2023-06-01

“I wanna be that cool”

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"I Wanna Be That Cool"

Soccer Mommy's Big Feelings

ABSTRACT This article elaborates recent work on a strain of contemporary indie rock by focusing on a case study of one of its chief practitioners, Soccer Mommy. This particular approach—which I refer to with the term "Big Feelings"—produces various feminist affects that are irreducible to any one parameter, but which emerge through a cohesive synthesis of several characteristics. That is, listeners *feel* this music's feminist orientations even in the absence of overt references. Primarily performed by Gen-Z musicians, the Big Feelings that these artists articulate must also be read in the context of the successive socio-political crises that are not literally referenced in the music, but which nevertheless inform it. Lyrical analysis of the 2018 single "Cool" shows how Soccer Mommy resonates with but also departs from riot grrrl models, where queer-feminist politics are implied by never stated outright. Harmonic analysis of the same song exemplifies the ways in which Big Feelings expands the sonic palette beyond the two and three note chords typical of masculinized rock music, instead incorporating extensions that track with Susan McClary's arguments regarding the feminized semiotics of chromaticism. Finally, I read 2020's "Circle the Drain" alongside excerpted interviews I have conducted with fans of the music, using their words to help corroborate and elaborate my reading of Big Feelings as an orientation that is made meaningful in part because of the traumatic context in which young musicians and fans, permanently in crisis, create spaces of community, catharsis, and care.

KEYWORDS Soccer Mommy, Affect, Feminism, Queer Care, Indie Rock

This article builds on recent work in which I have suggested that a certain approach to indie rock has coalesced within the past 15 years to the point where it is now possible to identify consistent aesthetic characteristics of the movement.[1] These characteristics, in my view, present a distinct sound within the genre, however deeply related it remains to others. Predominantly performed by women and queer musicians, I have described this approach with the term "Big Feelings" in order to foreground the ways that the music eschews overt political orientations, instead emphasizing emotions, feelings, and affects that resonate indirectly, sounding a (queer) feminist valence to the extent that it refutes the straight/white/masculine construction of rock music vocabulary. Importantly, such feminist orientations are not explicitly manifest in any one aspect of performance, but

1. Dan DiPiero, "Big Feelings: Feminist Affect In Indie Rock After 2000," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* vol. 33, no. 4 (2021): 16–22; *Big Feelings: Feminism and Indie Rock After Riot Grrrl* (under contract, University of Michigan Press).

Journal of Popular Music Studies, Volume 35, Number 2, pp. 39–65, Electronic ISSN: 1533-1598 DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/jpms.2023.35.2.39

become palpable through the affective force generated by the music as a complex socio-musical and visual phenomenon.[2] Far from the first indie music to center personal feelings, Big Feelings does so in a unique formulation: de-emphasizing the dyadic "power-chord" vocabulary of masculine-coded rock, Big Feelings makes frequent use of chord extensions that are rare in rock music, and which, following Susan McClary, have long signified a feminized association with affectuation, emotionality, and overwhelming feeling.[3] Rather than producing feminine excess by appropriating masculine-coded sounds (as feminist punk did), Big Feelings instead doubles down on the stereotypical association between femininity and emotion, positively re-appropriating such tropes in the pursuit of creating community, catharsis, and safety in a world where such opportunities are increasingly under assault.

While Big Feelings is indebted to both earlier punk-associated genres, as well as singer-songwriters in the rock/folk tradition who have also created spaces for emotional vulnerability and resonant catharsis through their music,[4] Big Feelings' aesthetic vocabulary presents a novel approach to such personal material (what we might problematically call "confessionals"[5]) by drawing on a combination of 1990s-inflected, grunge-oriented guitar

2. As elsewhere, I use the word "orientation" here to invoke Sara Ahmed's understanding from *Queer Phenomenology*, in which the idea of "sexual orientation" becomes a basis for Ahmed to theorize queerness phenomenologically, as a matter of space and how we move through it. Most broadly, orientations signal the ways in which we direct our desires as much as how we are directed by the world, co-constitutively.

3. For constructions of "feminine excess" via chromaticism, see Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002). For more on the relation of sound, gender, and the impropriety of women sounding out, see Ann Carson, "The Gender of Sound," in *Glass, Irony, and God* (New York: New Directions, 1995), 119–39. For more on rock's (standard) harmonic vocabulary, see David Temperley, *The Musical Language of Rock* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) and below.

4. I use the term "singer-songwriter" here to refer to a particular *discourse* about genre—not genre itself—which usually locates a beginning in the music of James Taylor and Joni Mitchell. In my own writing, I try to avoid this label, along with the "confessional" description, for their imprecision and gendered implications, respectively. In terms of "singer-songwriters," the most relevant references for Big Feelings are Fiona Apple, Tori Amos, and the pivotal link to what was at the time described as "alternative rock," Alanis Morissette. All three of these artists align with Big Feelings' orientations toward performances that work through trauma and adversity in ways that feel personal, but which then resonate and perform community/political work among listenerships drawn into an intimate public by those very disclosures. For more on the performative intimacy of singer-songwriters, see Ariana Phillips-Hutton, "Private Words, public emotions: performing confession in indie music," *Popular Music* vol. 37, no. 3 (2018): 329–50; David Shumway, "The Singer-Songwriter and the Confessional Persona," in *Rock Star: The Making of Musical Icons from Elvis to Springsteen* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 148–74. For more on Morissette and her approach to feelings, see Karen Fournier, *The Words and Music of Alanis Morissette* (Praeger 2015). For intimate publics, see Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008) and Barry Shank, *The Political Force of Musical Beauty* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

5. For a critique of the term "confessional" see Alexandra Pollard, "Why are only women described as 'confessional' singer-songwriters?," *The Guardian*, April 9, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/apr/09/why-are-only-women-described-as-confessional-singer-songwriters. Certainly, Big Feelings artists such as Soccer Mommy, Lady Lamb, and Indigo De Souza make music that is informed by their own lives, and in line with Phillips–Hutton's study, these artists also encourage reading their music as a personal expression through their social media activity, which sometimes contextualizes the topics they write about, and is in any case invested in crafting a public-facing persona that reads as authentic and intimate. The reason I try to avoid the word "confessional" then is primarily because of the ways it threatens—as label—to foreclose or downplay the creative, generative aspects of their work, some of which can't be read as disclosure at all. Instead, here I stick with the ideas of "personal" and "abstract" to suggest that while the personal lives of these musicians are clearly central elements of their craft, the latter is not

music, as well as the melodic tunefulness of post-2000s pop. Primarily performed by young, Gen-Z musicians, the Big Feelings that these musicians articulate must also be read in the context of the successive socio-political crises that are not literally referenced in the music, but which, I suggest, nevertheless inform it.

