Grounding the Troops: Music, Place, and Memory in the Iraq War

Troupes hors-sol : musique, espace et mémoire dans la guerre en Irak

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Grounding the troops: Music, place, and memory in the Iraq war

par

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Abstract: This article examines how American troops use music to navigate complex associations of place during deployment. Since 2005, I have been conducting interviews with veterans of the United States military who served in the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, exploring their memories of musical engagement, specifically listening to music, during their deployments. In these interviews, they described their musical listening in relationship to place, sometimes associating a particular type of musical engagement with a specific physical setting, linking songs to memories of locales, or alternately describing using music to psychologically remove themselves from an environment. Examining relationships between musical listening and place with a focus on the memories of veterans who were deployed to the Iraq war yields insight both into the critical role that music has for many contemporary troops involved in the physically and psychologically demanding context of war and to scholarly understandings of how music can operate in complicated processes of location and dislocation.

Keywords: *Identity – listening – technologies – war – psychology – patriotism / nationalism – nostalgia – place – memory*

Résumé : Cet article examine la manière dont des soldats américains utilisent la musique pour établir de complexes associations avec des lieux pendant leur déploiement. Depuis 2005, j'ai conduit une série d'entretiens avec des vétérans de l'armée américaine ayant servi pendant les conflits récents en Irak et Afghanistan, qui m'ont permis d'explorer leurs souvenirs et usages musicaux, notamment l'écoute de musique pendant les opérations militaires. Dans ces entretiens, ils associaient écoute et lieux, faisant le lien entre des chansons et les souvenirs d'endroits, ou au contraire, se servant de la musique se retirer psychologiquement d'un environnement. Examiner les rapports entre écoute musicale et lieux, et notamment les souvenirs de vétérans déployés en Irak pendant la guerre, c'est révéler le rôle considérable que la musique joue pour les troupes engagées dans le contexte physiquement et psychologiquement éprouvant de la guerre et les fonctions de la musique dans des processus compliqués d'ancrage ou de séparation d'un lieu.

Mots-clés : *identité – écoute – technologies – guerre – psychologie – patriotisme / nationalism – nostalgie – espace*

This essay is based on interviews I conducted with approximately twenty veterans of the U.S. Armed Forces, all of whom were deployed to Iraq at least one time. Most served in the lower echelons of the military as enlisted personnel, and all were under the age of thirty during their deployments. My research is qualitative and does not draw from a representative sample, though I do provide perspectives of individuals who served in different branches of the military, who come from different regional and cultural backgrounds, and men and women. I use the term “soldier” generically to refer to those in the military in any branch, understanding that the “soldiers” officially refers only to those serving in the U.S. Army. Though problematic, I use the term to avoid repetition of clunky phrases, such as “those serving in the U.S. military.” I also use the term “troops” interchangeably with soldiers because it is more inclusive. To protect the privacy and identity of those interviewed, I use first names or pseudonyms as specified by interviewees. In addition to interviews that focused specifically on musical practices, I also use data gathered in the process of making the documentary film *Grounds for Resistance* about a group of young veterans who run *Coffee Strong*, an anti-war coffeehouse outside of Joint Lewis-McChord Base in Washington State.¹ For the documentary project, I conducted longterm ethnographic participant-observation fieldwork during which I developed ongoing relationships with the veterans involved in *Coffee Strong*.

Musical listening, place, and new technologies

A significant transformation for American soldiers serving in the current wars is how they engage with music. New technological developments, especially MP3 players, create the possibility for troops to listen to music individually and in groups much more frequently than in previous wars, and file sharing possibilities between MP3 players and computers allow for people to continually add to their musical listening selections (Pieslak 2009 and 2007; Gilman 2010).² In previous American wars, much musical practice involved singing, when possible playing instruments, or listening to radio broadcasts over which troops had little control. By contrast, in the current wars, the dominant mode of musical engagement for troops is listening to music on personal MP3 players and computers, over which individuals have control of their own playlists and the possibility of accessing additional musical selections, sharing music with others for individual listening, and listening to music collectively.

Troops report listening to music often through headphones throughout their non-work time for example while exercising, socializing, relaxing, and sleeping. Many describe using music as an emotional resource, for example, Jonathan Pieslak examines how troops use especially aggressive rap and heavy metal sub-genres to energize themselves in preparation for patrols and missions (2007 and 2009)³. Music playing in the background is a common feature of some work environments on bases, such as clinics and operation centers.

And, though it is often officially not allowed, many troops describe listening to music on patrols and missions, either through individual listening devices, or channeled through existing or rigged audio systems in military vehicles. Joseph, a veteran of the U.S. Army interviewed in July 2009, explained, “I was always listening to music, I mean constantly. Music was sort of a soundtrack of my life.”

