toward it: but toward it completely ahead of signification, meaning in its nascent state, in the state of return for which the end of this return is not given (the concept, the idea, the information). . . . To be listening is to be inclined toward a reserve that is anterior and posterior to any signifying punctuation.”²⁵ According to Nancy, musical listening is an attentive relationship to meaning that reveals the gaps in symbolizing while it revels in the social and embodied sensuousness of its reflexive processes. Musical vibrations themselves are a repetition of difference that can be perceived as a unity of pitch, timbre, and rhythm. That simple translation represents a nearly instantaneous leap from the physical sensations to a subjective judgment of musicality. When we listen, we find ourselves drawn to those gaps between sensation and music, wanting to fill them with something like meaning. Our attention is drawn to what lies just beyond our ability to understand it, those sounds that seem musical. A great song on the radio, or spat through our computer by Pandora or Spotify, forces us to ask: what was that? A set of vibrations overlapping in innovative waveforms forces reflection: Is this reggaeton? Drum and bass? Electro-minimalism? Just another pop song? Nancy refers to this appealing quality of engagement with the musical as *sens*: “To be listening is always to be on the edge of meaning, or in an edgy meaning of extremity, and as if the sound were precisely nothing else than this edge, this fringe, this margin—at least the sound that is musically listened to, that is gathered and scrutinized for itself, not, however as an acoustic phenomenon (or not merely as one) but as a resonant meaning, a meaning whose *sense* is supposed to be found in resonance, and only in resonance.”²⁶ Repeating, resounding, resonance presents the possibility of musical *sens*. It is an effect of our attentive listening, one form of the insistence that the world be feelingful and intelligible. Nancy uses the French word *sens* to represent the general form of this longing for shared meaning. The lure of *sens* pulls us toward a world of meaning in a recursive set of ongoing judgments that demand new configurations of the sensible and the material. As we work to make sense out of the *sens* of music’s musicality, we attune ourselves to music’s formal characteristics—even if we know “nothing about music.” Music is a field of relations made audible and meaningful through its form. These relations are what we hear the moment we decide that what we are hearing is music. Even when listening to noise music, once we decide that this noise is music, our attention has been turned to the formal relations entrained in and emergent from those sounds. This process happens so immediately that even when we

do not have the official musicological language to label these relations, we feel them and apprehend them as we listen. These formal qualities extend beyond music's syntax (i.e., metrical and pitch relations) to include such properties as sound quality (timbre/noise) and intensity (volume/tempo), among other factors. These formal qualities of music carry no necessary narrative; they are nonindexical. Instead they are first experienced bodily as a series of regularized pulsations and tones. But those pulses and tones are immediately transformed in a process that is both abstract and embodied. Through our irrepressible insistence on the meaningfulness of those sounds, through our ability to construct a form from those pulsations and tones, embedded and enfolded with our subjective placement in the world, music makes sensuous and audible the material, social, and political relations of its time. This is why Adorno insists on a formalist method for his materialist aesthetics. "The unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form," he says. "This, not the insertion of objective elements, defines the relation of art to society."²⁷

Filtered through the discursive structuration of subjectivity, the experience of musical beauty is an instantaneous judgment about the right form of relations of difference. That is what we hear; that is what we feel; that is what we talk about when we long to make meaning out of music. The pleasure of musical beauty is the harmony of what we know and what we feel. But this pleasure is also the intriguing beckoning of what we don't quite know toward what we might feel. It is in this beckoning, in its ability to produce feelings of coherence from nearly boundless waves of incomplete repetition, that music renders the political.

DEMOCRACY'S IDENTITY PROBLEM

This luring, inclining, yearning quality of musical sound is the basis of music's political force. The desire generated through sens intervenes in one of the key problems in democratic theory. Although this problem can be stated in a number of ways, it ultimately reduces down to the question of difference within a pluralist democracy. How does a state legitimate itself with respect to an internally divided populace? How does the state, and indeed the political community itself, determine the borders between those differences included within itself and those excluded from its reach? What relations of difference constitute the political community and which ones must stand outside? Who should be of the polis?

These are not questions that can be answered rationally. They are always judgments made on the basis of a felt sense of right relations of difference. Traditionally, the recognition of political partners as equal participants in the democratic community has been mediated through a process of mutual identification with the nation, imagined as a site not only of formal equality but also of substantive commonality. As the political theorist Clarissa Hayward articulates it: "Democracy requires . . . democratic citizens . . . who regard one another as political equals, who are motivated to engage one another in collective deliberation, and who are willing to accept as legitimate the laws that democratic processes yield." This equality requirement most typically devolves into some version of group identity. Hayward writes, "Democracy needs some form of citizen-identity for purposes of integration. Individual citizens can be motivated to look beyond what they understand to be in their self-interest and what they understand to be in the interest of their familiars, and to do so for the good of their fellow citizens, who remain to them *strangers*, only if they feel some sense of identification with those strangers: some sense of solidarity with them, some sense of sharing with them in a collective purpose or a collective project."²⁸ Citizenship is a recursive political category. It is formally awarded only after the sense of belonging to the polis can be recognized by others. This suggests that the formal category of citizenship must come after the recognition of a shared substantive identity. But democracy's identity problem is not easily solved. This desire for a shared identity is constantly haunted by an insistent demand for the same, a sufficiently constrained identity that can be quickly recognized and easily confirmed. The cost of following this temptation is well known, resulting in the violent monotonal roar of fascism, or the smug Muzak of white supremacy.²⁹