The purpose of this article is to provide a thorough case study of one of Big Feelings' main practitioners—Soccer Mommy—and to give sustained attention to the ways in which they uniquely perform the aesthetic dynamics I read as distinctive in this strain of indie rock. As I have previously described, these include the centering of women, queer, non-binary, trans*, and otherwise non-cis men performers; a lyrical orientation towards personal experience and emotional honesty rather than overt political content; a nostalgic approach often invoking what we might call a 1990s sound; harmonic vocabulary that frequently deploys chord extensions in ways that differ from other rock subgenres; and catchy melodies that avoid previous feminist indie-rock's over-determinative associations with "anger."[6]

I hear these characteristics across bands such as Soccer Mommy, Indigo De Souza, Wednesday, Vagabon, Bachelor(/Jay Som/Palehound) Boygenius (/Lucy Dacus/Phoebe Bridgers/Julien Baker), Hello Mary, Land of Talk, beabadoobee, Fazerdaze, Snail Mail, Girlpool, The Ophelias, Mannequin Pussy, Great Grandpa, and more. But in outlining these characteristics, I do not intend to sort and categorize, much less label; following the ways in which reductive discourses around "women in rock" have flattened musicians' artistic contributions to a handful of common criteria (namely, gender and anger), I wish to avoid suggesting that these characteristics are uniform in any sense or that all the bands I have identified take them up in the same ways. Big Feelings is not defined by strict adherence to any one of these categories. Rather, it is a term that aspires to help us trace tendencies each band will approach differently, fully embracing some where others might not factor as prominently. Following affect theory's focus on interdependent relationships, these features should also be read as co-constitutive, producing Big Feelings through a synthesis that is both non-linear and unique across each example.[7]

reducible to the former. Moreover, I don't actually think that the idea of these songs being personally "real" or "authentic" is the central issue with Big Feelings. I don't think that fans' literal identification with the experiences sung about is the point; based on the conversations I've been having with listeners, the content matters less than the affects performed. The form of the performance affectively signals that musicians and audiences share similar genres of life experience and similar genres of interpretation about those experiences, regardless of the specific content (which would account for the fact that songs can be either quite specific in their storytelling or hopelessly vague—while being equally a/effective for listeners). The point isn't "that happened to me too" but "we belong to the same world."

6. As Fournier writes, more often than not, perceived anger was used by mainstream discourse to diminish and contain the political force of much rock and rock-adjacent music produced by women in the 1990s. Although my research suggests there are many aesthetic reasons why young musicians have turned toward different ways of singing (and by extension, expressing emotion) than their 1990s forebearers, those same aesthetic choices can also be read as effectively (and perhaps strategically) resisting or foreclosing mainstream discourse's previous reading of young women playing rock as "angry."

7. For theories of affect and interdependence, see Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds. *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). For affect, interdependence, and music, see Chris Stover, "Affect and Improvising Bodies," *Perspectives of New Music* vol. 55, no. 2 (2017): 5–66; Dan DiPiero, *Contingent Encounters: Improvisation in Music and Everyday Life* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2022).

Additionally, I want to guard against the implication that my formulation of "Big Feelings" suggests a coherent political project on the part of musicians; if anything, the opposite is true, since most of these groups defer speaking about their music in overtly political terms. As I hope to show throughout this article, however, this does not mean that Big Feelings music is politically inert. Instead, the connection between aesthetics and politics is oblique, where musical affects consecrate an intimate public, staging the kind of affective performance that writers such as Ann Cvetkovich (2003), Sara Ahmed (2004), and Lauren Berlant (2008) have variously theorized as a kind of "public feeling."

FEMINIST AFFECT

At its most basic, feminist affect is a concept that aspires to give us language for describing cultural productions that *feel* feminist, even if we can't obviously or objectively identify why. Particularly in the past five to ten years, affect theory has been useful for music scholars wanting to follow the "new musicological" assertion that music doesn't have to literally speak about political or social topics in order to raise them.[8] In the absence of clear statements (lyrical, visual, from interviews) attesting to a certain political orientation, feminist affect names the forces that are nevertheless perceived by listeners who gravitate toward music for the energy it gives off, for the reactions it elicits in others with similar experiences of the world. Feminist affect is not an endpoint or an objectively identifiable criterion; rather it is an opening, an ephemeral trace that enables us to describe those aspects of performance that orient listeners around a shared sense of inhabiting the world—even if, as is often the case, the artists producing these affects prefer to downplay the suggestion that their identities and political positions have something important to do with the music they make. Rather than concluding analysis, identifying feminist affect begins a conversation.

Like any affective phenomenon, feminist affect is not reducible to one or another idea, cause, outcome, or experience. As with the experience of genres like sadness, everydayness, or panic, affects that feel feminist will be singular, and experienced differently by different people each time they come up. While that sometimes complicates efforts to identify how affects operate, I stipulate this here to signal the importance of accounting for as many dimensions of music as possible—visual, lyrical, sonic, discursive—as well as the need to speak with listeners and to take their experiences into account. Tracking feminist affect must also consider the overall cultural, musical, and political context in which the music is situated and through which it is perceived, as a matter of social mediation. My hypothesis here is that Soccer Mommy's multivalent musical manifestations produce feminist affects through a nonlinear synthesis of several interdependent factors. For the purposes of this essay, I approach these factors sequentially, reading two Soccer Mommy tracks for lyrical address, approach to harmony, and representation of 90s nostalgia. I also briefly address

8. Ana Hofman, "The romance with affect: sonic politics in a time of political exhaustion," *Culture, Theory, and Critique* vol. 61, nos. 2–3 (December 2020): 303–18.

the mediation of Soccer Mommy's image via social media, as well as fan relationships with the music, reading their observations in the context of the overall cultural climate within which Big Feelings resonates.

"COOL," LYRICAL ORIENTATIONS, AND POST-RIOT GRRRL FEMINISM

Soccer Mommy (Sophie Allison)'s 2018 single, "Cool" is a low-key, slightly dreamy rock paean with an unusually compelling melody (a quality for which Allison is well-known). The subject of "Cool" is Mary, a classmate who Allison's character idolizes. According to the singer's perspective, Mary isn't cool because she is popular with boys, but because she rebuffs them: as the second verse explains, "And she won't ever love no boy/She'll treat you like a fucking toy/She'll break your heart and steal your joy, like a criminal." Later, Allison elaborates, "Mary keeps you off her mind/She wants to spend her weekend right/Out with her friends just getting high, like a stoner girl." This latter verse not only describes Mary's disinterest in heterosexual dating, but also and importantly foregrounds friendships among women.

In these verses, Allison seems to be speaking to one of the boys in question, both advising him of the futility of pursuing Mary and at the same time offering a somewhat commiserative admission: in the chorus, Allison sings "Ooh ooh ooh ooh ooh ooh ooh ooh/I wanna know her like you-ou-ou-ou-ou-ou-ou/I wanna know her like you-ou-ou-ou-ou-ou-ou/I wanna be that cool/I wanna be that." In this confession, more vulnerable than the verses, the protagonist continues to blur the lines between idolization and desire, singing that she wants to know Mary "like you," an envious sentiment implying that, while the speaker might be close with Mary, there is a sphere of intimacy that is beyond her reach: the (implied) sexual arena that remains the purview of anonymous boys. Still, it isn't just that Allison's speaker yearns for a sexual relationship; the stanza also ends with her desire to be "that cool."

