Chapter 14

“I Don’t Play Girly House Music”
Women, sonic stereotyping, and the dancing DJ

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In this chapter, I explore the assignment of particular gender stereotypes to sound and performance in contemporary electronically produced dance music, focusing on the sonic quality of ‘fluffiness’ (cf. Gavanas and Reitsamer 2013, 68). I underscore this exploration with a critique of idealistic theorisations of electronic music, in which machines have the potential to liberate us from the limits of traditional gender frameworks.¹ In order to illustrate the iteration and perpetuation of these stereotypes,² I draw upon interview material with DJs, extracts from sources of online journalism, and online (YouTube) dance music fans’ commentaries. These stereotypes, which participants learn and circulate, are complicated by the specificity of links between gender fluidity and queerness and the development of the types of DJ-based dance music practices that are recognisable as dance music culture today. I argue that the flexibility of gender is overlooked or denied by participants through their conflations of terms such as ‘fluffy’ with what they believe to be ‘feminine’ musical sounds. One of my approaches to examining the idea of fluffiness is through a discussion of tracks from three different dance music genres: ‘Friend of the Night’ by Prosper (psytrance), ‘For An Angel’ by Paul van Dyk (trance), and ‘Eivissa’ by Robert M (progressive house).³

Last, I consider gender-related prejudices as they pertain to the moving body, including dancing, ‘incidental’ movements unrelated to dance, and communication (verbal and non-verbal) with participants and video cameras. My analysis is centred upon the interactions of dance music fans, commentators, and practitioners with the performances, on- and off-stage, of DJ-producer Nina Kraviz. Using the case of Kraviz, I show how movement can provoke reactions to DJs’ performances, based on the binary conceptions of gender that dictate sexist attitudes in many clubbing communities, regardless of the extent to which the DJ fits these norms. To this end, I discuss two YouTube videos of Kraviz performing in Boiler Room DJ sets – one in Berlin (Kraviz 2013b) and another in Edinburgh (Kraviz 2015) – and

a YouTube video documentary about Kraviz made by the online dance music magazine Resident Advisor (2013). The extensive commentaries on Kraviz by journalists, other DJs, producers, and fans, some of which I present alongside the videos, demonstrate the specificity of Kraviz’s position in the wider global (and in particular Western European) techno milieu, and constitute some evidence of the continuing dominance of the idea that DJs are men by default (cf. Farrugia 2012; Gavanas and Reitsamer 2013). Intentionally, I adopt the language of music- and performance-related gender binaries as used by dance music participants, including addressing women DJs as a gender category. In doing so, I do not mean to claim that a homogeneous ‘women’s experience’ exists, or that these gender categorisations are helpful (cf. Sullivan 2003, 190). On the contrary, by employing the language of participants, my goal is to highlight aspects of gender normativity that I argue are implicit in how participants of all genders interact with many women on dance floors and at DJ booths.

Dance music and gender

My exploration of the problems of gender stereotyping in dance music settings is built upon an understanding that heteronormativity is an irrelevant and unproductive framework for human interaction, achieving little more than to reinscribe prejudices. J. Jack Halberstam (2012) challenges heteronormativity – meaning the normalisation of, and assumed heterosexuality in, everyday life – through a series of questions that commence with the phrase “what if…”, and proceed to invert widespread and deeply held gender assumptions. For Halberstam, heteronormativity constitutes a range of troubling gender essentialisms that constitute part of a ‘script’ or ‘formula’, put into practice via ‘training’ that is begun in childhood (2012, 8–13). Moreover, the ostensibly stable classifications of male and female that are under redefinition have “no essential … traits, desires, or inclinations”, and are therefore increasingly “inadequate placeholders for identity” (2012, 67, 70–71). Indeed, the gender essentialisms that I discuss in this chapter have their roots, as Judy Lochhead (2008, 64–70) points out, in Western Enlightenment philosophy. In this conception, ‘properties’ beyond the biological are ascribed to males on the one hand and females on the other. Beauty is understood as a feminine phenomenon and ‘an inferior aesthetic category to the ‘sublime’, a masculine mode of experiencing which contains “a power that registers in prerational experience” (2008, 64). Similarly, I have noted in my fieldwork a pervasive discourse by male DJs, producers, and promoters of two types of women DJs – those whose marketing is based primarily upon visual presentation (namely, physical attractiveness), and those for whom it is based upon the possession of ‘serious’ musical and technical skill (cf. Bayton 1998, 3–4, 107–122; Farrugia 2012, 48–55;
Gavanas and Reitsamer 2013, 64–68). Weaving through the gendered discourses of these male participants, beauty is still understood in diminutive terms and is thus perceived as irreconcilable with skill. One of the reasons that I have chosen to discuss Kraviz in this chapter is that, as a figure who is perceived by her fans to possess both of these attributes, she is in a unique position to throw this stereotype into doubt.