Perhaps, then, one ought to abandon the search for a shared identity of the polis that can be rationally described and accept in its place not only the affective but also the fundamentally irrational aspects of the political and its identifications. Perhaps it would be best to recognize that every politically salient group is constituted by and of difference and that political identification requires neither the suppression nor the transcendence of those differences. This discordance of the polis is one of the basic assumptions of what Chantall Mouffe calls "agonistic pluralism." For Mouffe, difference must not be understood as a problem to be managed, but seen instead as the very energy and force of the political. Building on the conceptual foundation that underlay her collaboration

with Ernesto Laclau in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Mouffe argues that the contradictory and indeterminate nature of political alliances is the productive outgrowth of the irresolvable contradictions at the heart of democracies. The generative contradiction, the irreducible conflict between ideals of liberty and equality, that constitutes democracies results in “nonachievement, incompleteness, and openness,” guaranteeing continual struggle. As she puts it, the “common good can never be actualized, it . . . cannot have a real existence.” It can only ever be an ideal—of which there will always be competing visions. Ongoing conflict is central to life in a democracy—at its periphery and at its core.³⁰ Democracies require *something more* than rational procedures and *something other* than substantive identity to hold them together in the face of this fundamental conflict and the inescapable fact of difference. Rather than attempting to eradicate or even mediate difference so that reason can shape political relations, perhaps it may be best to recognize the role of aesthetic judgments in the acts of recognition that constitute a political community.³¹

Political judgments can be understood as aesthetic judgments insofar as they are based upon a felt sense of right relations that cohere in the form of the political community. Like musical sound, the political community is constructed of difference. The complexity of the political community is built out of architectonically arranged power relations that emerge from, even as they shape, struggles on the ground. The judgment of the legitimacy of the political community is nothing other than a judgment that the set of relations of difference inherent in the community results in a sense of balance or well-formedness. The sense of the political community is always a judgment about the proportional relations of difference, about the beauty of an object constructed from difference.

THE AESTHETICALLY EMERGENT POLITICAL COMMUNITY

Political judgment and musical judgment are based upon the extrarational capacity to evaluate the harmony, the sense of balance and the legitimacy, of a set of relations of difference. But the judgment of this harmony requires a particular approach, a specific attitude toward listening and the political. Earlier I borrowed Nancy’s idea that musical listening is a relationship to meaning, a kind of leaning toward the sound that provides the opportunity to reflect on the immediacy of the aesthetic perception that transforms pulsations and tones into music—an

attunement to sens. I want to turn now to a different aspect of Nancy's work to buttress my argument about the aesthetic component of political judgment.

Instead of having a primary reputation as an aesthetician or a music theorist, Nancy is better known as a political philosopher. In particular, he has developed some important ideas about the formation of political communities that can help illuminate the aesthetic aspect of political judgment. Alert to the problems of essentialism and arbitrary exclusion that result from traditional communitarian thought with its dependence on a preexisting commonality, Nancy has worked out an approach to the concept of community that does not require a shared element around which the community must form. For Nancy, community is a process, not an object. Community is also not an experience that we have. Instead it is best described as a leaning toward each other, a *clinamen*, that "makes us be." Part of what it means to be a person, in other words, is this clining, this leaning toward others. Part of what enables our very existence as individuals is what Nancy calls "being-in-common," where the common is both an effect of the actions of individuals and the ground out of which those actions emerge. Communities do not exist on their own—they are not immediately apprehensible objects. That is what makes it so difficult to talk about communities. The effort to talk about *a* community, as a thing, often leads to errors of essentialism in the search for the common factor that all members share. When people try to solidify a community, to reify it into a *thing* that has its own existence, they must restrict its constitutive operations. They must stop the unpredictable but continually productive and transformative qualities of being-in-common in order to create a set of rigid social limits. The boundaries that result are produced at the cost of stopping the productivity of the relationships among persons, the ever-continuing production of being-in-common. This stabilization of community produces the illusion of a center, an essence that all members must have in common. This freezing of human relationships is the opposite of community. Rather than thinking of a community as a thing—as a society that "must be defended"—community should be understood as the productive, active, and unending process of creating being-in-common.³²

This active productive concept of community provides a way of understanding how the polis forms. Even though Nancy describes a process of being-in-common that is never completely stopped and that has potentially infinite expansion, it is evident that humans sort themselves into groups that they understand to be different from each other, with com-