Although I maintain that Big Feelings represents a distinct feminist orientation in indie rock, it nevertheless remains deeply connected to the last major moment in U.S. popular culture where feminism and rock collided: the riot grrrl movement. In Allison's lyrical address, I suggest that we can hear a kind of post-riot grrrl posture, which does not completely distance itself from the themes and politics of the movement, but also approaches those themes in new ways. Specifically, the purposeful ambiguity created in "Cool"—between idolization and same-sex desire—is characteristic of bands like Bikini Kill, whose famous anthem "Rebel Girl" proclaimed that the titular girl is "the queen of my world" and that the singer "wants to take [her] home" and "try on [her] clothes." In "Rebel Girl," Kathleen Hanna's character similarly describes ambiguous longing in relation to her "best friend," a deliberately blurred desire to both be *like* her and to be *with* her.

This parallel is significant for reading "Cool" insofar as I am concerned with tracking how feminist affects shift in indie rock from the 1990s—a critically influential period for Big Feelings—into the mid- to late 2000s. While there are clearly connections here that attest to the lasting influence of bands like Bikini Kill, it is also important to note that

"Cool" does not take up the most overtly anthemic, rebellious, or pointedly political declarations that "Rebel Girl" does. Whereas in "Rebel Girl" Hanna sings in defense of her character ("They say she's a dyke, but I know/She's my best friend, yeah"), and while Hanna repeatedly locates "revolution" in the rebel girl's movements (her hips, her walk, her kiss), there is neither a defensive posture toward others nor a pointed political orientation in Allison's lyrics. However, this does not mean that "Cool" is apolitical.

We have already seen that "Cool" becomes indirectly political via the lyrical foregrounding of women-women relationships, which can be read as feminist no matter how one interprets the platonic/romantic ambiguity. But there is at least one other important parallel to "Rebel Girl": the way that "Cool" implicitly takes place in the universe of adolescence, a construction that builds on the riot grrrl movement's important critiques of patriarchy by recourse to the language of girlhood. Like "Rebel Girl," which describes the heroine as having "the hottest tryke in town," the first verse of "Cool" describes Mary breaking a boy's heart "after school," characterizing the scene as one that takes place, if not in childhood, then still in a phase of life where emotions such as desire, envy, and idolization take on heightened intensity. Not only does this song place listeners back inside the period of their lives during which, (stereo)typically, emotions are most strongly felt, but critically, the song's envy/desire is also constructed in a way that combats the kinds of "girl/girl jealousism" that the riot grrrl movement critiqued, instead foregrounding the power of what we might call the uncomplicated friendship of young girls.[9] As Joanne Gottlieb and Gayle Wald write of riot grrrl,

> there is . . . a crucial element of fantasy in their self-construction—a nostalgia for the apparently close relationships between girls prior to the intrusion of heterosexual romance and its spin-offs, sexual competition and sexual rivalry.[10]

In "Cool," we can see a similar critique of girl-girl envy (where the guy is the object in the middle) since here, it is the other woman who is the object of desire, and the guy who has become an afterthought. A clear feminist political orientation is thus implied, if not stated outright. I have described this orientation as a "post-riot grrrl" posture not to signal distance from the movement, but to suggest that it selectively incorporates riot grrrl politics while also evolving them into a new cultural context. As the rest of this analysis suggests, this implication is bolstered by musical and visual elements that also allow this orientation to become *felt*.

"COOL," HARMONIC EXCESS, AND AMBIVALENT SEMIOTICS

Part of how "Cool" communicates its intense and unnamable yearning is through harmony. On paper, "Cool" proceeds by oscillating between two simple triads, D and A, the

9. See "Riot Grrrl Manifesto," originally published in *Bikini Kill Zine* 2, 1991. (A typed version can be found at https://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/riotgrrrlmanifesto.html).

10. Joanne Gottlieb and Gayle Wald, "Smells Like Teen Spirit: Riot Grrrls, Revolution, and Women in Independent Rock," in *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music, Youth Culture*, eds. Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose (New York: Routledge, 1994), 266.

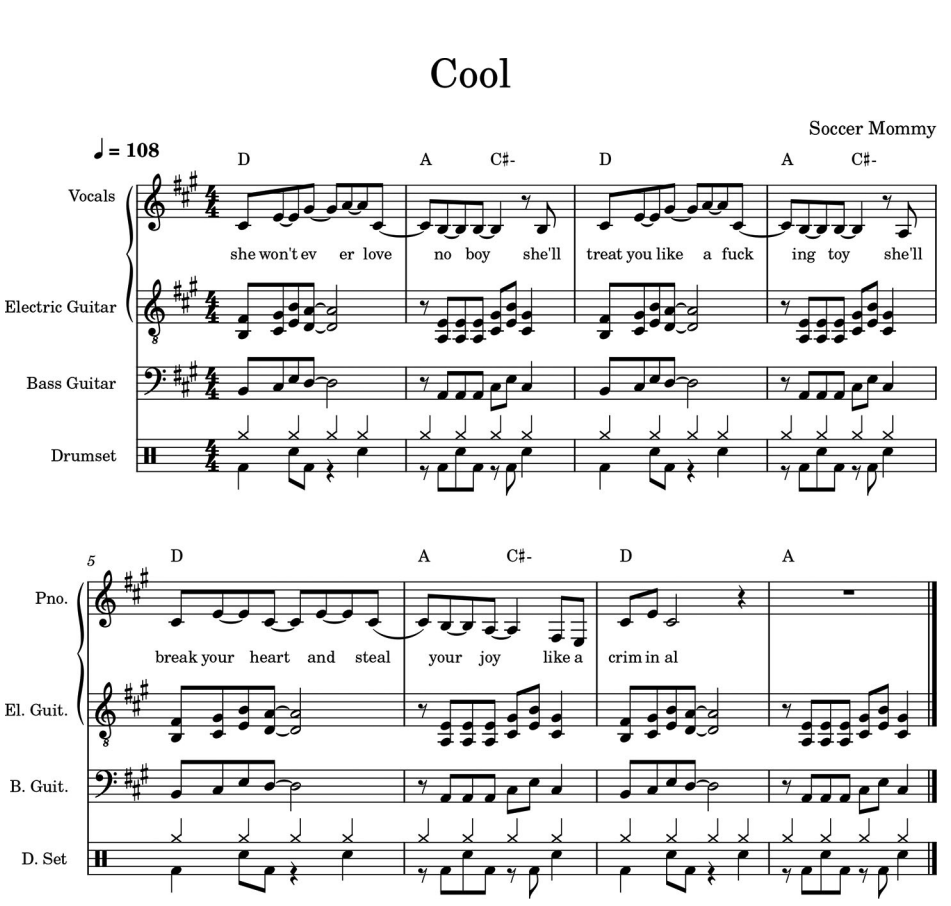

FIGURE 1. Transcription of Soccer Mommy, "Cool" (verse)