Electronic distribution has significantly expanded troops’ access to enormous varieties of music as well as the potential for musical sharing amongst troops and between those engaged in war and those outside. In preparation for deployment, soldiers can purchase or otherwise acquire large collections of music that can be listened to individually or played through speakers or on computers for larger groups. They can continuously add to their musical collections facilitated by the ease of sharing tracks electronically and the possibility of purchasing CDs using Internet outlets, especially amazon.com. U.S. Army veteran Mark interviewed in February 2012 explained that when based somewhere in Iraq where he had Internet access, whenever he had free time, “I’d go to the computers where we could go online, and I was always looking up bands that I liked and finding bands that were similar to them.” Friends and family members often send care-packages that include musical selections, sometimes those requested by the soldier and other times as a means to connect across space, for example, when a friend or loved one sends a soldier a CD of something that she has been enjoying in order to forge the physical distance.

Ethnomusicologist Martin Stokes, contemplating the importance of place in musical listening, writes,

the musical event, from collective dances to the act of putting a cassette or CD into a machine, evokes and organizes collective memories and present experiences of place with an intensity, power and simplicity unmatched by any other social activity (Stokes 1994: 3).

He explains that people use music to identify with places associated with collectives, but that “people can equally use music to locate themselves in quite idiosyncratic and plural ways” (*Ibid.*). Furthermore, music provides

the means by which the hierarchies of place are negotiated and transformed. The case of the private collection of records, tapes and CDs illustrates the ways in which music can be used as a means of transcending the limitations of our own place in the world, of constructing trajectories rather than boundaries across space. (4)

Relationships between listening to music and place occur in multiple and complex ways. Some musical genres or styles emerge in particular geographic locales and are thus associated by many with those physical and cultural regions. Thus, many Americans associate country music with the South. And specific country styles with particular regions, thus Mark explained his friend’s musical taste geographically: “He liked a lot of modern country *because he grew up in West Virginia and Kentucky.*” Matt, interviewed in June 2009, explained that when he joined the U.S. Navy, others in his unit did not know about his favorite band Phish, which he attributed to his perception that Phish was “an East Coast thing.” Other

genres are associated with geographic regions as part of an imaginary regardless if they originated or are performed in that place because of some sonic dimension, instrumentation, or lyrical content. And, many genres are geographic hybrids or have long expanded across spaces, yet continue to be associated with a more localized place. People associate music with places where they experienced it, either attending a performance, hearing or listening to a recording, or playing the music; and, they associate particular sonic dimensions – instruments, rhythmic patterns, and timbral qualities – to particular locales. Lyrical content can also reference places either by explicitly naming physical elements (e.g. mountains, oceans, or congested housing) or the names of particular places (e.g. Texas or the Bronx). People's memories can be tied to an experience of musical listening in that locale or can be associated with a place because of sonic dimensions, lyrical content, context of how the person learned about or acquired a piece of music, or fantasy about that place.

Relationships between music and place are especially interesting because of the inherent mobility of music. As John Connell and Chris Gibson elaborate, “music is, at its most basic, sound transmitted from the microlevel (in a bedroom, pub, car, between headphones) to the macroscale (through various means, including global media)” (2003: 9). Music is an artifact that moves with people, maps out global economies, and is “transformed through spatial mobility” (10). Furthermore, new technologies allow for music to accompany people constantly as they move through time and space, contributing to a mobile and controlled auditory

soundscape within day-to-day life. Individual listening devices also enable people to isolate themselves sonically from what is happening in their environments and thus to create private spaces, what Michael Bull refers to as “sound bubbles” even within the very public spaces that characterize much of life during deployment (2007: 5)⁴.

Music and American nationalism

Contemporary U.S. military rhetoric emphasizes place, as in the nation-state, intended to evoke patriotism, part of a strategy to stimulate soldiers' dedication to the military, government, and the mission. The explanation that troops engaged in the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are protecting their country, its citizens, and its freedoms, or alternately, are fighting to bring the same freedoms that exist in “America” to the people living within the geographic locations of Iraq or Afghanistan is repeatedly disseminated through multiple communicative channels. Despite this emphasis on the nation, a single place, the lives of American soldiers epitomize translocality because they move from base to base during their military careers, both within the U.S. and internationally, often resulting in a reduced connection to a single place or “home.” Deployment is yet another movement to a different place(s), and significantly, one in which soldiers engage in physically and psychologically intense activities that can lead to feelings of dislocation. Such liminal feelings can intensify soldiers' needs to ground themselves to places

where they remember being “normal,” often conceptualized as “home” (cf. McKay 2006).

During deployments to Iraq, those I interviewed explained that individuals and groups sometimes listened to certain musical selections because the lyrics expressed a patriotic stance, an explicit connection between music and place, in this case the United States. Or they listened to music because they associated the genre as being inherently patriotic, pro-troop, and supportive of the Iraq war. A number of people I interviewed, for example, explained the popularity of country music among troops because many country artists have been vocal about their support for the war (Willman 2005; Sampert and Treiberg 2007). Numerous country music artists composed songs after 9/11 whose lyrics were about or directed to American troops and expressed patriotism. A number of people I interviewed remembered Toby Keith’s song “American Soldier,” whose lyrics are in the first person from the perspective of a soldier and express the protagonist’s love and pride in his country, as is evident in the following verse:

American soldier, I’m an American soldier
 Yeah, an American soldier, an American
 Beside my brothers and my sisters
 I will proudly take a stand
 When liberty’s in jeopardy, I will always do what’s right
 I’m out here on the frontlines, so sleep in peace tonight
 American soldier, I’m an American
 An American
 An American soldier

Another Keith song, “Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American),” on the album *Unleashed* that was released in 2002, pays homage

to the soldiers fighting the war and warns those who have put this “nation that I love” under attack that justice will be served:

And you’ll be sorry that you messed with
 The U.S. of A.
 ‘Cause we’ll put a boot in your ass
 It’s the American way

By listening to songs, artists, or genres deemed patriotic, soldiers connect to the place of their home country, a broad and abstract category made concrete through their musical listening.

