

## Taste, Disgust, and Feminist Aesthetics

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### **Abstract:**

The fourth volume in the Routledge series "Understanding Feminist Philosophy," Carolyn Korsmeyer's *Gender and Aesthetics: An Introduction*, aims to provide undergraduate philosophy students with some grounding in feminist aesthetics. The initial chapters provide a clear, although not unproblematical, summary of the ways gender is implicated in aesthetic theories of Western philosophy, how these implications bear on women's artistic education and practice, and feminist critiques of Western aesthetics. The final chapters theorize beyond traditional aesthetics to contextualize the challenging art of the 20th and 21st centuries, especially certain types of feminist visual and performance art. Particularly noteworthy are Korsmeyer's discussions of feminist artists' use of the abject and disgust as an aesthetic response. While these are challenging issues, and Korsmeyer must be applauded for taking them on, they raise numerous questions that she fails to address, and sometimes even to acknowledge. Although Korsmeyer includes music in the earlier chapters, the later chapters deal almost exclusively with visual art, and this omission raises questions about whether music is compatible with more recent aesthetic theories.

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**\*\*\*Note: Full text of article below**

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## **Electronic Article**

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## Taste, Disgust, and Feminist Aesthetics

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The fourth volume in the Routledge series “Understanding Feminist Philosophy,” Carolyn Korsmeyer’s *Gender and Aesthetics: An Introduction*, aims to provide undergraduate philosophy students with some grounding in feminist aesthetics. The initial chapters provide a clear, although not unproblematical, summary of the ways gender is implicated in aesthetic theories of Western philosophy, how these implications bear on women’s artistic education and practice, and feminist critiques of Western aesthetics. The final chapters theorize beyond traditional aesthetics to contextualize the challenging art of the 20th and 21st centuries, especially certain types of feminist visual and performance art. Particularly noteworthy are Korsmeyer’s discussions of feminist artists’ use of the abject and disgust as an aesthetic response. While these are challenging issues, and Korsmeyer must be applauded for taking them on, they raise numerous questions that she fails to address, and sometimes even to acknowledge. Although Korsmeyer includes music in the earlier chapters, the later chapters deal almost exclusively with visual art, and this omission raises questions about whether music is compatible with more recent aesthetic theories.

Placing into historical context the conceptual bases of Western beliefs about art, artists, beauty, and aesthetics, Korsmeyer draws mostly upon 18th-century philosophers, most notably Kant and Burke, although she places the origin of the concept of “fine arts” (and artists) closer to the Early Modern period (Renaissance, to most music scholars), and reaches back to classical Greece for such concepts as “genius.” Much of this material, which repeatedly points up the ways “the feminine” wound up on the devalued side of binary oppositions (fine art vs. craft; reason vs. emotion; genius vs. muse, etc.) has been explicated in various works of feminist musicology and ethnomusicology, and therefore is probably review for many readers of this journal.<sup>1</sup> But Korsmeyer’s presentation is unusually clear, and she does add some succinct



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insights and intriguing details. For example, in explaining the separation of “fine art” from craft, of purely aesthetic value from use value, Korsmeyer points out,

The notion of aesthetic value emerged from new approaches to pleasure and to the receptivity and appreciation that were summed up in the idea of ‘taste.’ ... As the notion of fine art, in contrast with utilitarian arts, began to develop, more and more theorists maintained that the true value of art is purely aesthetic, that art is for beauty and for the aesthetic pleasure it furnishes. Reinforcing these values, certain artistic institutions arose in the modern period that provided venues for pure aesthetic enjoyment, most particularly concert halls for listening to music and art museums where paintings were made available to the public to appreciate the efforts of artists past and present, who were now conceived to be persons who created for beauty and aesthetic insight (28).