basic I–V movement that is the most straightforward and foundational root/dominant relationship in Western tonality (Figure 1). However, listening to the way these chords are articulated reveals a world of complexity under the surface. The bass and rhythm guitar, for instance, approach the D chord indirectly, through a riff that begins on B, the 6th scale degree in the key of D—rather than on the root, as might be expected. Further, the riff then walks up from B to C♯ (the major 7) and E (the major 9) before finally landing back on D, the root. Similarly, if we read the melody in D, it almost entirely avoids standard chord tones (root, third, fifth) in favor of chord extensions, arriving at the 5 via 7, 9, and ♯11 before jumping back down to 7 and finally 6/13. Because of this unconventional line, the key role its scale degrees play throughout all parts of the song, and the overall sound of the composition, it is possible to hear "Cool" in D Lydian, which is notable for the purposes of my argument. However, it is also possible to hear the song in either D major/Ionian (where the ♯11 in the melody suggests the major 7 of A as the chord progression moves)—or else as occurring in the key of *A*. In this latter case, which the melody most strongly suggests, the I–V movement would actually be a I–IV movement, with the song starting on the IV chord.

In the context of the recording, my ear leans slightly toward the D Lydian reading, while at the piano, A sounds the more natural fit. No doubt music theorists will have

a perspective on the question that differs from my own, and it is always possible that Allison herself hears the tune in a particular key. Complicating matters further, we could read "Cool" through the idea of a "melodic-harmonic divorce," which would suggest that the melody stays in the key of A while the chords circle through a progression in the key of D.[11] Indeed, there is an entire, still-emerging body of work in music theory dedicated to exploring the ambiguities and complexities of rock music's relationships with tonal harmony, where "there is little consensus on even the most basic issues" because of the ways that rock songs deny easy interpretations based in the "strong directional tendencies of classical harmony."[12] In this vein, the plausibility of hearing "Cool" in either A or D also raises Mark Spicer's idea of a "fragile tonic" in rock songs, where "the tonic chord is present, but its hierarchical status is weakened."[13] Spicer goes on to suggest that this often occurs in rock songs where instability, ambiguity, or fragility are relevant for the narrative or total semiotic affect in the music—and that is exactly what I suggest is happening in "Cool," which produces an ambiguity reinforced by the major 7 tonality present here and across so much music in the Big Feelings camp.

For my purposes, the ambiguity that this song creates from a listening perspective—in which tonic is not firmly grounded—actually serves my point. In other words, I am less interested in understanding the harmonic function than I am in picking apart how the song's overall sound resonates or signifies—and for this, it is actually counterproductive to come to a conclusion regarding key, tonal center, or the harmonic function of chords.[14] The ambivalent, complicated, overmuch affects created by many Big Feelings artists are here exemplified by the dual construction of a floating or unstable tonal space that is inflected with a major 7 tonality. The major 7 sound reinforces the ambiguity of the fragile tonic by adding what I would characterize as a kind of saturated ambivalence: in part by virtue of the relative rarity of the major 7 sound in rock music, I suggest that it uniquely signifies a complex, dense, lush, or what has been described to me in interviews as "cinematic" affect in the space of rock music, complementing and enhancing the ambivalence generated by the song's chord/melody movements and pining lyrics alike. Because this affect might be considered particularly complex, it is capable of taking on a number of resonances or signifiers—but not without limit; simply put, this is *not* the sound of cis-hetero guy-rock.

11. David Temperley, "The melodic-harmonic 'divorce' in rock," *Popular Music* vol. 26, no. 2 (2007): 323–42.

12. David Temperley and Trevor de Clercq, "Statistical Analysis of Harmony and Melody in Rock Music," *Journal of New Music Research* vol. 42, no. 3 (2013): 187. See also Trevor de Clercq, "Embracing Ambiguity in the Analysis of Form in Pop/Rock Music, 1982–1991," *Music Theory Online* vol. 23, no. 3 (2017); Christopher Doll, *Hearing Harmony: Toward a Tonal Theory for the Rock Era* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2017); Trevor de Clercq, "The Harmonic-Bass Divorce in Rock," *Music Theory Spectrum*, vol. 41, no. 2 (2019): 271–84; Brett Clement, "Convention and Invention in Harmonic and Melodic Theories for Rock Music," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Rock Music Research*, ed. Allan Moor and Paul Carr (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 107–28.

13. Mark Spicer, "Fragile, Emergent, and Absent Tonics in Pop and Rock Songs," *Music Theory Online* vol. 23, no. 2 (June 2017).

14. This is also why I don't take the possibility of a melodic-harmonic divorce into consideration when identifying "Cool"'s major 7 sound—for me, it doesn't matter that the 7th scale degree might not at most moments appear in the guitar parts because we still hear it in the overall affect, sonority, or atmosphere created by the song as a complex whole. That being said, the affective register is raised when Big Feelings bands explicitly play major 7 chords on the guitar, which many do.

To unpack this point further, I first want to briefly consider the role of chord extensions in rock music, before turning to the major 7 (and implicated ♯11) more specifically. I have suggested, following David Temperley's corpus studies, that chord extensions are generally rare in rock music, a genre whose most prototypical sound has been associated with two-note (power) chords or triads.[15] The consistent use of the major seventh (and other extensions) in "Cool" is therefore notable. I have previously focused attention on how Big Feelings' consistent use of chord extensions contributes to a feminist affect in the music due to the longstanding associations between chromaticism and femininity, particularly in the figures of madwomen or hysterics. So the first point is that both their presence and the extent of their use across Big Feelings artists are important for understanding how feminist affect becomes successfully communicated to listeners, especially when combined with other factors, such as the lyrics addressed above. Here, I also want to reinforce that point by focusing on a second, which is the way the major 7 chord specifically contributes to the "bigness" of Big Feelings, taking what has already been established as a musical device signaling feminine excess and *intensifying*—or more easily facilitating the intensification of—that very excess.

The sound of the major 7 chord is perhaps uniquely appealing for Big Feelings music, appearing not only in a large number of songs, but also contributing decisively to the qualities that make Big Feelings sound and feel different from adjacent rock music. In many ways, it is the consistent use of chord extensions generally—but the major 7 specifically—that distinguishes Big Feelings from its most closely related genres, including punk and emo. As to why this particular chord might be so appealing for musicians in the Big Feelings camp, I suggest that this might have to do with the major 7's ambiguous semiotic complexity. Where other chords have taken on relatively stable semiotic interpretations in the space of rock music, the major 7 sound more than anything overwhelms efforts to clarify a particular emotional interpretation.