Another problematic dichotomy upon which gendered-oriented aesthetics manifest in dance music is that of the delineations – or, as Donna Haraway refers to them, “leaky distinctions” (1990, 193) – between masculine and feminine (cf. Leonard 2007, 96–98). This notion holds that human-made technologies are situated in opposition to organic, biological, ‘natural’ phenomena such as the body (cf. Chasin 1995, 74–76; Haraway 1990, 192–194; McClary 1991, 135–140). This is relevant in large part because of the central role that electronic hardware plays at dance music events. In particular, men are given the exclusive right to exert control over technologies (Farrugia 2012, 8–9, 19–23; Gavanas and Reitsamer 2013, 54–57; Haraway 1990, 193; McClary 1991, 138; cf. Bayton 1997, 41–43; Bayton 1998, 41, 124–125; Doubleday 2008; Green 1997, 53). This attitude is clearly demonstrable through the different ways that participants interact with DJs of different genders.

Utopian interpretations of electronic music frame it as being freed from the burden of these traditional gender categorisations as they are understood in relation to music (cf. Doubleday 2008; Rodgers 2010, 4). Famously, Haraway’s (1990) vision of the cyborg involves the normalisation and incorporation of machine technologies into our activities and bodily experience, thus freeing us from the past separations between our ‘natural’ selves and the machines that we once attempted to control (191–196, 205, 207). Extending this notion, producing and reproducing music with machines could also emancipate us from biological-determinist understandings of how bodies ought to interact with instruments (cf. Doubleday 2008; Rodgers 2010, 4; cf. Bayton 1997, 40–43; Bayton 1998, 40–41; Bradby 1993, 157, 161–162; Green 1997, 53–80, 116–140; Rodgers 2010, 5; Waksman 2004, 697). By this thinking, electronically produced sounds take us out of dualistic modes of listening, affording us the opportunity to explore more possibilities. Yet, this potential is hardly achieved in dance music, as in other genres. In rock, for example, technological interactions (both with instruments and sound production) continue to be gendered, with men having access to and authority over technologies (cf. Bayton 1997, 40–43; Bayton 1998, 40–41,124–125; Bradby 1993, 162; Leonard 2007, 44–52), and indeed, as Helen Reddington notes, over the women involved in the process (2012, 59–65). For Tara Rodgers, the tactile and social interactions with machines, and the electronic sounds themselves, are imbued with violent masculine symbolism (cf. Farrugia 2012,
8–10; Goodman 2010; Rodgers 2010, 6–8). In science and technology as well as the arts, electronic sound has, since its inception as an agent of ‘progress’, been utilised in the practices of militancy and domination, as the handiwork of male expertise (Rodgers 2010, 6–10). Thus, DJs and producers have inevitably had this gendered history deeply inscribed into their own practices (Rodgers 2010, 7; cf. Farrugia 2012, 21–23).

This seems at odds with the development of today’s recognisable DJ-based dance music practices, which were initially developed in queer communities. I use the term ‘queer’ here in the same sense as Jodie Taylor (2012, 144) to connote practices that subvert normativity and heteronormativity through activities that include, among many other things, musical participation. To use the term ‘practices’ is to helpfully conceptualise queerness, or indeed any form of gender or sexuality, as acts rather than identities (Sullivan 2003, 50, 57–80, 192). In adopting this position, I acknowledge the fluidity (and reject the fixity) of gender and sexuality paradigms that lead to unfair treatment of those who occupy the peripheries and in-between of dominant categorisations. As Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton (1999) and Tim Lawrence (2003, 2011) argue, queer disco parties in New York in the 1970s were rare environments in which this fluidity could occur, and where the heteronormative modes of sexuality, temporality and dance could be defied and redefined by African American and Latino, as well as white, participants (Brewster and Broughton 1999, 136–137; Fikentscher 2000; Lawrence 2003, 24; Lawrence 2011; Reynolds 2008, 14–24, 28–32; cf. Halberstam 2012, 2). Indeed, parties held at the Loft and the Sanctuary in New York in the early 1970s (Lawrence 2011, 232–233) were uniquely positioned – geographically, historically, and politically – in order for such resistance to occur. While contemporary dance music practices are spatiotemporally and sonically derivative of these past events, and while they have appropriated certain aspects of DJing and dancing practice, event organisers now order and promote many of these dance music activities around music-stylistic rather than political or social concerns (cf. Taylor 2012, 149). Undoubtedly, in some cities, many queer and politically focused club events take place regularly. Participants of such events make use of all the elements that comprise parties – such as music, dance, costume, and drugs – as tools for protest and subversion of the status quo for a range of political issues. However, these remain the exceptions; much of the queerness – heterogeneity, openness, and fluidity – characteristic of DJ-driven events in 1970s New York has been replaced, in both mainstream and many alternative dance music settings, by a patriarchal and heteronormative turn, where traditional attitudes about gender are endemic.