Feminist art historians have commented on the gendering of the “art vs. craft” binary since the 1970s, noting that “craft” is polluted by both its female associations and its utilitarian dimensions. But Korsmeyer goes further to suggest that the very notions of the aesthetic and of taste developed in contradistinction to (typically) female practice, and that the institutions in which women have so long sought equity were founded specifically to cultivate these elite pleasures. Thus, “structural sexism” in the arts reaches all the way back to fine art’s original premises.<sup>2</sup>

These origins have considerable import for rethinking music education, for inequality is built into structures of the things we teach, from playing concert music to its appreciation. Can the aesthetic be “refunctioned,” or is it only and always a privileged pleasure? Can there really be “art for all,” as some populist movements have suggested, or does that proposition always suggest a diminution of art’s aesthetic value?<sup>3</sup> Can we shunt the elitism inherent in “the aesthetic” by teaching social contexts and use value along with “appreciation,” as some feminist criticism has suggested, or do the origins of “the aesthetic” make it impervious to such approaches?

A concept from feminist anthropology that would have helped Korsmeyer sort through the various gendered binaries she addresses is the “nature/culture” dichotomy, articulated by anthropologist Sherry Ortner in 1972.<sup>4</sup> Ortner argues that virtually every human society either implicitly or explicitly aligns women with nature and men with culture, an assumption that undergirds not only the (purely aesthetic) art versus (utilitarian) craft opposition, but also

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explains why what men do is accorded more cultural value than what women do, even if what they do are very similar things. For example, everyday, utilitarian cooking is done most often by women, but chefs of *haute cuisine* are more often men, a fact Korsmeyer does not consider in her discussion of whether or not food can be classified as art (a subject to which I will return anon). Clearly, many musical distinctions we discuss as educators and scholars, such as venue, genre, texture, timbre and form, map easily onto the nature/culture divide, and are implicitly gendered because of this mapping.

The nature/culture concept permits a more grounded discussion of gendered binaries that can explain apparent discrepancies, as the following example illustrates. Korsmeyer spends a considerable portion of Chapter 1, on art and artists, explaining that, in our inherited conceptions of art, rationality is a defining quality of an artist, and that women, with their putatively greater emotionality, cannot satisfy this qualification. But rationality—so crucial in the formulations of Kant and others—was a dim second in the philosophy of the influential Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who argued that passion rather than reason drove creativity. Not incidentally, Rousseau believed that men’s greater passion distinguished them from women, whose writing he found to be “a hundred times more reasoned than impassioned.”<sup>5</sup> Although an inversion of Kant’s gendering of the intellect/emotion binary, Rousseau’s formulation yet preserves a duality in which women are aligned with the devalued term. Rousseau’s assessment of male and female creativity accords with his other writings concerning gender, such as *Émile* (1762), which makes clear the domestic obligations of women, implicitly linking them to the family, reproduction, and nature.

To offer an ethnomusicological example of this inversion of the reason/emotion binary, Jane Sugarman has shown that Prespa Albanian men sing more ornately and with greater affect than do women, marking emotion as both a male privilege and a source of musical creativity. Again, it is woman’s reproductive role, her allegedly closer alignment with nature, that “explains” these differences in creative ability.<sup>6</sup> Thus, while the “rational man/emotional woman” trope is certainly a dominant interpretation in Western culture, it is not universal. The nature/culture dyad provides a framework for understanding why, even when understandings of male and female qualities are reversed in particular cultural or historical contexts, *whichever quality is more prized by a culture is attributed to men rather than to women*. Thus, there can be

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considerable difference in the construction of gender without any improvement in the status of women as artists.

In my favorite chapter, “Deep Gender: Taste and Food,” Korsmeyer elucidates the gendered hierarchy of the five senses, and the implications this hierarchy has for what is considered to be an acceptable topic for philosophical inquiry. The supremacy of vision among the senses, with its attendant implications of domination, has already been theorized by feminist critics, but Korsmeyer calls on her own philosophical expertise—food—to show that smell and taste are relatively devalued senses because “they don’t seem to be required in the developments of higher types of knowledge” (87).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, unlike vision and hearing, which operate at a distance, smell and taste work within closer ranges, emphasizing their alignment with the “animal” or “bodily” senses. Touch lies somewhere between these two poles, as it is at once bodily and close range, but also an important means of verifying truths that may elude hearing and vision, and therefore plays an important cognitive function. To demonstrate the gender significance of this sense hierarchy, Korsmeyer calls on the mind/body binary from earlier chapters as well as the associations of smell and taste with eating and drinking and therefore nurturance and domesticity, and the conventional assessment that smell and taste are private and subjective pleasures, sensual rather than aesthetic, and therefore inappropriate subjects for aesthetic judgment. (Again, the differences Korsmeyer takes care to explain map easily onto the nature/culture dyad.)