In large part, I make this claim based on the fact that the major 7 chord is just that bit more unusual in the context of the rock genre space. Where certain chord extensions such as the dominant 7th (essential for blues-inflected styles) and others convey specific moods or tropes (e.g. the "Hendrix chord"), the major 7th is rare enough in the context of rock music that it frustrates simplistic semiotic interpretations, instead allowing the major 7th chord to produce a degree of perceived *complexity*. Following Temperley's understanding of complexity in music as an attribute conveyed "by events or patterns that go outside the norms of the style,"[16] the major 7 functions as a complication or a nuance that can, in the context of rock music, can be read in a number of ways.[17] The ♯11, which I discuss further as an extension of this major 7 sound, is even explicitly cited by Temperley as one that,

15. One can also get a sense of the relative rarity of chord extensions generally, but also the major 7 specifically, in Allan Moore's "Patterns of Harmony," in which the major 7 chord appears a scant five times. Allan Moore, "Patterns of Harmony," *Popular Music* vol. 11, no. 1 (January 1992): 73–106.

16. Temperley, *The Musical Language of Rock*, 143.

17. Consider some of complexity's synonyms: complication, intricacy, entanglement, multiplicity, and involvement. When combined with specific lyrical content, performance practices, visual/physical/musical styles, and so on, I read many of these aspects of "complexity" as a/effectively highlighted across performances of Big Feelings.

where harmony is concerned, "could be considered to increase complexity."[18] While Temperley is referencing musical complexity, we might also extend this reading to include emotional or affective complexity.

But it is not just the major 7's relative rarity that contributes to its ambivalent semiotics. Rather, it seems to me that there is something inherently contradictory about the sound of the major 7 chord inasmuch as it sounds both alluring as a major sonority (major chords being one of the most common building blocks of Western music), while also containing within it perhaps the single most dissonant interval of all: the minor second. In any number of voicings, the major 7 and the root rub directly against each other, or else obliquely bounce off one another by virtue of being stretched far apart. This jarring dissonance has none of the nefarious, cartoonish character of a diminished seventh chord, but remains at turns haunting, melancholic, wistful, forceful, and (this I maintain) beautiful—by and through its very dissonance. This is not to say that dissonance and beauty are opposed to one another, but rather that this chord is not as straightforward as others we might describe as pleasing to listen to.[19] Combined with the fact that it is also less frequently encountered, and this chord produces a sound that is comparatively trickier to put a finger on. A chord that is so pulled between grace and discomfort can be considered a quintessentially ambivalent chord, ideally suited for rock anthems of the kind we hear in Big Feelings: songs about pain and love, bittersweet transitions, or feelings that are simply too complex to articulate through clear referents. More to the point, insofar as the major 7 is capable of reinforcing *all* of those contradictory feelings, dialing up the major 7 sound becomes one way that a song can hold onto many complex feelings all at once, both making space for emotional nuance and amplifying the affect of feeling so much. Unable to grasp the experience of being overwhelmed by feeling, the major 7 helps to reify that same too-much-ness in sound.

Finally, consider the ways in which the major 7 chord's complexity and semiotic ambivalence can both become augmented by the Lydian ♯11 to which it is related—and which we can hear in "Cool." Temperley writes, "in general, rock melodies and harmonic progressions stay within a set of ten scale degrees—the "supermode"—avoiding ♭2 and ♯4."[20] Both the ♯4/♯11 scale degree and the Lydian mode it indicates are "extremely rare in rock,"[21] making their presence notable in and of itself. In my view, this rarity should be

18. Temperley, *The Musical Language of Rock*, 143.

19. I am in the process of corroborating this view of the major 7 by asking interview respondents to describe ideas or images that come to their minds when listening to the major 7 tonalities. So far, an overwhelming majority have raised ideas of nostalgia, longing, bittersweet feelings, happiness with a complication attached, and cinematic scenes in which characters are swept up in moving events. Feelings of calm and groundedness were common, but almost always with a melancholic dimension. Sometimes, these observations were outright contradictory: "You're either kinda down in the dumps and it's raining out and it's like a sad movie scene—or you're insanely happy and you're reminiscing," said one. In this vein, there was much consensus about warm imagery ("summer," "strawberries in a salad," "a child's drawing of a sun") but also cold or dark imagery ("rain," "rain outside a cafe," "a starry sky above a meadow"). I suggest that it is this capacity for the major 7 to potentially signify both grief and joy, dark and light, warm and cold, that makes it compelling and effective for a kind of music invested in holding all of the big feelings that its practitioners and listeners experience in performance.

20. Temperley, *The Musical Language of Rock*, 35.

21. See also Doll, *Hearing Harmony* and Clement, who notes in "Convention and Invention" that "A common thread in [supermodal theories of rock harmony] is some suspicion regarding Phrygian and Lydian modes," 111.

read not as another departure from rock norms but rather as an extension of the major 7 sound I have been discussing.

Without at this point venturing quite far afield, a simple way of illustrating how these two sounds are related might be to consider how a major 7 chord is constructed by stacking two major thirds on top of one another. If we do this *again*, (that is, stack *another* major third on top of the major 7 chord), we reach the major 7 (♯11), a chord that both houses, in a way, the major 7 chord on top of which it sits, while also extending it, adding a level of nuance. This extended chord is the only one that continues to stack straight major thirds, without any other kind of interval relationship along the way, thus making it sound unique and at the same time attesting to the ways that the ♯11 sound "belongs to" or intensifies the same category as the major 7, all-important for Big Feelings. From this point of view, the ♯11 is not an aberration but an intensification of the affect created by the 7, an over-and-above amplification of its sound-world. This overmuch tonality, this space of everything at once, is Big Feelings in a nutshell.

The purpose of all this is not to diagnose a particular harmonic operation per se, but to try to describe something of the affect, feeling, or orientation generated by the sounds. On this point, Christopher Doll veers into the language of affect when he writes that "we as listeners hear chords—we experience their presence—whether we know it or not."[22] Sounds exert force, even if that force is not fully graspable or consciously understood. By foregrounding a harmonic tonality rarely seen in rock, we see one concrete example of the ways in which Big Feelings breaks open rock's tonal space, adding colors and intensities that increase music's emotional complexity beyond standard rock categories *and* reinforcing a feminist affect insofar as emotional complexity remains a domain of activism, concern, and proficiency beyond the purview of traditional masculinity. After decades of masculinist rock making use of simple chord structures, and given the long history of associating femininity with chromaticism, the subtle and delicate ways that "Cool" makes use of such chord extensions places it along another register, generating feminist affect through complex, deeply evocative harmonies and a catchy, decidedly indie-rock sensibility. In particular, the harmony being amplified here is the sound of the major 7 (♯11), that ambivalent and all-at-once feeling that overflows compartmentalization.

"COOL," VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS, AND 90S NOSTALGIA

Though the major 7 chord extension is rare in rock generally, it does appear selectively in earlier precedents, most notably, in certain rock music from the 1990s.[23] This is perhaps

22. Doll, *Hearing Harmony*, 5.

23. Readers will know the classic example of a piano-based major 7th chord heard on Elton John's "Bennie and the Jets," but there are more salient precedents for Big Feelings artists. In other words, it isn't just the appearance of the major 7 that concerns me, but the way that it factors into the full context of indie rock. More pertinent, for example, is Built to Spill's "Carry the Zero" (1999), which makes extensive use of AΔ7, and is a band that Allison has explicitly cited as an influence. Other prominent major 7 chords in 90s alternative include Red Hot Chili Peppers, "Under the Bridge"; Foo Fighters, "Everlong"; New Radicals, "Get What You Give"; The Smashing Pumpkins, "1979"; Alanis Morissette, "Perfect"; Sonic Youth, "Schizophrenia"; Radiohead, "Fake Plastic Trees"; Jeff Buckley, "Everybody Here Wants You" and more.