I have become particularly interested in the evidence for such sexism when it manifests in participants’ biases against particular musical features. These features are considered by participants to be intrinsically feminine in quality.
Of the six DJs to most explicitly speak in such terms, four were male and two were female. Cilla, a DJ from Malmö, Sweden, used the phrase ‘girly house music’ with reference to music that she avoided playing in her DJ sets in order to prove that her tastes, and by extension her skills as a DJ, matched those of her male DJ peers:

*Cilla*: I don’t play girly house music.
*Tami*: What’s girly house music?
*Cilla*: [Hesitates.] Girly house music in people’s ears would be lots of lyrics, maybe? Very easy to listen to. Energy. Childish, popping, ‘yay!’ house music. That would kind of be girly. This rougher and deeper [sound] would not be considered girly, I think. (Cilla 2015)

Cilla reinforces a high/low division ascribed to male/female music. As Bradby observes in her discussion of female vocal samples, traditional “sexuality, the body, emotion and nature” versus “culture, technology and language” divisions persist even in the aesthetics of machine-driven music (1993, 157). Building on this, I argue that DJs and producers of many dance music genres attach similar binary understandings of gender norms (femininity) to a range of non-vocal musical features (cf. McClary 1991, 55). These understandings of music and sound technologies are also visible in the language used by journalists and music critics such as Simon Reynolds:

[Larry Levan] ... developed a science of total sound in order to create spiritual experiences for his followers ... he custom-built the Garage’s sound-system, developing his own speakers and a special low-end intensive sub-woofer known as Larry’s Horn ... during his all night DJing stints he would progressively upgrade the cartridges on his three turntables, so that the sensory experience would peak around 5 a.m. And during the week, he would spend hours adjusting the positioning of speakers and making sure the sensurround sound was physically overwhelming yet crystal clear. Garage veterans testify that the sheer sonic impact of the system seemed to wreak sub-molecular changes in your body.

*(Reynolds 2008, 28–29)*

The ways that this language is used feeds into the implication that sounds or qualities of sounds attributed with so-called femininity sit at the opposite pole, perceived as lacking depth and impact, and as being of inferior quality (Rodgers 2010, 12–14).

‘Fluffy’ music

The associations of sounds, musical gestures, and the materials that produce and play back these sounds with binary gender categories can be brought into
focus even further by examining the common use of a single adjective – ‘fluffy’. Fluffiness, far from being a measurable, physical quality of sound, is a pervasive, ingrained belief, formed through communication and practice, and reiterated through a casual transference from one DJ or dance music participant to the next. Such a phenomenon is exemplified when male DJs state that they play ‘fluffy’ sounds because “that’s a way to get the girls dancing, very often” (Warren 2011). This phenomenon is both discussed between (usually male) DJs and put into practice at performances, in the hope that, as a technique, it will fill dance floors.

Fluffiness is one example of the larger-scale gender stereotyping carried out by people both within these genre-centred communities and outside of them. It derives from our everyday characterisations of certain physical objects: cotton wool, feathers, dandelion seeds, fur, other fabrics harvested from plants or shorn off animals, cotton candy. The material qualities of these objects such as their texture and their feel against the skin (soft, smooth, gentle), how their forms look to the eye (round, undefined edges), and their weight (extremely light) can and often do translate into interpretations of these metaphors within sound. The softness of these objects is such that they float aimlessly when airborne and have little physical impact upon other objects. With blurred edges, they can be hard to see and hard to catch; their material substance can elude us. With this more explicitly negative metaphor – an object without substance – we arrive at something that lacks significance. The fluffy object is soft, light, and pleasant, but ultimately empty; its pleasures are confined to the surface only.

This word – a single example among many – is used widely in dance music communities. Fluffiness is in an already-established state, grounded in dominant gendered notions in which the metaphors of the soft, the smooth, and, by implication, the weak and the super-ficial are tantamount to femininity. As a concept pertaining to sound objects, it is challenging to grasp in part because of the relatively elusive and invisible quality of sound waves, compared with the tangible, visible objects described above. The difficulty of explaining fluffiness also relates to the requirement that participants possess knowledge of the rules and rhetoric of different dance music genres. Cilla, the DJ I referred to above, uses the word to describe perceptions of women and DJing technologies:

**Cilla:** I think that guys … or people think … the structure … the society thinks that just guys are born with this talent with [technology] and girls are just so pink and fluffy and don’t know things about cables and buttons…. Always when something happens, when a mixing cable gets pulled out, this troupe of guys just come up there and [say] “I’m going to help you”. They haven’t done that to a male DJ. I feel like it’s just because I’m a girl.
For Cilla, fluffiness does not allow room for the types of technological mastery traditionally afforded only to men. Regardless of how she enacts her gender and sexual identity, men who watch Cilla setting up her DJ equipment perceive a lack of technological skill in her as a ‘girl’. By virtue of her gender, she feels perceived as too soft to manage ‘hard’ materials such as ‘cables and buttons’.

