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Kathryn Alexander

University of Arizona, [kalexander@arizona.edu](mailto:kalexander@arizona.edu)

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# The Study of Music and Gender

Kathryn Alexander | University of Arizona

**Abstract:** This article provides an overview of critical issues and scholarly developments pertaining to music with gender.

**Keywords:** music notes, ethnomusicology

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**Gender:** a state of experiencing (mis-)alignment with socially constructed roles, behaviors, expressions, and identities attached to categories of bodies delineated by a culture's unique criteria. Gender may hinge on visible anatomy (sex), embodied practices, or other characteristics.

## Gender Identity and Music Research

Gender is a category of experience that is both uniquely personal and heavily impacted by cultural contexts. It is a way of organizing human beings and bodies into alliances formed around the meanings, social roles, and characteristics (anatomical, hormonal, chromosomal, and behavioral) that attach to and demarcate genders within a particular culture. Gender is one of those slippery, elusive frames of embodied cultural knowledge. The ways we define gender, such as clothing, behaviors, or other means are not innately gendered: We give these symbols gendered meanings within our culture's norms and belief systems. Though its meaning is thus culturally constructed, gender has profound cultural relevance. How gender is defined thus also varies between cultures.

Gender identity is the experience of gender and how a person makes their own space within or outside the boundaries of a socially legible gender category, such as "male" or "female"; this may involve creating alternate cultural spaces in which their gender identity can be meaningful. In contrast, sex is anatomy, hormones, and chromosomes. Gender may be based around sex characteristics; however, gender identity and sex need not map onto each other. Since the 1970s, gender-focused activists have worked through scholarship, legislation, and community action to dissolve these linkages. For example, my own work on LGBTQ country western cultural forms like dance and rodeo explores how these enable a greater diversity of queer people to create meaningful identities and empowered communities (see Alexander 2019).

## Second Wave Feminism and Impacts on Research Methods

In the latter twentieth century, music scholars began devoting sustained attention to the ways that gender impacts musical phenomena and communities. Beginning in the 1970s, music scholars took inspiration from the social justice activism of Second Wave feminists, whose primary goals included greater equity for women in areas such as reproductive rights and pay equity. At the same time, those marginalized in America's mainstream feminist movement, such as lesbian activists and feminists of color from many ethnic backgrounds, advocated for their own communities' rights alongside women's rights. These women faced homophobia and racism in addition to sexism and misogyny. Drawing on these new currents, ethnomusicologists initially sought to reveal how women's experiences and roles as musicians differed from men's in various cultures. In the 1980s, North American ethnomusicologists increasingly paid attention to gender (Sugarman 2019:71), and ethnomusicologists also began to recognize that male informants had long framed (male) ethnomusicologists' understandings of musical cultures. They observed that this resulted in systemically gendered perspectives (Nettl 1983:334). The recognition that a researcher's gender impacts their research offered opportunities to fill in previously undocumented aspects of gender within music cultures, such as musics performed only by women for women, as is the case of healing rituals in Islamic eastern Africa and the Arabian Gulf, such as Zār ceremonies.

Female ethnomusicologists initially addressed this gap by refocusing on women's participation in musical cultures (Koskoff 1987; Moore 1988; Abu-Lughod 1990; Doubleday [1988] 2006; Magrini 2003). The scope of this work gradually broadened to consider the impacts of gender more widely, and no longer limited itself to the experiences of women (Roy 2019; Thorn 2019; Spiller 2019). Researchers increasingly highlighted the culturally constructed reality of genders and the systemic nature of gendered experience. For example, Jeff Roy explores third gender categories in India, known as *hijra* (2019). Meanwhile, Henry Spiller's investigation of cross-dressing performances in West Java examines how these performances reinscribe normative gender roles (2019). Scholars also considered intersectional experiences that include gender, producing a growing body of work that looks at how racial and gender identities together impact musical participation (Gaunt 2006; Keyes 2006; Wong 2006; Hayes 2010). In the 2000s, scholars produced a steady stream of edited collections encompassing a wide range of topics and issues surrounding women's participation in musical cultures (Moisala and Diamond 2000; Magowan and Wrazen 2013; Bernstein 2014; Koskoff 2014).

## Reflexivity and the Role of the Researcher

Ethnography is a key method for generating research data in fields such as anthropology and ethnomusicology. Until the latter 20<sup>th</sup> century, “good” ethnographic research was marked by its presumed objectivity—meaning that the researcher was impartial in gathering data, something which is valued in the empirical sciences. Social sciences like anthropology attempted to replicate this idea of objectivity as much as possible. One of the most sustained impacts of a feminist approach is the rise of “reflexivity,” meaning the ability to interrogate one’s own subject position, biases, and motivations. Early twentieth century research attempted to remain objective and did not analyze the role of the researcher; however, later scholars questioned whether such research was as impartial as it claimed or whether it instead masked biases rather than acknowledging them. Reflexivity arose in the 1980s and became an expected praxis by the early 2000s (Barz and Cooley 2008:13). Through reflexivity, the fieldworker, or the researcher engaging directly with communities, explicitly recognizes that their body’s identities have cultural meaning. Further, they recognize that these identities impact the community they work in and consequently influence the research they produce. In short, the researching self is always a participant rather than someone separate or apart from the research. Researchers also began to recognize their place as agents of change who could impact the subjects of their research, and how research might in turn impact them (Hahn 2007; Wong 2008, 2019). To capture this complexity, practitioners of autoethnography—an ethnography that centrally includes the researcher’s experiences as a data source—work to thoroughly identify and unpack one’s place in a research site. This dissolves the idea that fieldworkers are neutral and interchangeable: Who we are matters for our work, methods, outcomes, and even safety. Autoethnography is a key method through which gender has become more accessibly documented, defined, discussed, and dissolved (Alexander 2019; Castro 2019).