FIGURE 2. Screenshot from "Cool" music video, Hot Topic Necklace

related to another key aspect of Big Feelings that we can see in Soccer Mommy's music, which is its clear, self-reflexive references to 90s music and culture generally. Not all Big Feelings bands partake of 90s nostalgia, and when they do, it is not necessarily a consistent throughline in the music. Nevertheless, the self-reflexive use of timbre, visual references, and other evocative gestures toward 90s popular culture is prevalent enough across Big Feelings that it becomes a meaningful factor in the effort to understand how this music is distinct from other strands of feminist indie rock.

In Allison's case, while there are some Soccer Mommy songs that more directly cite 90s musical aesthetics, "Cool" deploys these sonic references more subtly and more generally. That is, unlike "Last Girl," "Scorpio Rising," or "Circle the Drain" (see below), there are not necessarily distinctive timbral choices or familiar melodic devices winking and nodding to the 1990s. Visually, however, as if to compensate for this fact, "Cool" deploys several direct, even ironic references to the popular culture of the 90s in its music video (Figures 2–6). Most of these references involve popular-at-the-time brands, including a Guess T-shirt, Pop-Rocks candies, Furby toys (a particularly high-selling fad on its 1998 release), as well as Hot Topic, a mall-based, "alternative" retail store that went public in 1996.

The visual references in "Cool" perform double-duty by citing a particular sociocultural landscape while also invoking and reinforcing the adolescent/teenaged tenor of the lyrical address. (This can also be seen in the doodles that float around the screen in "Cool," including a yearbook, bong, microscope, pot leaf, ice cream sandwich, as well as fish, skeleton arms, and plenty of hearts and stars.) Such images bolster the teenage perspective in the lyrics, a perspective that is sounded out via the juxtaposition of catchy pop melodies and harmonies that are too affectively complex to pin down, materializing the way that all feelings feel to teenagers: urgent, overmuch, impenetrable. In general, use of adolescent imagery also echoes links to previous feminist rock histories: while the punk musicianship of riot grrrl has been replaced by a more tuneful approach, youth culture and DIY aesthetics here remain prominent.

FIGURE 3. Screenshot from "Cool" music video, Guess T-Shirt

FIGURE 4. Screenshot from "Cool" music video, Pop Rocks

FIGURE 5. Screenshot from "Cool" music video, Fake Plastic Knife

FIGURE 6. Screenshot from "Cool" music video, Illustrated Furby

One still unanswered question has to do with the broader function of 90s nostalgia across Big Feelings, and the rest of this article will be concerned with drawing clues from Soccer Mommy's example. Most critical reviews or interviews of Soccer Mommy note the audible influence of the 90s and early 2000s, as does Allison in turn: "I feel like that's because that was the culture when I was, like, a 5-year-old," Allison says in one interview. "I was imagining being a teen and being a young adult and how cool it was going to be. So I feel like that's why I, and a lot of people my age, have this attachment and nostalgia for that kind of stuff. It's what we looked up to when we were kids."[24] In my view, this reflection captures something important about Big Feelings' recourse to 90s nostalgia: here, nostalgic sounds are those that allow us to recapture the feeling of looking forward precisely by looking backward. It can be tempting to read the 90s resurgence among young indie rockers as reflective of a more general trend in popular culture, reflected (for example) by reboots of popular 90s shows and think-pieces that try to make sense of why low-rise jeans are making a comeback. And there are indeed such obvious ways in which capitalist postmodernism regurgitates cultural markers cyclically, once they can feel fresh

24. Lindsay Zoladz, "Songs for Feeling Your Feelings: Soccer Mommy Writes Through Her Life on Color Theory." *The Cut*, February 27, 2020, https://www.thecut.com/2020/02/encounter-with-musician-soccer-mommy.html.

again. At the same time, I maintain that nostalgia, despite its ubiquity as a mode of consumption and production, also raises particular issues for both cultural producers and consumers in ways that remain singular across media formats and discourses. In other words, I think there's more to the story here than a simple marketing trend, which is hinted at by Allison's statement above. To think about 90s nostalgia in more detail, I turn now to a single from Soccer Mommy's 2020 album, *Color Theory*.

"CIRCLE THE DRAIN"

As its title suggests, "Circle the Drain" is a song about depression. Reading the lyrics in isolation, we are presented with a relatively straightforward portrayal of a character experiencing a mental health crisis through a series of metaphors. For example, Allison sings in the second stanza, "It's a feeling that boils in my brain/I would dial back the flame/But I'm not sure I'm able/I'm wobbling out on the wire/And the lights could go out/With the break of a cable." Here depression is experienced as a feeling boiling in the brain, which threatens to snap the cable on which the narrator's life is precariously balanced. Later in the song, we catch glimpses of what happens in the moments when that cable *does* snap, or the balance can't be maintained: "I'm trying to seem strong for my love/For my family and friends/But I'm so tired of faking/'Cause I'm chained to my bed when they're gone/Watching TV alone/'Til my body starts aching."

The image of Allison's character endlessly zoned out in front of the TV, "cling[ing] to the dark of [her] room," while "the days thin [her] out" seems to completely invert the experience of "too much" feeling that I described above, instead portraying a debilitating inability to feel adequately. Perhaps more to the point, the implication here is one of overload—of feeling so much that something has broken. Such a reading tracks with both comments from my interview respondents (see below) and with Ann Cvetkovich's reading of trauma in *An Archive of Feelings*, where she writes that "traumatic experience and its aftermath can be characterized not just by too much feeling, or hyperarousal, but also by an absence of feeling, or numbness."[25] Critically, this trauma is, in the narrative space of the song, not informed by any one particular event. To the contrary, "Things feel that low sometimes/Even when everything is fine."

Whether or not this song describes a real experience in Allison's life, I am more interested in thinking through how this performance might be taken up by fans and listeners. Building on my description of Big Feelings lyrics as both "personal" and "abstract," a critical feature of "Circle the Drain" is the way it defers discussing the source, cause, or issue behind the pain being described. This is significant insofar as it holds open the maximal possibility for fans to feel along with the emotional affects being described and generated by the music. Keeping the question open, listeners are more able to resonate with feelings of depression that are not limited to those caused by any particular issue, but are rather more widely shared and commonly understood.

25. Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 43.