Another interviewee to use this term was Warren, a psytrance DJ. Along with many of his peers, he used it to denote musical attributes intended to inspire women to continue dancing. Regardless of my cursory familiarity with the specific dance music genre of psytrance, I shared an understanding of Warren’s use of ‘fluffy’ without his expanding upon it. Warren correctly presumed that I possessed specialised knowledge of the music (distinguishing between dance music genres) and participation (DJing and dancing) in his scene. Specifically, my experience as an insider dance music participant, and the inevitable biases resulting from this participation, would have informed my own understanding of fluffiness. In a genre such as dubstep, I would therefore hear fluffiness as entailing ‘smooth’ legato sounds in a high-register such as synth strings. These higher pitches would have the effect of auditory lightness as a counterweight to abrasive, distorted, electric guitar-like sounds in middle registers, and warbling sub bass lines that are common in the genre. By contrast, in trance, synth strings and higher registers are among the fundamental sounds making up the recognisable texture of the genre; these same sounds might not therefore be considered fluffy by trance fans. A so-called fluffy sound in trance would need to possess other properties – fewer harmonic overtones, for example, sounds that are closer to ‘pure’ sine waves – to contrast the harmonically rich sonic textures and high registers of trance, a genre which attracts stadium-sized crowds of all genders, across the world. All in all, fluffiness in sound seems to pertain to certain types of frequencies, including the perceptual properties of pitch and timbre. However, as I will show through the analysis that follows, these same frequencies can have effects and possess significations that range from girliness or fluffiness to drug-induced, high-energy euphoria. Moreover, unlike ‘fluffiness’, frequencies which carry with them this ‘druggy’ association appear to be acceptable for male clubbers to associate with.

DJ-producer and sound engineer Gabriel Kemp-Zislis provides a helpful sonic description of this genre of trance music, whose central focus, he argues, is on frequencies with rich harmonics that “draw out a whole range of emotion simultaneously – an overload of the senses” (Kemp-Zislis 2015, personal communication). What is often described as ‘euphoric’ music in the genre is targeted at consumption in conjunction specifically with the drug ecstasy. A commercially successful example of trance is Paul van Dyk’s ‘For An Angel’ (1998), well-known enough to be considered an ‘anthem’ – a memorable, catchy track recognised by most trance fans. In addition to
typical spacious reverb and delay effects, it is characterised by extended mid-
to high-register synth strings, synth leads, and pads at underlying tempos of
approximately 130 beats per minute. When overlaid, the pitched sounds
that foreground ‘For An Angel’ are examples of the types of sounds that
participants refer to as fluffy. The synth strings, leads, and pads often
provide timbral interest, add to the texture, and function as melodic,
counter-melodic, or harmonic. The first elements of clearly defined pitches to
enter the mix after the kick drum, bass line, and later snare and hi-hat
introduction are an extended, atmospheric pad together with a recurring
bouncing octave-doubled synth lead with a strong tonality built into it. The
pad helps to establish the soft timbres that underline much of the track. The
whisper ‘For An Angel’ in a brief breakdown, followed by a punctuated
psytrance-like bass line warble, reminiscent of a Roland TB-303 (Kemp-
Zislis 2015, personal communication), signposts the entry into the first main
section of the track. This section is richly layered with multiple melodic parts.
Throughout the track, all the melody lines, including even those with
relatively sharper attacks and delays such as during the breakdown beginning
at 1:37, form an overall tone of warmth, roundedness, and sonic space
between the registers. The highly reverberant sounds in the mix also affect
this experience of sonic space. The exception occurs when a more abrasive
and ‘noisy’ layer is introduced from 4:10 — a rapidly descending, tenor-
register melodic part that gradually distorts. The result is an outward growth
in noise, behind which mid-register rapid arpeggiated or sequenced stabs
occur. In addition, noisy, percussive sound effects are introduced such as
recurring ‘crash cymbals’ on every beat of the bar. An upward glissando
sound known by many producers as a ‘riser’ (Kemp-Zislis 2015, personal
communication) winds up this section with an abruptly spacious breakdown,
in which the central melodic theme returns in a sequenced synth-stab mid-
register form. At 5:20, a characteristically melodic higher register layer with
a gentle attack is added as simultaneous emphasis (doubling the dominant
melodic shape of the theme) and rhythmic syncopation. At 5:34, the second
half of the breakdown is punctuated by a further emphasis (doubling) of this
melodic line by another layer softening in its effect because of its extended
duration and legato quality. The overall sonic experience is softened also by
a tail of sound behind the more metronomic, staccato melodic riff at the
foreground. This is likely produced with the commonly used reverb effect to
“simulate a ‘cathedral-esque’ space” (Kemp-Zislis 2015, personal
communication).