Defending the aesthetic importance of food and the sense of taste, Korsmeyer considers whether cooking qualifies as art. More than a merely personal pleasure, she argues, food is invested with meaning through symbolic shapes and tastes and ceremonial and social uses, and fine food manifests qualities objective enough to be discussed among educated experts. But, she concludes, “food simply does not qualify as a fine-art form in any recognizable sense,” because fine arts emphasize “the autonomy of art and the contemplative distance between audience and artwork” (99). Food and its preparation, she argues, have certain qualities that are not “favored by traditional concepts of fine art,” including the repetitiveness of cooking and food’s instability of physical form. Food and cooking, her arguments suggest, do not conform to the “work” concept of art. But then, neither does musical performance.

This parallel bears reflection: “art music” seems to take its ontological status from the score—a physically stable form, “settled” by publication and visually apprehended—rather than from sounding music, which is aurally apprehended and the actual source of aesthetic enjoyment. Musical performance not secured by the careful rendering of a score holds a relatively low status in classical music institutions, and musicians, who, like cooks, perform repetitive actions, creating anew each time the pleasure to be consumed, do not enjoy the same prestige as the composers who create the physical, visual score. Thus, as in Korsmeyer’s sense hierarchy, vision trumps hearing, even in music, and by comparison to certain aspects of food and cooking, music does not qualify as an object of aesthetic contemplation. But historically that was not true: in the 19th century, music was the most highly regarded of the arts and its putative material insubstantiality was part of the reason. Thus, it seems that the guardians of fine art use other criteria to include some arts and exclude others. Korsmeyer is content to let the categories of fine art stand, but concludes this section with the statement that food “has aesthetic importance in its own right and need not borrow status from art” (100).

An aspect Korsmeyer does not consider here is the possibility that the limits of scent and smell may not have been tested to the extent that “higher” senses have, and the lack of interest in exploring them may be due to their gender associations. She quotes the aesthetician Frank Sibley’s assessment that, “perfumes and flavors...are necessarily limited: unlike the major arts, they have no expressive connections with emotions, love or hate, grief, joy, terror, suffering, yearning, pity, or sorrow—or with plot or character development.”<sup>8</sup> But anyone who has been in the “aroma therapy” department of their local health food megastore knows that a multitude of claims are now being made for scent, including many pertaining to emotion. Moreover, a well-known brand of air freshener now markets aroma with narrative content: “Scent Stories” allows its consumer to select a sequence of scents that changes over some limited span of time. Leave it to capitalism to plumb the depths unreachable by philosophical inquiry.

When I was a child in the 1960s, I was excited by some talk about “smellelevision” and disappointed that it never came to pass (my closest experience was attending a movie about Cajun culture at the Fox Venice [California] Theater, where the smells of cooking Cajun food wafted from the kitchen as the film played). Was the talk of smellelevision just a cruel hoax? Was

it impracticable because smell lacks the distance properties of hearing and vision? Or was the idea merely dropped because smell was too trivial a sense to pursue? While the examples above may not be aesthetic applications of scent, they do suggest that the premises by which scent has been judged “unaesthetic” are not entirely accurate, and that, as Korsmeyer argues, its devaluation in the sense hierarchy is ideological and gender-based.