Connell and Gibson explain that specific genres of music are often associated with specific categories of social groups and with geographic locations (2003: 16). Though country music has come to represent “America,” the nation-state or whole country in many troops’ soundscapes, within the United States, country music is not associated by all with the nation as a whole, but rather is often associated with localized regions and particular demographics. Despite the diversity of musical styles popular in southern states and the prevalence of country music across the country, many of the people I interviewed symbolically associate country music with a generalized American “South” in addition to rural white communities throughout the country. Tina, a veteran of the U.S. Army interviewed in March 2008 who is from a small rural Oregon town, for example, explained her own and other people in the military’s “love” of country music in geographic terms: “we’re all, most people in the military are small town, rural folk, so, you know, most of us liked country.” These associations are at least partly imaginary in that people may make these

geographic connections regardless of the particularities of a performance or the identities of specific bands or band members.

Unlike Tina who explained her draw to country music during her deployment as being a continuation of her lifelong musical listening tastes, others I interviewed explained that they did not necessarily like or choose to listen to country music prior to their deployments. Because of its pervasiveness during their time in Iraq and because of songs that supported the troops, they found themselves enjoying it only after they arrived in Iraq. Gabe, a specialist in the Army National Guard interviewed in April 2009, explained that he listened to country music in Iraq because of its patriotism, and even though he was no longer in the military at the time of the interview, he continued to listen to the genre:

There are a lot of country songs that are very patriotic, they will talk about the war, and how we will win the war. Before, I was like, country is not really my type of music, I wouldn't probably listen to it. But when I was there, I was even singing country music.

When I inquired further about how Gabe associated country music with place, he answered:

It kind of reminded me of Texas. It might have something to do with, like where I grew up in Peru, it's, it's kind of a place where a lot farmers live and ranchers, so Texas culture is kind of similar to the cowboy culture in Peru too, so it kind of reminded myself of, I don't know, being in Texas, somewhere in Texas...

For Gabe, the associations of country music and place exemplified translocality. On the one hand, country music evoked feelings of patriotism and "home," as in the United States while at the same

time, his associations of country music with Texas, where he had never lived, were also significant because they evoked nostalgia for the country of his birth, Peru. Gabe's association of music to place was both conceptual and physical in that country music evoked feelings about the nation, an abstraction, but also about physical locality, the ranches and farms of Texas, which he also identified with the landscape of Peru. Yet in the latter case, the link to the physicality of place was also conceptual in that it was not tied to his own personal experience or nostalgia for having lived in that physical environment, but rather with an imagined idea of Texas.

This association has become so strong that it can transcend the politics of a musician or a song's lyrical content. This is not surprising given that as Connell and Gibson (2003) write, a majority of listeners to popular music do not pay as much attention to lyrics than to other musical dimensions either because they are inaudible or incomprehensible or because lyrical content is not what attracts all people to musical selections. A striking example is the music of country music singer Steve Earle. Earle is a long-time anti-war activist whose 2002 album *Jerusalem* and 2004 album *The Revolution Starts Now* contain songs explicitly critical of the Iraq war. Nevertheless, some of the people I interviewed referred to Earle's music as representative of the patriotic country music prevalent in the soundscapes of their deployment.⁵

Some soldiers who were critical of the U.S. government's foreign policy and of their own participation in the Iraq war explained that they rejected or disliked country music because of its associa-

tion with American nationalism (Gilman forthcoming). Even in these cases, however, patriotic music could still operate nostalgically by evoking positive memories related to their war experiences. For example, though he was avidly against the war and critical of the American government, Joseph explained that during his second deployment, he and his closest friend listened to the song “Letters from Home” by country artist John Michael Montgomery about a deployed soldier reading letters from loved ones at home. He explained that the song was “totally capitalizing on the pain of soldiers and on some level disgusted me, but I could relate to the song.” He and his friend would listen to the song “and get all choked up because it really helped us, reminded us of home.” He elaborated that it was a nationalist and patriotic song, but that it was not the patriotism he was attracted to, but rather the song’s articulation of “the way that it feels to be a soldier at war away from family and having your parents and your fiancé write to you while you’re deployed.”