The variability of the meaning of fluffiness, across different genres,
destabilises any absolutist notions of gender in sound. Thus, the commercial
strand of trance music exemplified in ‘For An Angel’ is characterised by the
types of softer sounds described in the above analysis without any allusions
by participants to femininity. The commercial trance genre has, on the
contrary, largely presented as an ecstasy-focused, male-dominated scene in the dance music communities I have studied in Europe and Australia. Contrasting, participants associate similar timbres with the aforementioned understandings of femininity in many other dance music genres, including techno, house, dubstep, drum’n’ bass, electro, breakbeat, and on occasion, psytrance. In the latter genre, sounds which incorporate melodic, light, and catchy elements are positioned differently in the sonic space. At 3:41 of the track ‘Friend of the Night’ by Prosper (2006), the producer introduces a melodic riff with a softer timbre and higher register than the other layers. At 3:55, a crescendoing synth pad of extended duration, with a ‘long-tail’ reverb effect added to it, lends texture and atmosphere to this higher register. The track is stripped back to a soft, highly reverberant female vocal sample with a delay effect at approximately 5:35, followed by a reverberating pitch at an interval of a minor seventh below the original. At 5:44, the word ‘dream’ sounds on the tonic note of the track after these reverberations are sounded and allowed to decay. The auditory effect of distortion occurs with the accumulation of frequencies as a result of these ‘time-domain’ effects (Kemp-Zislis 2015, personal communication). After the bass line and kick drum elements return, chorale-like, extended synthesised strings dominate the mix from 6:02, either in the form of a single-pitch melodic line or as two pitches in rhythmic unison and pitch harmony. These are set apart from the rest of the mix by a much higher register and a distinctly softer, purer timbre. Unlike in commercial trance, where such higher register, softer sounds dominate the sonic experience and are integrated into the expectations of the genre, the highlighting of the presence of fluffy sounds in genres such as psytrance and techno sets these sounds up as counter to the ‘fundamentals’ – kick drums, bass lines, snares, and hi-hats. In this case, fluffiness constitutes an example of a feminine ‘other’, problematically attributed to anything that sonically contrasts or offsets these fundamentals.

In laying out and challenging the binary understandings of these elements, it is worth further taking into consideration their bodily effects. This is relevant in part because many DJs consider how music affects gendered dancing bodies during their performances, often targeting women dancers. What Vinoo Alluri and Petri Toiviainen (2010) refer to as the polyphonic timbre – the sum total of the multiple layers of electronic sound, rhythmically synchronised, and meticulously pieced together by the producer – has a significant bearing upon the experience of the dancer. For example, the addition or removal of a sound, or alternatively, the gradual and subtle altering of its parameters, can dramatically shift the bodily experience of music, such as the progressive house track, ‘Eivissa’ by Robert M (2007). In this track, the increase in a reverbation effect upon a looped, melodic sequence or arpeggiated riff – beginning at the breakdown at 2:46 and ending

with the bass drop at 3:47 – can increase a participant’s sense of “Body” and “Place” (cf. Kim 2010). This is also achieved through the removal of the bass-driven parts of the ‘rhythm section’ (kick drum and bass line) in stages. Attention is momentarily drawn to the hi hat and snare, which maintain the track’s forward momentum.15 The foregrounded high-register melodic riff on its own fits the notion of fluffiness when superimposed over the ‘fundamentals’ of the rhythm section. In sum, a number of perceptual features would lead participants to associate sounds with the idea of fluffiness. These include the richness of texture, the sense of sonic space, the frequency of single sounds, and the atmosphere created by combinations of sounds in a whole mix.

**DJing, the moving body, and the media**

As I have shown, the physical-perceptual effects of the aforementioned musical features include associations with such human qualities as gender. The gendering of sounds is reflected in and born from the bodily movements of DJs performing the music in the flesh, and dancers responding to it. These scenarios are not confined exclusively to the physical spaces of night clubs, nor do they occur only once; they are often mediated by processes of formal (professionally hired) and informal (clubbers with smartphones) filming, as well as audio recorded by DJs through laptops, sound cards, and mixers, in order that they might be enjoyed by participants at home or at work, either through a feed during the gig, or afterward. As Philip Auslander notes, such media-orientations are an established and familiar practice in a range of musical and other performance event forms (Auslander 2008, 7, 24–27).

It can seem strangely contradictory to target a DJ-driven dance music event, such as the Boiler Room, for the home viewer to watch on her personal computer in solitude.16 The contradiction stems from the notion that for participants, dance music events are supposed to work through an in-the-flesh, shared response to music performed by a DJ (only once) and to the dancing of other participants, and the Boiler Room event is undoubtedly aimed first and foremost at the home viewer. The camera and lighting are carefully managed so that the DJ is a great deal more visible on screen than she otherwise would be. She faces the camera with her back to the dancers, so that they might also face the camera.17 All the while, it must remain recognisable as a ‘traditional’ dance music event in order to be attended by ‘live’ clubbers. These clubbers are themselves a part of the cast; indeed, for Auslander, one of the appeals of watching a performed event on video is to witness the feedback from the participants and performers who are co-present (Auslander 2008, 69). The reconfiguration of the physical club space exemplifies the extent to which such events have been mediatised; events are designed around a co-dependency between the documented and the
document (Auslander 2008, 25). Given that the Boiler Room event is screen-centred, regardless of the genders of the DJs, fans’ criticisms of Nina Kraviz for deliberately performing sexual desirability for the camera (2013, 2015) are based on normative understandings of what it means to perform gender. It is worth calling to mind the playing of gender roles as conceptualised by Judith Butler, where ‘mundane’ modes of ‘performativity’ are incorporated into behaviour, dress, bodily appearance, and language (Butler 1988, 524, 530). Through this lens, Kraviz’s fans would see her as having internalised the limited notions of femininity described in this chapter. As in other genres of solo pop performance, DJing constitutes a platform for gendered identities to be scrutinised (cf. Hawkins 2009), and in a male-DJ-dominated global techno scene, Nina Kraviz is a frequent subject of such scrutiny.