Korsmeyer contextualizes feminist visual art within contemporary art and its theories, and these chapters raise the most vexing questions. Arguing for the importance of defining what constitutes art, she opines that, without a way to include and exclude potential members of this category, there would no adequate “response to the puzzles that the artworld amply delivers to us nowadays” (112), and that the ambiguities inherent in much contemporary—especially feminist—art “cannot be resolved without the context that theoretical aesthetics provides for the practice of art” (152). The argument itself, although not its values, reminds me of Tom Wolfe’s critique, *The Painted Word*, which maintains that modern art is not meaningful to the public beyond experts’ verbal explanations for it.<sup>9</sup> Because much feminist art challenges traditional aesthetics as well as gender-based social oppression, and because it often situates itself in relation to historical precedents, much feminist art demands theorizing (and theorists), Korsmeyer suggests.

Supporting her arguments are the “institutional theory,” American philosopher George Dickie’s attempt to define art, and the opinion of art critic Arthur Danto that nowadays art is about meaning rather than aesthetic responses, and that perceiving art *as art* demands “an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art” (115). Although Korsmeyer is clearly sensitive to the burdens of history, noting that the concepts of art and artist and their imputation of masculinity have not changed radically despite radical changes in feminist and post-modern art (128), she also opines that “the institutional theory... is not overtly exclusionary” (115). Overtly, maybe not, but as one of the primary texts of feminist musicology, Marcia Citron’s *Gender and the Musical Canon*, demonstrates, institutions, the opinions of those who make policy at institutions, and women’s limited access to many institutions, have been critical aspects of the omission of women’s works from the musical canon. A theory that trusts institutions to define what counts as art is not one I expect to embrace any time soon.

Korsmeyer makes distinctions between philosophical definitions of art and standards of evaluation, and this strikes me as ivory towerism of the most naïve sort, as these excerpts show:

We do not find with contemporary philosophical concepts of art and of the artist the same kinds of exclusionary categories that prevailed as the fine-art tradition developed. (This is not to say that the standards of evaluation and selection in the artworld today have erased all of the skewed value structures that excluded women's accomplishments of the past. That is a matter for a study of the critical reception of art, which I have not done here) (128).

And a little further:

It is ironic that although the value distinctions associated with mind and body are still pretty well entrenched—for habits of abstract evaluation seem hard to break—the metaphysics that used to subtend them is no longer in place. The gendered values that traditional concepts assumed in philosophy of the past apparently fade less speedily than the explicit philosophical tenets adopted at any given period (133).

Even conceding that the academic field of philosophy is less tradition-bound than the field I know best (musicology), I would be very surprised to learn that philosophy as a discipline has shaken off its Enlightenment past and completely jettisoned the mind/body duality. Further, if there is only one operational philosophical trend at any one moment—as the second excerpt implies—then philosophy is distinct among all other disciplines. Finally, like musicology and many other disciplines, philosophy has a limited influence on what people believe, but common cultural beliefs have a great deal of influence on philosophers. Philosophy doesn't prescribe gendered values or anything else, but rather explains what already exists, in this realm or another. As an academic discipline, philosophy has been affected by intellectual feminism, but most of the world still lives by its gut, without reflection or self-examination, and its knee-jerk evaluations are rehearsed *ad nauseum* in popular culture, especially advertising, every day. It is hardly surprising and certainly not ironic that philosophy should have made some advances over the culture at large, but it remains to be seen what feminist aesthetic philosophy can contribute to the institutional, critical, and popular understandings of feminist art.

The most challenging and fascinating discussions of this book revolve around feminist artworks that confront traditional aesthetics by using materials coded feminine, such as fiber, food, and the (female) artist's body, engaging disgust, which Korsmeyer argues as a parallel to the sublime. (She uses the theories of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray to introduce the concept