The issue of music and American patriotism also raises the issue of what “America” means to individuals who are deployed. Unfortunately, this question did not emerge until my later interviews. I did ask anti-war activist Joseph. His answer was thoughtful and complex. He began by explaining that when he refers to America, he is referencing the “nationalism,” that “draws predominantly from people’s ignorance and the way they are raised.” He elaborated that his negative feelings about “America” are against the government and the media that fosters this ignorance. During his deployments, he did not like music

that he felt “fed” this “nostalgia” and “ignorance.” Later in the interview, he elaborated that when he thinks of “America,” he does sometimes “think about American people.” Joseph’s effort to explain what he means by “America” reveals just how complicated associations of “place” can be—a physical location, a government, the people that inhabit it, citizens of a country, events that have occurred in the locale, or dreams of an idyllic existence.

Music and Personal Associations of Place

On a more personal level, soldiers report listening to music to connect to places important to them or alternately to escape their current realities. As is evident from the above discussion, for many soldiers deployed to war, home is broadly conceived. “Home” can refer to a particular physical location or the people associated with that place. Depending on the nature of a particular unit or branch, units are often composed of people who identify with many different places, both locales within the United States and in other countries. When a deployed individual in the military refers to home, she or he may be referring to the United States broadly, specific location(s) in the U.S., a different country, or most likely some combination of the above. If someone from an urban neighborhood in Chicago refers to “home,” whether at the moment he is thinking about the neighborhood in which he grew up or the United States as a country, his conception of home is likely markedly different

from the individual who spent part of her life in Alabama and part in a small Oregon town.

As individuals spend more time living in a variety of locations, engage in a range of activities in different locales, and interact with others and participate in virtual communities across vast amounts of space, how soldiers think of themselves in relationship to specific locales becomes more and more complicated. Individuals can have multiple places that they call home simultaneously, and these may be shifting. Certain places may have important significance to them and how they identify, even when these places are not necessarily “home,” as in the places they grew up or even ever lived. Also, memory and identification with home can be associated with nostalgia or longing (Boym 2001), or it can evoke pain, anger, loss, or some combination of the above. Even in these situations, people’s connection to “home” or another significant place can be very strong, something that they hang onto, either by choice or because they cannot let go.

In T. Turino’s work on the semiotics of music, he explains that we make “connections between indexical signs and their objects by experiencing them together in our actual lives” and that music “commonly indexes the people and situations where we have heard the music” (2008: 8-9; cf. van Dijck 2006: 363). Listening to music allowed soldiers to experience a feeling of place far removed from where they were, for example, when they heard music they had listened to in other times and spaces. Noah⁶, who served in a tank unit in the Army National Guard, described listening to a band that he heard at WOW hall, a music venue in his hometown of Eugene, Oregon:

I just was reminded of loved ones, who I was with, you know, friends, and my significant other. It was just more of a place, just being out, just being outside. You don’t get too many opportunities to think outside of the military.

He expressed that listening to this band helped bring him back to the “real world,” implying that while in Iraq, he felt that he was in an other-worldly situation, and the music helped ground him in a place other than where he was physically, one that he associated with his reality, his “real life” – the one he left, and the one to which he hoped to return. Noah’s use of “real world” suggested that he associated “home” with how things should be, as much as a specific locale. Here, it is important to realize that during deployments to Iraq, most troops had very limited freedom of mobility and did not, for the most part, leave base unless they were on patrols or missions. Their mobility was thus limited to the base itself, which depending on its location and type, offered limited diversions or changes of scene, a very different reality than that of non-war contexts in which people can physically leave their work environments and relocate to other spaces to relax and engage in leisure-time relationships and activities. As Shannon, a veteran of the U.S. Air Force interviewed in February 2007, put it:

It’s kind of a bubble over there, and you’re not able to just go home. A lot of people have their own little spaces that they go to. They go to work, they go to school. They may not like it a whole lot, but then they just go home. They have that escape. Whereas, over there [in Iraq], there’s absolutely no escape. There’s no way to get out of it besides dying.

This restricted mobility, the foreignness of the location in which they found themselves, the distance from other places they had lived or where they currently called home, and the constant danger of injury and death enhanced soldiers' desire to use music to transport themselves elsewhere.

Similar to Noah, Joseph remembered buying the album *Fallen* by Evanescence because his girlfriend at the time had sent him a letter with the lyrics to the song "My Immortal," whose first verse is:

I'm so tired of being here
 Suppressed by all my childish fears
 And if you have to leave
 I wish that you would just leave
 Your presence still lingers here
 And it won't leave me alone

He remembered feeling at the time that it was a "super deep song," and the lyrics reminded him of her. In the case of this song, Joseph made a connection between this particular song because of the meanings he interpreted from the lyrics and the fact that his girlfriend had sent them to him in a letter. For other songs by this band, he explained that he was attracted to the songs because of the "yearning" and "longing" expressed in the lyrics. He listened to the music for the nostalgic emotion that it expressed and evoked rather than to a specific connection between the song and a different place. Similar to those interviewed by Pieslak (2007 and 2009), Joseph explained that when he was working out or preparing himself to go on a patrol or mission, by contrast, he would listen to very different types of music, which he described as aggressive "testosterone fueled" music, "stuff

that would get my adrenaline going" and "make me feel hyper-aggressive and hyper-vigilant." These choices were specifically selected because the "sound would obviously not remind me very much of home."⁷ During his private time, he would listen to Evanescence or the bands Atreyu or Aiden for their songs about longing or love because as he explained, "I think that was just a reflection of what I felt at the time."

