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## **The Sounds That Know: Synaesthesia, Sexual Trauma, and a Musicological Confession**

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

### **The Sounds That Know** **Synaesthesia, Sexual Trauma, and a Musicological Confession**

*Jenny Olivia Johnson (bio)*

The watery organ . . . I'm seeing this deep mauve color, almost a deep dark red, liquid, like blood

—Amelia Something, email to author,  
September 15, 2006

What follows is an experiment in something I'm tempted to call "confessional musicology." It will unfold both as musicological inquiry on the topic of music and memories of childhood sexual abuse and as personal meditation on the challenges of ethnography. In some ways a confessional tone comes more naturally to me than a professional one. As a composer, almost all of my music is confessional—exaggerated, deeply personal, intensely emotional—and almost all of it explores issues related to traumatic memory. My musicological prose writing, though infused with a similarly self-reflective and emotive ethos, has a much more stunted and bullet-holed history, one strain of which I wish to unravel here, with increased transparency about the anxieties this work produces in me. Were it not for the immensely important roles that music and trauma continue to play in my intellectual and personal life, I would have long ago stopped my writings about trauma in their tracks. The difficulties I have faced in pursuing them over the past decade have more than once brought me to moments of heartbreak, panic, and blank dissociation. I have abandoned essays midsentence, choosing instead the far less anxiety-producing medium of composition for any rumination I still felt I needed to do on the deep relationships that sounds and extreme experiences can form.

As it turns out, however, composing music about this subject is not enough. I still have things to say; I still have questions to ask. I still have stories **[End Page 133]** generously donated by abuse survivors, with hopes that my insights could prove useful. Sheer luck brings me to this moment, as I cannot envision a more appropriate space in which to return to this work than a collection honoring Suzanne Cusick. Imagining Suzanne's graceful allowance of just this sort of writerly tone, I am suddenly finding the courage to come back to my unfinished business and to do it with as much of Suzanne's own intellectual rigor and candid

self-reflection as I can muster.

I am tempted to turn to the broken prose of the survivor whose story will guide my thinking in this essay: a woman (“Amelia Something”) whose memories of being molested as a child are largely inaccessible when asked to describe what happened to her and are yet keenly available on highly somatic, sensory, and synaesthetic levels whenever she hears certain songs.<sup>1</sup>

and I feel this drippiness between my legs . . . this intense sadness flowing out of my body . . . it’s like a trail of tears<sup>2</sup>

Amelia’s descriptions of her traumatic memories are vivid and intense, written with an aching, disturbing beauty. The fact that her words are so moving has, in the past, inspired me to open conference papers with them, to let their impact place listeners in positions similarly vulnerable to those she has experienced. I now find this technique problematic: were I to turn to Amelia’s words, your emotions might become immediately heightened and her testimony become ossified into an art object unto itself, a monument to be initially beheld with sympathy and then hermeneutically scrutinized—rather than a dynamic, fluid testament to a past experience that she is by necessity continually rewriting and recontextualizing.

Much of my exchange with Amelia has been characterized by her painful inability to decide whether the abuse even happened at all. While many trauma experts have argued that an emotional memory can be just as valid (and as psychically damaging) as an “actual” one—a distinction that Judie Alpert describes as “story-truth” versus “happening-truth”—this is little comfort to Amelia, who is simultaneously desperate to eradicate the traumatic event from her life history by deciding it never happened and desperate to legitimize the emotional difficulties she continually experiences in its wake by acknowledging **[End Page 134]** that it did.<sup>3</sup> I am beginning to wonder whether it is for this reason that my earlier incarnations of...

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