of the abject, which can arouse disgust, but this line of inquiry seems peripheral to her primary argument.) The sublime, as she has already shown in earlier chapters, was theorized by Enlightenment philosophers as a “masculine” aesthetic quality counterposed to the feminine “beautiful,” which elicited transcendent feelings of awe or terror. An oversimplified music analogy from 19th-century music discourse is the putatively sublime music of Beethoven, so characterized due to its scale and presumed content, vis-à-vis the beauty of Mozart’s. The perception of rough-hewn and mighty mountains, wild and threatening nature, near-death experiences, or a glimpse of the Almighty were regarded as sublime, beyond human comprehension, and therefore transformative. Intrinsic to the experience was the perceiver’s ability to exert mastery over the sublime object by surmounting the fear it elicits, and thereby realizing that human thought is unbounded by nature (133-34). In opposition to this sublime of mastery and domination, Korsmeyer cites Barbara Freeman’s concept of the “feminine sublime,” a domain of experience “in which the subject enters into relation with an otherness...that is excessive and unrepresentable” (136).<sup>10</sup> Rather than exert domination, the feminine sublime “accepts its relation with other forces and a certain loss of individuation” (136). While accepting otherness rather than dominating it certainly has appealing aspects, especially with respect to nature, the alignment of masculinity with mastery and femininity with acceptance is problematical for reasons that are probably obvious to readers of this journal.

Because it is visceral, overwhelming, and “unrepresentable”—in the sense that it is not seemly to represent it—the disgusting parallels the sublime, according to Korsmeyer. The “emotion of disgust [can be] aroused by art as part of understanding and appreciation,” she argues, where disgust can be a part of realizing the transgressive and imaginative aspects of the artistic representation (144). Disgust and the abject can, indeed, lead to reflection on substantive philosophical issues, such as mortality. Many of Korsmeyer’s examples involve women’s bodies, functions, and fluids, such as Joanna Frueh’s tale of a girl who tastes her own menstrual blood, the staged and sometimes horrifying self-portraits of Cindy Sherman, and Hannah Wilke’s parodies of classic nudes using her own cancer-ridden and obviously ill body. The political and artistic fearlessness of these women is awesome in the non-trivial sense, and they do indeed

provoke thought: Korsmeyer makes a compelling case for these feminist artists and their use of disgust.

Since Korsmeyer demurs on the issue of reception, however, she does not address the *Realpolitik* of gender in this art other than to comment that, “The evocation of the powerful aversion of disgust is a daring artistic enterprise, for it risks both alienation of audiences and misinterpretation of intent and meaning” (150). She glides past the relationship of disgust and pornography, but this warrants much more discussion, for disgust is very much a part of pornography’s aesthetic appeal. I’m not talking about the airbrushed classic aestheticism of bourgeois soft-core magazines like *Playboy*, but rather the magazines, films and websites that cater to particular erotic tastes, like children, very fat people, amputees, bestiality, etc., in all their gross materiality. Their representation of “warm, dark sticky interior[s] where unmentionable substances are kept hidden away” (146), the celebration of un-beautiful female bodies, the free flow of fluids of all kinds, and fascination with the abject (which Freud associated with childbirth, but also with defecation) exceed the transgressive qualities of any feminist art I have viewed. So it really does come down to “intent and meaning,” but who controls meaning?

As Korsmeyer makes clear in her discussion of how Dada became ART, “the power of history trumps individual intent” (114). And since history burdens the female body with tenacious meanings, the prospect of an artist using her own body to demystify or reinterpret femaleness seems grim. With the amount of exposure women’s bodies receive in contemporary culture, you would think there are no mysteries left, yet women’s bodies as symbols of male visual delectation, sexual pleasure, reproduction and nurture do not seem even vaguely shaken. Moreover, in our post-modern “death of the author” climate, is meaning any longer the purview of the woman artist? I suggest that, for better or for worse, it is not under the artist’s control, and that in the absence of an unequivocal message—which many would say puts it beyond the realm of art into the category of “agit-prop”—the artist’s intent is very likely to be subverted to conform to historical interpretations.<sup>11</sup> All of this is not to say that feminist artists should not use their bodies or evoke disgust, but rather that, even in an introduction, the complexity of these issues demands more context, more consideration of implications for women’s relation to

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culture, and more acknowledgment of related phenomena, such as pornography, the grotesque, and camp. (Anyone unfamiliar with disgust should see John Waters' film *Pink Flamingos*.)