Some interviewees, such as Gabe already discussed, used "home" in describing nostalgic music listening not necessarily to refer to places where they had spent much of their lives. Josh⁸, who worked in counter-intelligence in the U.S. Army, remembered listening to music that reminded him of his wife at the time, high school, and home. When I asked him what he meant by "home," he said Washington State. Though he grew up in Sandusky, Ohio, he was based at Fort Lewis (now Joint-Base Lewis McCord) in Washington and at the time was married to a woman from Washington State. Home was where she was. Similarly when I asked Joseph about a song that made him think of "home," he explained that for him home was "sort of split." During his deployments, he was conflicted about his relationship with his parents. When he longed for home, he did not remember missing his parents' home, but rather he longed for the Pacific Northwest, in this case the landscape where he had spent most of his life:

I used to think a lot about the mountains and being at the beach, like at Ocean Shore. I once took a road trip down to Oregon and went along the Pacific Byway, and those sorts of scenes really reminded me of home.

Joseph also identified Germany as “home.” His girlfriend when he joined the military was German, a woman whom he had met when she was an exchange student in his high school in Washington State. After joining the military, he requested to be based in Germany to be near her. Though he had only spent two months in Germany, it was her home that he often thought about during his first deployment. At the time, he had also “begun to really find a distaste for American culture,” so he was attracted to music that made him feel more connected to Europe, “a little more sophisticated or less American in some ways.” I asked Joseph whether it was the lyrical content or other sonic dimensions that he associated with various places. He explained that it was often the lyrical content, but that where the band came from also mattered. He enjoyed the British bands Radiohead and Travis, because they made him “think more of Europe and European things.”

Some chose not to listen to music that reminded them of their lives outside the war specifically because it was too difficult to think about. Josh remembered listening to music that reminded him of his wife, high school, and home. But, listening to music about home also made him sad, so he often chose not to listen to music that evoked those memories.

Others explained that music evoked strong feelings associated with places, even if those places were not particularly significant to them. For example, Andrew, a soldier in the U.S. Army interviewed in February 2008, remembered that during his deployment, he listened to a lot of “So-Cal music,”

especially music by Yellowcard, a band that originated in Florida but was then based in Los Angeles. Because there was someone in his unit who was from southern California and liked this style of music, he often found himself listening to the band when playing cards during his deployment. Since the end of his term of service, Yellowcard now reminds him as much of Iraq as it does California.

In addition to connecting to places and people important to them, many soldiers described selecting music because they considered the artists and genres to be far removed from their current realities. In these examples, they were less intent on remembering a specific place than in escaping their current environment. New technologies are especially effective for enabling individuals to create personalized spaces for themselves, sonic bubbles removed from their present environments. As M. Bull explains, a person putting on headphones can effectively shut out the world outside; iPods can create an “auditory territory ... a form of ‘sensory gating,’ permitting it to screen out unwanted sounds, producing its own seductive ‘soundscape’” (2007: 12-13). Bull, C.A. Condella (2008), and others overstate MP3 players’ ability to transport a person away from their current setting. Condella argues that the world has become “flat:” remoteness has been abolished because “technologies like the iPod tend to render all places more or less the same” because people have the capacity to transform their experience, making it where they want it to be, in this case by manipulating their sonic environments. He writes: “It doesn’t matter where I *actually* am, as the place

around me can be essentially ignored” (2008: 92). Echoing this idea, Mark explained that he shared a living space with three other soldiers. He had a curtain around his bunk, and “as soon as I went in there and put the headphones on, it was like, I didn’t even care if anyone else was in the room.” For him and many other interviewees, putting on headphones was a way to retreat into a personal sonic space at the same time that it signaled to others his unavailability. However, in the case of deployed troops, this transformation is superficial and difficult to achieve, especially when a person’s attempt to control his or her soundscape is frequently interrupted by mortar explosions or one’s desire to wander aimlessly while absorbed in fantastic sonic journeys is restricted by a barbed enclosure.

Nevertheless, troops take advantage of this potential of individual listening devices and other opportunities for private listening. Eric, a medic in the National Guard interviewed in February 2007, explained that when he was in Baghdad and had his own room, he set up speakers. When he could, he would go into his room to listen to music. He explained that he tried to find music that would take him away from where he was, such as the artist Norah Jones’s or the band Journey’s love ballads. A number of soldiers, including Eric, described listening to female artists because the music transported them mentally out of the very male and masculine environment in which they found themselves (see Gilman 2010). Here, it is interesting to think about how spaces become gendered through musical listening. In much of the descriptions about soldiers group listening

during deployments offered by those interviewed in Jonathan Pieslak’s (2007 and 2009) and in my research, aggressive male-associated styles, such as metal and rap genres, dominate, contributing to the creation of hypermasculine spaces within the military (Gilman 2010). Male and female soldiers sometimes chose to listen music that they gendered feminine, specifically music that featured women’s voices, to create a differentiated space distinct from the male gendered space that surrounded them. This isolated sonic environment for some might have been gendered female, whereas for others, it provided an auditory reprieve from hypermasculinity.