Kraviz has gained the attention of vast numbers of participants, fans, journalists, artists, and followers of these techno scenes since her emergence as a prominent international DJ-producer. The ‘controversies’ surrounding her (Barnes 2013; Cangelosi 2013; Fact 2013; Johnstone 2013; Reamer 2013; Wilson 2013) pertain to the framing of her femininity, sexuality, and/or desirability both in her DJ sets and in a video documentary made for Resident Advisor (2013) about her life as a touring DJ. Kraviz’s participation in this documentary included an interview conducted in her swimsuit at the beach (at thirty seconds into the video) and most notoriously from a bubble bath in a hotel (at 5:42). These scenes spurred strong reactions from viewers, including a DJ-producer peer from techno and house scenes, Maceo Plex (Barnes 2013; Cangelosi 2013; Fact 2013; Johnstone 2013). The scene shot in the bath was deemed in bad taste and constituted a lack of integrity, insulting “the ladies playing amazing music and pushing the scene forward with nothing else but sick records and studio time” (Maceo Plex quoted in Cangelosi 2013; Johnstone 2013). Two years after the Resident Advisor ‘scandal’, the Boiler Room DJ set based in Edinburgh (2015) provoked discussions about her physical appearance, criticisms of her mixing skills, and references to her (alleged) relationship with Berlin DJ Ben Klock. From YouTube user microglitch:

This is the second appearance of Nina I’ve seen after the first Boiler Room and I must say that it is a shame she didn’t make any progress in mixing skills. She’s got a lot of gigs and I believe a lot of time for an improvement as well, but it doesn’t make any difference. No doubt she is very cute behind the mix however it is questionable whether it is enough.

(microglitch 2015)

User Chris Bradley simply comments, “Serious Bird” (2015), while DAYV GANG asserts, “Nina I wanna have sex with you”. Edward Clowes argues the following:
Her sets are getting better in terms of mixing and track selection, but I just cringe so hard when I watch her perform, because I feel she’s as concerned with the set as she is with eye fucking the camera and doing really self-conscious sexy dance moves.

(Clowes 2015)

Amidst a thread of responses to the above comment by others, user Fig Les writes:
I agree, I look at pictures from her sets all over the world and she’s always in the middle of a set, but managing to strike a pose and pout for the camera. Saw her a few months ago and she delayed the set about 5 minutes so she could pout at everyone in the crowd and so they could all take snapchats of her. Have a Love/Hate relationship with Nina.

(Fig Les 2015)21

These examples are a demonstration of the ways in which dance music media coverage of Kraviz inflames and reinforces prejudices by many dance music fans. In particular, there is an underlying assumption within these comments that behaviour deemed to draw attention to sexual desirability is rarely paired with serious DJing and production skills. The comments could even be interpreted to mean that participants believe that the performance of ‘sexiness’ has no business intersecting with the performance of ‘serious’ music.22

The biases inherent in the discourses on Kraviz incorporate the larger-scale gender binaries that I have described earlier. DJs, producers, clubbers, promoters, and bar staff all contribute to shaping ideas such as that women DJs tend to deliberately attract attention to their desirability while playing through ‘sexy’ dance moves, a greater use of their ‘stage’ or ‘booth’ space with their whole bodies, and explicit communication with dancing participants through body language. This theory holds that women are more interested in audience interaction than with their tools of performance such as mixers, laptops, or effects units, and that men are stereotypically more likely to direct their attentions toward these technologies while DJing, and in doing so, assume a nongendered, ‘neutral’ posture: a self-assured attitude which manifests through relative lack of engagement with the audience and a greater attention toward the technical media being used to produce the sounds. The stereotype extends to images of minimalistic bodily movements and introverted postures, in which a smaller range of movement through space is used, and in which energetic, whole-body dancing is less common. This is a stark demonstration of the themes that have been (usually uncritically) reiterated by these participants over the course of my participant observation and interviewing since 2010. In presenting a guide to the prevalent binary,
heteronormative discourses in such a confronting manner, I have been able
to analyse, using the Berlin (2013) and Edinburgh (2015) Boiler Room
videos, the extent to which Nina Kraviz is playing up her feminine sex appeal,
as she is accused of doing by the aforementioned fans.23