That Soccer Mommy fans might relate to the feelings of depression expressed here is something of a foregone conclusion when considering the widespread conditions of anxiety experienced by young demographics in the U.S., particularly since the advent of the COVID pandemic. Indeed, as mainstream news and scholars alike have observed, Gen-Z as a whole experiences stress, anxiety disorders, depression, and other mental health struggles at higher rates than other cohorts, with 70% reporting these as major struggles among their peers.[26] And in the same way that even mainstream outlets seem to be aware that Gen-Z is struggling, the socio-political factors informing this widespread depression are not mysterious. Gen-Z grew up training for active shooter scenarios in school; grew up watching Black people murdered by police; grew up watching the world break its promises to their Millennial elders, saddled with student debt or medical debt or both, matriculating into a gig economy, unable to afford homes or even apartments without roommates; grew up acutely aware of the climate crisis and the certainty that they'd live with its consequences in the face of political inaction; grew up experiencing formative moments of high school or college through the mediated dissociation of a Zoom window. Young women are still entering an economy stratified by the gender pay-gap, where women of color always fare worse. Queer-presenting workers are still not protected from workplace discrimination. Conservative state legislatures are increasingly pursuing nakedly fascistic attacks on the very existence of trans* people. Racialized young people grow up in towns that are as or more segregated than they were 50 years ago, experiencing the attendant economic, health, educational, and other disparities that result from being pushed to the metaphorical and literal margins, where neighborhoods are more likely to have lead pipes, are more likely to be situated near industrial manufacturing, are more vulnerable to damage during extreme weather events. Across the board, today's young people are no more likely to be able to afford hospital expenses or retirement planning or higher education than the previous generation, which was the first in contemporary U.S. history to be statistically worse off than their parents.[27] Now, they are preparing to enter the workforce during an inflationary period with historic levels of student debt.

My conversations with young indie rock fans have consistently reflected the pain of these realities. A pair of recent responses effectively illustrate what I mean: after discussing music by Soccer Mommy and Indigo De Souza, I turned to questions concerning how respondents feel about the broader social climate.

26. Juliana Menasce Horowitz and Nikki Graf, "Most U.S. Teens See Anxiety and Depression as a Major Problem Among Their Peers," *Pew Research Center*, February 20, 2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/02/20/most-u-s-teens-see-anxiety-and-depression-as-a-major-problem-among-their-peers/; see also The Annie E. Casey Foundation, "Generation Z and Mental Health," October 16, 2021, https://www.aecf.org/blog/generation-z-and-mental-health; Sophie Bethune, "Gen Z more likely to report mental health concerns," *American Psychological Association* vol. 50, no. 1 (January 2019): 20; Casey Schwartz, "The Age of Distracti-pression," *The New York Times*, July 9, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/09/style/medication-depression-anxiety-adhd.html.

27. Sarah O'Connor, "Millennials poorer than previous generations, data show," *Financial Times* (February 23, 2018); Olivia Rockeman and Catarina Saraiva, "Millennials Are Running Out of Time to Build Wealth," Bloomberg (June 3, 2021); Aimee Picchi, "Millennials are much poorer than their parents," *CBS News* (November 30, 2018).

SF: For me specifically I think about abortion, I think of . . . I see a lot of headlines—I know I shouldn't just run on headlines—but I see a lot of headlines about like, 'this bill about trans rights or gay rights or Black lives matter,' and it's just like . . . all these [rights] are being taken away, and it's just so *bad* and I don't know . . . it's hard to see the light at the end of the tunnel because it seems like the government is completely re-doing all the progress that we had.

DD: That's very helpful. Do you think about the climate often?

SF: [Overlapping] Oh my God yes! I don't know why I didn't think about that . . . the climate is one of the biggest fears of mine . . . it's a reason I don't want to have kids, it's like, why would I want to bring a child into this world that's . . . I feel like we're just gonna go up in flames. And then I'm like, why am I in college? Cause like, I'm wasting all this money, and I might not even be able to use this degree cause we're all gonna die.[28]

A later interview with Alyssa, a 25-year-old who identified as queer, produced a similar sequence of reflections:

AL: I feel like ever since the pandemic and everything with Black Lives Matter, I feel like everything has been very high and intense for anybody who . . . experiences hardships because of their identity . . . with *Roe vs Wade*, women or anyone with a uterus having to face the possibility that their state won't provide them with the healthcare they need—that's absolutely insane, and it's dehumanizing . . . and then they're talking about taking away gay marriage again, and it's like: I just started embracing my queer identity in the past four years so . . . I mean, I don't know about marriage, but that's something that should be an option for me or anybody else, regardless of who they are. So that's hard! Because when you're being faced with all this neglect and hate toward people that you love and see and are in community with, it is like a soul-crushing thing to see that every day. I think it's a battle that you have to wake up and do every day until things start to change . . .

So that's kind of my take on it from the past two years . . . I mean, it's been longer than that, but the two years with COVID, I feel like everybody is worn the fuck out. Losing jobs, having to pay for everything, money [inflation] going up—is absolutely insane. I think everyone's on edge right now. But I think that also plays into how people are so tied to their music, because they're looking for stuff to . . . in a way music is a healing tool, I think, for me. It's definitely helped me with anything that I've faced, so I feel like that's even more so why music is getting to be that way now: because there's so much happening, and people need those paths or roadways to find some type of thing to hold onto, I guess.

DD: A lot of the people I'm talking to are in your age bracket. Are you worried about the climate?

AL: I didn't include that in my speech but heck *yes* I am, oh my God. Like I said, I'm from the low country in South Carolina, and with everything happening . . .
I wouldn't be surprised if in a few years . . . it is underwater . . . our flooding issues are so bad, and you look at Florida . . . how are they going to keep recovering from those

28. Sarah F., interview with the author, October 6, 2022.

> things? When hurricanes come—and they are gonna keep coming, and they are gonna keep getting worse . . . those are going to take away the whole coastal ways, and then everything with the ocean, it's . . . yeah. I am super incredibly nervous about the state of what's going to happen and . . . I dunno, I feel like that's another reason why people should be allowed to decide if they want kids or not. Like, who the fuck wants to bring a kid into this situation right now? Not me.[29]

Both of these responses stand out to me first because of how the respondents seems to struggle knowing which crisis to address first (because there are too many), and second because of how they tie together the climate crisis with other structural disasters, such as the unhinged cost of higher education in the United States and the stripping away of reproductive autonomy via *Dobbs*—all of these problems that affect Gen-Z most acutely. Finally, Alyssa's response specifically links the experience of these crises with musical listening, suggesting that artists like Indigo De Souza provide "healing" and "something to hold onto" in the context of widespread, chronic instability.

Based in part on responses like these, I am insistent that the Big Feelings raised in the music I am discussing here are rendered meaningful in part because of the ways in which our contemporary living conditions are experienced by listeners in this age group, that any personal experiences implicated in music are always already refracted through the collective situation within which those experiences take place. While it can be tempting to read in Big Feelings the same kind of myopic emo-band cynicism that Karen Tongson writes is "alienation that comes with privilege rather than a striving toward affiliation with others who share the same plight,"[30] taking "Circle the Drain" into this broader context renders its representation of depression more as a recognition of shared grief and the intractability of huge structural problems such as climate change and systemic racism, which have gone unaddressed and compounded for decades. Following Kate Hamori's discussion of Olivia Rodrigo, we might also think about how, for example, Allison's bedroom-bound character might resonate with young people trapped inside during the darkest days of the COVID lockdowns—often after moving back home—experiencing another crisis that was traumatic in part because of how the government abandoned people's needs.[31] This reading of

29. Alyssa L., interview with the author (Facetime), October 11, 2022.

30. Karen Tongson, "Tickle Me Emo: Lesbian Balladeering, Straight-Boy Emo, and the Politics of Affect," in *Queering the Popular Pitch*, ed. Sheila Whiteley and Jennifer Rycenga (New York: Routledge, 2006), 63.