Others described using music in especially anxiety producing moments as a mechanism to temporarily escape the real risk they were experiencing. Mark explained that his unit functioned as a reserve unit that provided backup to other units as needed. This usually meant that the unit they were assisting or replacing was involved in an especially dangerous operation:

Each unit would get a specific plot of land that they would have to control or patrol or do operations in. And whenever that unit was getting their asses handed to them, then the division would say, “okay Brava Troop,” you have to go here for a week or two, or maybe two months, whatever it was. And we had to basically support these guys. So, we were always going to the worst places ever. Wherever the worst fights were, that’s where we were going.

The Brava Troop is a tank unit. In order to quickly mobilize the unit to the location of its new mission, the tanks, intact with their soldiers inside, were transported on flatbed trucks across the

countryside. Mark has many dark memories of being enclosed in his tank, which was sitting on a truck that rushed across the Iraqi countryside. He explained: "I'm sitting in a tank on the back of a truck, trying not to think about how there could be a bomb going off beneath me right now. So, I'd have to put the headphones on." Asked what he remembered listening to during these journeys, he answered Modest Mouse's albums *Good News for People Who Love Bad News*, and *The Moon in Antarctica*. He liked listening to these albums because "*the Moon in Antarctica is pretty*, it sounds like the title. It's very desolate and bleak, but just beautiful. The music on it is just unbelievable." Mark is an accomplished musician and someone for whom musical listening is very important. He constantly seeks out new music, and he explained that even when not listening to music, music is streaming through his mind. In his description of his musical choice inside the tank, he capitalized on the opportunity to listen to music that he really liked that could draw him into focused listening rather than to music whose specific characteristics enabled him to escape, because of its association with other places. When asked if he could describe a specific memory of listening to music inside the tank, he answered:

Whenever I started to think about my situation, it felt really confined. I felt that I was in prison. That was basically what it was. I knew I had to be there for a specific amount of time. The only way I was going to leave was that I was dead, or I got blown up, or I stayed there for a year plus. And, early on at least, I was so worried about everything. It was becoming a huge problem for me that I had to, I mean, I really needed to try to compartmentalize it, just put it out of my mind. I was

like, struggling, trying so hard to find a way to do that. I think, as busy as we were all the time, that sort of passed the time a lot. But then, listening to music would do it too. I mean, there were some records, I listened to them, and they kind of reminded me of my situation to some degree, and how horrible and depressing it is. But, I mean, it's still enjoyable to listen to good music.

Mark's answer is complicated because it suggests that on the one hand, music helped mitigate his intense anxiety and provided a calming mechanism at the same time that music reminded him of his "situation." Within his distress, listening to music also still brought him some joy. Mark's explanation is a good example of why Condella's suggestion MP3 players have rendered one's physical context insignificant is an overstatement. Mark used music to try to escape his environment, however, listening to music could only dull the reality of the physical presence in which he found himself.

Soldiers also created differently-constituted spaces within the larger sonic environment through collective listening. Josh Kun writes, "music is, after all, a spatial practice, evoking, transcending, and organizing places along spatial trajectories" (2005). As I describe in Gilman 2010, deployed soldiers often aggregated based on shared identity, some of which was geographically constituted. Thus, soldiers from particular ethnicities associated with shared national origins, particular regions in the country, or those who lived in similar types of environments (e.g. urban or rural) often developed friendship groups within their larger units. Sleeping arrangements were often based on these groupings in that

friends chose to share rooms together when rooms existed, or clustered together in larger sleeping environments, thus spatially arranging themselves in relationship to geographic as well as cultural and other identifiers. Craig, a veteran of the U.S. Army interviewed in August 2008, for example, was in a very diverse unit with “a lot of Mexicans, a lot of African-Americans, one Russian ... and ten percent of my company were islanders: Dominican, Puerto Rican, Haitian, and Jamaican.” Music played a role in this organization of space in that people who grouped themselves together based on shared identifiers would listen to music together, sometimes music associated with specific geographic locales. Similarly, Andrew, who is Euro-American, described the African-American soldiers in his unit closing off their sleeping space and listening to hip hop music, associated culturally with African-Americans, but also geographically with urban “inner-city” environments. To complicate things, his roommates physically closed off the space with a curtain and created a distinct sonic environment for themselves. However, that they listened to music collectively through a speaker system created an acoustic wall within the room at the same time that because sound travels, their music nevertheless crossed the barrier blurring the boundary. Yet, it also created sonic conflict as the Euro-American soldiers did not have control of their acoustic environment and were forced to listen to the music of their neighbors, something about which Andrew complained.