My analysis of Kraviz’s gender embodiment does not support the claims
that she draws attention to her sexual attractiveness. There are moments
during which she becomes more explicitly communicative, such as through
smiles and ‘air kisses’ directed toward particular participants at 0:28 (Kraviz
2013b), presumably (although we cannot know) to those she knows
personally or professionally. It would seem that these brief moments of what
Wilson (2013) refers to as Kraviz’s ‘charisma’ are given undue attention by
those who critique her for sexualised performance.24 In the video of her
Berlin set (2013), Kraviz’s movements are few and small. Yet that these
gestures are being enacted by a woman are enough to threaten or shake up
familiar ontologies of DJing as a job for men. Her occasional interactions
with people (perhaps promoters and staff at the event, or perhaps clubbers)
are the only hints of the ‘feminine’ in her performance, and yet the pervasive
commentary is focused upon these moments, either to question her skills, to
refer to her physical beauty, or both at once. I therefore contend that
comments made about Kraviz ‘overplaying’ her femininity are based in large
part upon the notions of gendered performance outlined in this chapter and
a lack of acceptance that the skills of a woman (notably, one perceived to be
attractive) can be equal to or greater than those of a man.

Conclusion

I have endeavoured in this chapter to unpack some of the vagaries of dance
music participation that identify so-called femininity as a sonic or bodily
phenomenon. In particular, I have argued that many dance music
participants associate the sonic qualities of music with binary gender
categorisations. Electronic sounds can impress a range of sensations and
evocations upon participants, and some of these are tied up with and
influenced by a model of gender that assumes fixity and heteronormativity
and rejects ambiguity or queerness. Indeed, neither the genderless, human-
machine ideals promoted by Haraway, nor the queer dance music spaces
where gender, sexuality, or other regressive boundaries dissolve, eclipse the
vast number of scenarios in which traditional gender categories dictate
people’s discourses and practices. Narratives of electronic sounds, as I have
shown, stem in part from the narratives of gender asymmetry in the
production of, access to, and consumption of technologies that produced
these sounds (Rodgers 2010, 6–16). These narratives have led, among other
ideas, to the notion of the ‘fluffy’ sound, which is traced in my analysis to a
range of musical features such as high-register melodic lines, and sound

parameters such as frequency and attack. Moreover, through observation and interviewing of participants from a range of dance music communities, along with analysis of tracks by Paul van Dyk, Robert M, and Prosper, I have illustrated that clubbers and DJs’ familiarity with the specifics of genre and style significantly affects their understandings of gendered aesthetics. This genre-based variability suggests that if we ‘hear gender’ in sound, it indeed relates a great deal more to the expression and reiteration of prejudices than to any intrinsic, pre-social or ‘natural’ phenomena. In the final section of this chapter, I have discussed how Nina Kraviz has constituted a pertinent case study for the ways in which DJs who do not present as male are not only attributed problematic gender notions with reference to their sounds, but also to their bodily movements during performance. I have observed that Kraviz rarely moves in ways that typify simplistic understandings of ‘female DJing’. Thus, instead of being able to trace perceptions of Kraviz’s so-called femininity in the ways that she engages her body during performance, I suggest that media and participant fixations upon her gender, sexual desirability, and appearance indicate that these attitudes relate a great deal more to whether or not a woman behind the DJ booth is sexually – and therefore, by default, heteronormatively – desirable. It is relatively rare for women-identifying DJs and producers in global dance music scenes to achieve widespread recognition (Farrugia 2012, 7; Gavanas and Reitsamer 2013, 51–52). These criticisms therefore stem from little more than retrospective assumptions about women’s roles in male-dominated fields. Inspired by Halberstam’s (2012) bold embrace of ambiguity, confusion, and redefinition, my overall discussion highlights a need to reject outright any notion of a feminine aesthetics – whether of the sonic or of the body. The prevalence and seeming immovability of these gender stereotypes does not preclude the necessity for their interrogation, no matter how complex the task.

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Notes

1 In addressing women in dance music specifically rather than women across various genres of music, I am able to attend to specificities of performing in this genre which is wrapped up, in the words of Marion Leonard, in its own “distinct histories, performances, practices and
discourses that affect how gender is constructed and experienced” (Leonard 2007, 3).

2 These stereotypes are also arguably racialised in that they could be seen as imposing white standards on this music and its performance.

3 A substantial proportion of my knowledge of insider notions and practices in the dance music communities discussed throughout this chapter has been acquired from immersion in dance music – in the form of interviews and participant observation as a clubber, DJ, and event organiser – spread across ten cities, since 2010. These locations include Bangkok, Berlin, Edinburgh, Glasgow, London, Melbourne, Oslo, Tel Aviv, Sydney, and Zurich.

4 Marion Leonard provides an illuminating analysis of how women navigate male-dominant musical practices in rock scenes. Her account evidently parallels many of the issues that women in dance music scenes encounter, such as how participation overall tends to occur in “male-defined terms” (Leonard 2007, 25). Examples of this include the treatment of women musicians as novel by journalists and popular music critics (2007, 34); the lack of agency afforded to them by male journalists and music critics when interviewing them (2007, 105–109); and the excluding practices built into studio production and audio engineering (2007, 51–55).