Gender-focused ethnomusicologists broadly acknowledge the real impacts of gender, both as an analytical lens and embodied identity. Gender impacts epistemology (what we know), methodology (how we come to know it), and ontology (how we make sense of what we know). With these acknowledgements, once-canonical research methods were recognized as dependent on a scholar’s privileged gender identity rather than universally available to anyone. Fieldworkers increasingly acknowledge their gender—what they feel and how they are perceived by others—since ethnomusicology began to acknowledge its colonial background and began to work towards more ethical research practices and scholarship. For example, ethnomusicologist Veronica Doubleday demonstrates responsiveness to her field site and interlocutors by choosing to veil while working with women in Afghanistan ([1988] 2006). Similarly, Carol Babiracki directly addresses the impact of her gender identity, assigned gender roles, and interlocutors’ expectations of her based on her gender during her field research in India and on her subsequent representation of that research in writing (1997/2008). She ultimately finds gender neutral-

ity impossible, a conclusion that challenges the belief held by earlier generations of predominantly white, male scholars that they were neutral observers. Nicole Beaudry likewise chooses to downplay her “feminine identity” during her field research but questions this decision, recognizing that her belief in equity between men and women—which perhaps undergirded her enforced gender neutrality—is not shared by her interlocutors. This leads her to consider a series of ethical quandaries. Rhetorically, she asks, “is gender a matter than can ever be left aside?” (1997:82; 2008:243). Other authors, like Timothy Rice, note the ways they are distanced from a tradition by their male gender identity, and how their gender is (dis)empowered in particular field research contexts (1997:107; 2008:48). This marks a significant change from earlier generations’ assumptions that the male experience was universal, or at least sufficient to understand a culture’s music making.

Women’s music is still considered in ways that reflect contemporary feminist scholars’ interest in highlighting cultural specifics rather than cross-cultural universals, and showing how large-scale structures like laws or gender norms impact women’s lives. Trying to understand a music within its own cultural norms pushes against the “righteous indignation” (Sarkissian 1999) felt by scholars projecting Western feminism’s empowering, even anti-patriarchal ethos, onto women’s experiences in other cultural contexts. Lila Abu-Lughod (1986, 1993) and Virginia Danielson (1997) laid early groundwork to decenter Western gender expectations of Arab women’s music-making. Similarly, Jessica Roda (2024) identifies the culturally legible protections of women’s agency in some North American Orthodox Jewish communities that, from a mainstream feminist perspective, are overshadowed by patriarchal structures. Structural gender systems and women’s negotiations of them are also considered in Central Asia by Tanya Merchant (2015) and Razia Sultanova (2022). Merchant offers a comprehensive view of Uzbek female musicians’ landscape of musicality, while Sultanova considers the impacts of the Taliban on women’s music-making.

## Queer Theory and Conclusions

The impacts of queer theory on gender-focused scholarship is growing. Gregory Barz and William Cheng’s collection *Queering the Field: Sounding Out Ethnomusicology* includes gender-diverse scholars. Throughout the collection, authors consider gender in myriad forms, including the impacts of gender identity on their production and presentation of knowledge, engagement with field sites and subjects, and constructions of the scholarly self (2019). For example, I use autoethnography and reflexivity to reflect on how my gender identity was frequently misidentified in Cape Breton’s Scottish social dance halls. This gender ambiguity presented challenges for inclusion in the dances, which have clearly defined roles for men and women (2019). A body between the binary was not so easily understood. Queer theorists’ work helps interpret these moments of ambiguity; it highlights how identity is mapped onto bodies, and how

both bodies and identity are the product of cultural meaning-making.

In summary, gender-focused ethnomusicologists reveal the ways that gender functions in a wide array of musical cultures, and in the field of ethnomusicology itself. Though the “different social and cultural understandings of gender and music” have not allowed for easy cross-cultural comparison or broader theorizing (Cusick 2014), the enlisting of queer theoretical models to decenter and deconstruct normative and universal ideas of gender, the rise of autoethnography, and an awareness of individual and structural biases may lessen the drive for universals. Instead, these models offer opportunities to decenter Western cultural gender norms.

## Discussion Questions

1. How does approaching gender as a cultural construction, rather than a biological given, impact your understanding of the world around you?
2. In what ways might a focus on gender aid your ability to understand new musical contexts?
3. How do you react to writing in which the author’s bias or perspective is clear? Do you think it is possible for a scholar to have true neutrality on a subject? Do you think reflexivity helps reduce bias in writing?

## Recommended Reading/Media

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