At the same time as music could contribute to geographic and cultural divisions, music was also

used to transcend them, sometimes by choice and sometimes not. As already alluded to, because of their connection with more diverse populations in the military, soldiers described listening to music of which they had not previously been aware or that they had previously disliked. Matt, for example, described listening to a lot of country music when he was stationed with a unit with a lot of southerners though previously he had mostly listened to alternative rock genres. He remembered not being very enthusiastic the first time somebody in his unit suggested they listen to Johnny Cash, but now he loves Johnny Cash: “he’s become one of my favorite musicians.” Similarly, Euro-American soldiers I interviewed described enjoying and also learning to dance to salsa music because of their friendships with Latino members in their units.

Music, memory, and place after deployment

After deployment, Iraq as a place was one more locality within the multi- and trans-local matrix of soldiers’ associations with place. Music became a conduit for remembering experiences in Iraq as when soldiers chose music they listened to during a deployment or when they inadvertently heard a song that triggered a memory. The musical associations that the people I interviewed discussed were rarely music they identified with the country of Iraq or its inhabitants, but rather music they listened to individually or with others in the U.S. military.

One of the dynamics of the current war in Iraq was that U.S. troops were largely closed off from Iraqi civilians other than those working on bases or those they encountered during patrols or missions. Though they were in the physical location of the country of Iraq, their experiences within that space was mostly devoid of contact (at least positive contact) with cultural practices associated with Iraqis, including Iraqi music.⁹ Few people I interviewed mentioned Iraqi music as being part of their soundscapes, and those who did often did not refer to it positively. Asked if he ever listened to Iraqi music, Andrew distinguished between “hearing” and “listening:”

“No. No. We heard a lot of it, but we never listened to it. I mean, God forbid someone heard you listening to it in your unit. I mean, they would be like ‘What? What are you going to join their side now?’”

Andrew’s answer exemplified ways in which musical genres and styles could be so strongly associated with a place, the people who lived there, the politics of its governing body, that people may not be open to considering the aesthetics of the music: they accepted or rejected it because of associations tied to particular people, politics, or governments rather than whether or not they enjoyed it.

Veterans interviewed did report many examples of American and European music that reminded them of their time at war. In the following quote, Mark describes why the Broken Social Scene record continues to be tied to memories of war for him:

The initial battle was done, and we were out on this border. The mail came on the second day. And, I got a couple of CDs, I pulled it out. It was a Broken Social

Scene record. It was like their first really good one. As soon as I heard it, I was like, “this is unbelievable. This is the best music ever.” And, I mean, still to this day, they’re one of my favorite bands. I love all the stuff they do. I don’t know, I loved getting mail. I get this CD, and it was just great. We were up all night. It’s October, but it’s still crazy hot, and then we’d get cold at night. It was so uncomfortable. I had to sleep in the driver’s hole of the Bradley [tank] or in the back, you know, on the ground. I hadn’t showered in like two weeks. But, I was about to go on my leave. I was about to go home for two weeks. So, I was really excited about that. And then, I get this record. It was just like, I don’t know, the excitement of what we had just gone through plus the excitement of going home ... So, whenever I listen to it, the first couple of songs in that, I always think about that, how I felt then.

Mark’s description encapsulates the complicated tangles of emotions he experienced following a traumatic invasion: relief, exhaustion, excitement, or nostalgia for home, where he would soon return for a short leave. The significance of the music for him has little to do with its sonic dimensions and more to do with the memories associated with his first introduction to the album.

Similarly, Andrew explained that the song “In the Arms of the Angel” by Sara McLachlan evoked sad memories for him:

I remember that Sara McLachlan song, “In the Arms of the Angel” was playing on the radio on Christmas ... and then we had, you know, rockets hitting and thirty-something patients came in at the same time. A lot of my friends died that day. That still kind of sticks in the back of my mind. Before, I’d be like, ‘this song’s corny, next.’ It really caught me since then, even to this day. I still listen to it and it just brings back a lot of memories.

Here the indexical memory of having heard this song during an especially traumatic day continues to trigger memories for Andrew whenever he hears it.¹⁰

Svetlana Boym begins her book *The Future of Nostalgia* with “Nostalgia is not only a longing for a lost time and lost home but also friends who once inhabited it and who are now dispersed all over the world (2001: ix). Correspondingly, sometimes certain music reminded war veterans more of the people and relationships during their deployments than of the physical place. For Andrew, the band Yellowcard, mentioned previously, reminded him of his time with his unit. As Andrew explained, it is often when you’re no longer in a place that the place becomes significant to you and thus music evokes memories. He explained that when he was in Iraq, music made him think about home because he did not want to think about being in Iraq. Now, certain music made him think about being in Iraq: “just like now when I hear a song from there it’ll draw back memories. The same thing when I was there, I wasn’t thinking about being there, I was thinking about being home.” Similarly, certain music reminds Mike, a medic in the National Guard interviewed in January 2009, of his friend Gabe. Their relationship and its associated memories were intricately tied to a place where they spent time together and with what was going on in that setting. Deployment is similar to camp experiences where participants are intensely engaged with each other for a bounded amount of time. The nature of people’s relationships during deployment differs from any other time because

they shared space, leisure and work time activities, and all of these were highly charged emotionally. Upon returning from deployments, the nature of their interactions necessarily changed as people operated under less tension, lived in different environments, had more mobility, and sometimes lived with spouses and family members. As is the case for a significant percentage of deployed American troops, Mike and Gabe were in the National Guard. Upon returning to the U.S., they returned to their civilian jobs and lives, and the time they devoted to part-time military obligations lessened. When they each spoke to me about their relationship with each other, it was context and place-specific, their unit’s deployment to Iraq during the war. Though they continued to communicate over the phone and email, what they had in common was the time they shared in Iraq rather than their lives before or after. Interestingly, most soldiers I have interviewed did not maintain relationships with many people in their units even when these relationships had been very deep and important during their deployments. When people did report keeping in touch, it was usually with just one or two other people.