5 The dualistic listening to which I refer here is effectively depicted in Philip Tagg and Bob Clarida’s empirical examination of male versus female “Visual-Verbal Associations” (Tagg and Clarida 2003, 666–678). The outcome of the authors’ research, which highlights the challenge of understanding people’s immediate associations of elements of music with extramusical phenomena, highlights how embedded these binaries are within their participants’ everyday thinking (2003, 666–679). In this sense, the Tagg and Clarida study should be taken as introductory; it provides evidence for the fact that people essentialise gender (and other categories) while they are listening to music, while not focusing on the reasons that this occurs.

6 As Nikki Sullivan (2003, vi) highlights, queer practices are not exclusively about sex or gender, being also necessarily entangled with other acts and other identities.

7 This is an example of how the process of translation from African American, Latino, and queer popular music practices into white heterosexuality becomes highly profitable for the appropriators (cf. Halberstam and Livingston 1995, 4–5).

8 The names of interviewees cited in this chapter are referred to either by pseudonyms, DJ names, or real names, according to their requests.
9 This discourse endures; many clubbers and DJs similarly ascribe high value to what they see as a ‘perfect balance’ between sound impact and sound clarity (cf. Devine 2013, 166; Keightley 1996, 161; Rodgers 2010, 13).

10 Researchers are also transmitters of this type of ‘knowledge’; indeed, as Jonathan Sterne astutely argues, it is vital that we are reflexive in our recognition of the many visible and invisible ways in which we are wrapped up in the process of ‘pre-constructing’ our research objects (2003, 368).

11 The outdoor psytrance parties attended by Warren tended to last so long that participants would often need to take periodic rests from dancing.

12 In Tagg and Clarida’s survey, listeners consistently associated what the authors refer to as “Legato e cantabile melodies and legato accompaniments, especially of arpeggio or tied-over string pad type” with the female category, whereas “staccato phrasing and quick repeated notes” were experienced as male. This was just one of many examples of highly essentialised understandings which, as the authors bluntly argue, “seem quite sexist, to say the least” (2003, 670).

13 All participants in my ethnographic research who are interested in trance are men, although this is not a statistically significant sample and therefore is not necessarily indicative of broader trends.

14 According to Kemp-Zislis (2015, personal communication), this is most likely a “sinusoidal (sine) or triangle wave, with very little upper harmonic content”.

15 For Kemp-Zislis (2015, personal communication), such an effect is created by the addition of a “filtered white noise riser”.

16 Whether the viewer is sitting is speculative – it could be valuable to perform a survey on regular viewers of Boiler Room sets to find out if any of them dance. Such data pertains also to Emília Simão’s research on virtual psytrance parties (Simão and Tenreiro de Magalhães 2015) in which people would attend psytrance parties in virtual gaming form and take them seriously as events although they were sitting at their computers and their participation did not involve dancing.

17 According to Diana Taylor’s conceptualisation of the ‘archive’ as a documented verbal artefact and of ‘repertoire’ as constituting performed, nonverbal acts, it is important in analysing videos that we understand them as ways to document performances and not as performances in and of themselves (2003, 20). Taylor cautions against taking such a separation for granted (2003); it is significantly complicated by the cases of performances that exist expressly for the purpose of being archived, such as in the case of the Boiler Room sets (2013, 2015) with Nina Kraviz.
performing to a camera first and foremost, and a dance floor second (cf. Auslander 2008, 7).

18 The Boiler Room parties in 2013 and 2015 were only two gigs among her extensive schedule of touring (GigaTools 2015).

19 Other reactions can be found amongst the hundreds of comments below the video on Resident Advisor (2013), although caution must be exercised when attending to such comments given that it is difficult to ascertain whether users are commenting seriously or merely ‘trolling’.

20 For example, from YouTube user The Anomaly (2015), “Ben Klock needs to take notes from his girl”.

21 Snapchat is software designed for sharing videos and photos on smartphones. It is marketed on the automatic deletion of files after they are viewed for only a number of seconds, and is hence perceived as more conducive to preserving the long-term privacy of users. According to the web-site’s promotion as an advertising medium, it is used by a relatively young demographic (Snapchat 2015).

22 Some feminist activists have vehemently rallied online in defence of Kraviz against such comments (cf. DJ Shiva aka .noncompliant, 2015).

23 The presentation of such an interpretation can be compared with the findings of Tagg and Clarida, in which listeners were asked about the masculine versus feminine associations of particular music (2003).

24 It is worth acknowledging here that Kraviz vehemently disputes accusations that she uses her sexuality for marketing (Kraviz 2013a).

Bibliography


**Online sources**


Fig Les. 2015. “YouTube Comment.” Nina Kraviz Boiler Room & Ballantine’s Stay True Scotland DJ Set. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YIcbIIHcx44.


Interviewees

Gabriel Kemp-Zislis aka G Kemp (DJ, producer, sound engineer, promoter). Edinburgh (via e-mail). 2015.