Korsmeyer does not discuss how feminist strategies of using devalued artistic materials, artists' bodies, and the evocation of disgust do or could work in music, but it is worth considering. Susan McClary has discussed the performance artist Laurie Anderson, who does use her body, but not in a markedly sexual, and certainly not a disgusting way, and Diamanda Galás, whose performances of *Plague Mass* do evoke the type of disgust and provoke the reflective response Korsmeyer speaks of here. But these musicians are seldom regarded as musicians, much less composers, but rather as performance artists, some type of half-breed only grudgingly accepted into discussions of music history. Women musicians more solidly within popular music traditions, for example Tori Amos and P.J. Harvey, have written and sung disruptive lyrics, foregrounded their bodies in performance, and used certain aspects of disgust, as when Amos posed suckling a pig.<sup>12</sup> Punk rock feminists and rappers like Li'l Kim operate outside female music traditions by virtue of their masculine genres, their unbeautiful aural presentations, and use of "dirty" and sexuality explicit words. But none of these artists has made much impact on how we think about and teach music—certainly not the way feminists like Karen Finley and Cindy Sherman have shaken the institutions of art—in part because a gulf remains between popular and classical music.

The institutions of classical music, still largely bound up in 19th-century ideas of transcendence, reject embodiment as a feature of music, although in practice sexiness is a common music marketing tool. Such body hypocrisy would seem to demand intervention, but it is not clear whether it is possible to use visual art's methods to challenge gendered concepts of music because, as with Laurie Anderson and Diamanda Galás, acknowledging the body shunts the artist into a different, ostensibly inferior aesthetic category.

Finally, Korsmeyer's attention to critiquing binaries does not, as one might expect, lead her to question the binary division of gender. "Gender and Aesthetics" ultimately means "Women and aesthetics," and although that is a legitimate topic, to equate women with gender—as though men do not have gender, and as though there are no other available genders—is obviously problematical. Regardless of its shortcomings, I found *Gender and*

*Aesthetics* to be interesting, thought provoking, and appropriate for its intended audience. These issues warrant much discussion, particularly in music, which always seems behind the curve.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Ellen Koskoff, ed., *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); and Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> “Structural sexism” is a term used by Marxist art historian Griselda Pollock and others. See, for example, Pollock’s introduction in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988) 1-17.

<sup>3</sup> I think especially of the members of the “cultural front,” as Michael Denning discusses in *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Sherry B. Ortner, “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?” *Feminist Studies*, 1 (Fall, 1972) 5-31.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Lettre à M. d’Alembert sur les Spectacles* (Amsterdam: Marc Michael Rey, 1758), 193n; quoted in Marcia Citron, “Women and the Lied, 1775-1850,” in Jane Bowers and Judith Tick, eds., *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition, 1150-1950* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 225. Translation is Citron’s.

<sup>6</sup> Jane C. Sugarman, *Engendering Song: Singing and Subjectivity at Prespa Albanian Weddings* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Korsmeyer cites her own work as the basis for this chapter: *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Frank Sibley, “Tastes, Smells, and Aesthetics,” in John Benson, Betty Redfern, and Jeremy Roxbee-Cox, eds., *Approach to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001) 207-55. Quoted in Korsmeyer, 94.

<sup>9</sup> Tom Wolfe, *The Painted Word* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975).

<sup>10</sup> Here Korsmeyer quotes from Barbara Claire Freeman, “The Feminine Sublime,” in Michael Kelly, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Aesthetics*, vol. 4 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 332.

<sup>11</sup> Here is one more shred of evidence that everything having to do with women has already been sexualized: Frederick Kaufman’s forthcoming book *A Short History of the American Stomach* argues, among other things, that the camera work, imagery, and speech on the Food Channel resemble those of pornographic films (Interview with Kaufman on “On the Media,” National Public Radio, 9 October 2005).

<sup>12</sup> For analyses of songs by Amos, Harvey, and others, see Lori Burns and Melisse Lafrance, *Disruptive Divas: Feminism, Identity, and Popular Music* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

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