When I asked anti-war activist Joseph whether there was any music that he avoided because it reminded him of Iraq, he answered simply, “country.” When I asked him to elaborate, he described his intense visceral irritation with the line from Toby Keith’s song “We’ll put a boot in your ass, it’s the American Way.” He explained that he felt that this type of music “symbolized a refusal to face what was really going on” in the Iraq war.

Later, he said that it was ironic that some of the same people that claimed that the wars were being fought to bring freedom to Iraqis listened to music glorified shooting and killing, e.g. “we’ll put a boot in your ass,” which he felt constituted a contradiction.

Joseph also described using music to process strong feelings he had about the war, sometimes evoked during his activism. In his work with the anti-war coffeehouse Coffee Strong, he frequently had conversations with active duty soldiers who were ambivalent about being in the military. He explained that whenever he had a conversation with a soldier who was preparing to deploy, it reminded him how he had felt about going to Iraq, and it made him feel “fairly upset and emotional about it.” After these conversations, he would often listen to the song “Hero of War” by the band Rise Against. This emotionally intense and melancholic song’s strong and clearly audible vocals present the perspective of a soldier whose experience in war is strikingly different from what his recruiters promised, as evident in the last verses of the song:

She walked through bullets and haze
I asked her to stop, I begged her to stay
But she pressed on
So I lifted my gun and I fired away

And the shells jumped through the smoke
And into the sand that the blood now had soaked
She collapsed with a flag in her hand
A flag white as snow

A hero of war is that what they see
Just medals and scars, so damn proud of me
And I brought home that flag, now it gathers dust

But it’s a flag that I love, it’s the only flag I trust
He said, “Son, have you seen the world?”

Well, what would you say if I said that you could?”

Joseph explained, “I listen to that song, usually in my car when I’m alone so that I can just sort of get choked up and sing it out loud and sound and feel terrible.”

Conclusion

Most scholarship on music and conflict emphasizes the production, dissemination, and distribution of music or it analyzes music as text, thus neglecting what is probably the most common form of contemporary musical engagement—consumption. Given the widespread availability and accessibility of recorded sound, the most frequent way that many people in the contemporary world engage with music, even those who are musicians themselves, is through musical listening, and most frequently via mediated recordings. Given the multiplicity of ways that people engage and interpret music, examining the very individualized and personalized ways that people not only listen to music, but how they remember and talk about their musical habits, reveals perhaps more about how music operates in the lived world than do more limited approaches that neglect listening. War environments especially demand attention to musical listening because the majority of those fighting the wars have such limited opportunities for other types of musical practice because of lack access to instruments, mobility, other musicians, and times and places to make music. That music listening is so prev-

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alent and that troops are so articulate about the multiple roles that music plays for them during their deployments is evidence of just how important it is that scholars consider listening as active and engaged musical practice.

Thinking more specially about how soldiers' musical practices relate to place exemplifies how many people in the contemporary world operate within translocal networks. It highlights how individuals identify with different conceptualiza-

tions of place, from nation-states to more specific locales, and how people strongly identify with multiple places simultaneously, some of which overlap, others of which can exist in opposition to one another. Musical listening is an especially salient mechanism for navigating these complicated spatial dynamics because it is inherently mobile, is tied to real or imaginary spaces and places, is so widely available and accessible because of new technologies, and open to multiple individualized uses and interpretations.

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Notes

1. For more information about the documentary, see www.groundsforresistance.com.
2. Portable cassette and then portable CD players allowed for more individual listening. MP3 players greatly increased the quantity of music that can be accessed during war, and the smallness of the players and ear-phones facilitates their being transported and listened to during work-time as well as leisure-time activities.
3. A review of his 2009 book is available on *Volume!*'s website, here: http://www.cairn.info/resume.php?ID_ARTICLE=VOLUME_092_0242 [editor's note].
4. Cf. the review of his book in this issue [editor's note].
5. See Gilman, forthcoming, for more detailed information about Josh's discussion of Earle's music as patriotic.
6. Interviewed in July 2009.
7. See Pieslak 2009 and 2007 for descriptions of soldiers' use of heavy metal and rap genres as motivation for battle.
8. Interviewed in July 2008.
9. I did hear one anecdote about officers getting together regularly with Iraqi musicians to share and play music together, though I do not have the details about the contexts in which this took place nor how common these musical sharing sessions were for others.
10. See Gilman, forthcoming for a discussion of music, memory and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder [PTSD].