31. Kate Hamori, "It's Brutal Out Here: Adolescence, Betrayal, and Vulnerability in Olivia Rodrigo's SOUR," *AMP: American Music Perspectives*, special issue on "Sound and Affect in Times of Crisis," edited by Christine Capetola and Dan DiPiero, vol. 2, no. 2 (forthcoming). For more on systemic institutional failures and betrayals vis-à-vis COVID-19, see Saidiya Hartman, "Saidiya Hartman on Insurgent Histories and the Abolitionist Imaginary," *Artforum*, July 14, 2020, https://www.artforum.com/interviews/saidiya-hartman-83579; Richard A. Oppel Jr., Robert Gebeloff, K. K. Rebecca Lai, Will Wright, and Mitch Smith, "The Fullest Look Yet at the Racial Inequity of Coronavirus," *The New York Times*, July 5, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/05/us/coronavirus-latinos-african-americans-cdc-data.html; Ed Yong, "How the Pandemic Defeated America," *The Atlantic*, September 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/09/coronavirus-american-failure/614191/. For perspectives on the impact of the pandemic, including on young people in particular, see Claudia Deane, Kim Parker, and John Gramlich, "A Year of U.S. Public Opinion on the Coronavirus Pandemic," *Pew Research Center*, March 5, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/2021/03/05/a-year-of-u-s-public-opinion-on-the-coronavirus-pandemic/.

depression is further reinforced by placing Allison's lyrics into conversation with the rest of the song's elements: in particular, the sonic and visual representations in "Circle the Drain" speak to shared social conditions specifically through recourse to 90s nostalgia.

It is important to foreground the fact that Soccer Mommy deploys 90s affects selectively and strategically, which is to say, as a particular tool in their musical project, a tool they do not always employ and to which their music is not reducible. That said, when it is deployed, it is deployed comprehensively: both the timbre of Allison's guitar tone, as well as the songwriting structure (the two-beat harmonic rhythm of the song, for instance, and the voicing of common chords) evoke 90s alternative immediately and purposefully, to the extent that keyboard samples from 90s-era floppy disks were employed during the recording of *Color Theory*.[32] At the same time, these associations are reinforced by the music video, the entirety of which is filtered in order to appear as if on VHS, complete with the kind of characteristic, RGB-colored glitching that might make any Millennial reach to adjust the tracking. The subject of the video—a group of friends skateboarding in an abandoned water park—is also immediately evocative of the kind of Gen-X malaise so often represented in 90s media. From the beginning, then, we are situated both sonically and visually in a nostalgic space, which I suggest is not a fad but rather a key mechanism for locating the struggles that are common to the young generation gazing longingly backwards.

If we continue thinking the music and the video together, both seem to eventually establish a strange kind of contrast with the lyrics. The longer the song progresses, the more it becomes clear that Allison's character—as portrayed in the video—is having a *good* time. While it does take her a while to get to the park and join her friends, possible readings wherein she might have been left behind don't seem plausible once she does arrive; rather, she skateboards, performs, goofs around, and laughs, ending the day high-fiving and playing air guitar. This would appear a strange video, then, for a song about depression. Allison has acknowledged this tension in an interview, saying of the track:

> I wanted it to feel like this really sunny, beachy, summer jam from the early 2000s while also hiding feeling bogged down. Because that's kind of what happens with people a lot of the time: The outside can be going through life [like normal] and then the inside is struggling.[33]

This quote surely helps to contextualize the perhaps counterintuitive images presented in the music video. But in addition to this reading, I suggest that it is also important to think through the affects generated by the musical, lyrical, and visual elements of "Circle the Drain" together—this might lead to interpretations of how the song functions, over and above the artistic intentions infused into it by the artist herself. In other words, each element of the multiply mediated "object" we're identifying as "Circle the Drain" must be

32. Audie Cornish, Connor Donevan, and Cyrena Touros, "Soccer Mommy on 'Color Theory': 'I Want To Keep Growing Until I hit The Ceiling,'" *NPR,* March 5, 2020.

33. In "Soccer Mommy on 'Color Theory.'"

thought collectively, as each ostensibly separate element actually co-constitutively informs how we understand the others.[34] On this view, the video's disjuncture with the lyrics would also have to be read through the overall context of 90s nostalgia in which everything is housed. And from that vantage, the carefree visual scene at odds with the lyrics is one that we are invited to read as taking place in the past—if not the literal past, then in the fantasy of a nostalgic past. Following this implication, the disconnect between the visuals and the lyrics occurs because the depressive state being sung about and the fun afternoon being shown to us *do not occupy the same time-space*. It is in the imaginary past—a past that Allison has already attested allows her to look forward into the future—that we find her character's happiness. In other words, while the song alone easily supports an interior vs exterior reading, the video more strongly suggests that Allison is not hiding something from her friends but is rather genuinely enjoying herself. The catch is that this enjoyment is a memory, where the narration of the lyrics takes place in the current moment.

In my reading, the element of fantasy is critical: I want to be clear that I am not suggesting (nor does the video suggest), that the 1990s *were* in fact ideal, that they weren't characterized by neoliberal austerity, the war on drugs, white supremacy, patriarchy, or any of the other traumas to which Gen-X culture so often responded. This is not a direct or literal longing for the past, which was characterized by many of the same structural violences that persist under neoliberalism today, and which was for Allison, born in 1997, a time before she would have had any real consciousness of the world. Rather, it is the kind of yearning proper to nostalgia, which locates lost possibilities in a past that never was.[35] Nostalgia here is not characterized by the conservative desire to go back to "simpler times"[36] but rather to reclaim the possibility of imagining a different future than the one we have inherited, becoming an indictment of the present through recourse to the past.

Given all this, and again thinking with Cvetkovich, we can read Allison's (character's) depression not as an individual clinical pathology but as a shared, social condition, waxing and waning with the kinds of structural phenomena that affect large groups of people.[37] Considering the context of Gen-Z's mental health struggles together with the always-

34. For music as "multiply-mediated," see Georgina Born, "On Musical Mediation: Ontology, Technology and Creativity," *Twentieth-Century Music,* vol. 2, no. 1 (March 2005): 7–36; Georgina Born and Andrew Barry, "Music, Mediation Theories and Actor Network Theory," *Contemporary Music Review* vol. 37, nos. 5-6 (2018): 443–87. For more on the need to read music's separate elements as interdependent and co-emergent, see Nina Sun Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Stover, "Affect and Improvising Bodies"; DiPiero, *Contingent Encounters*.

35. Andy Bennett, "'Things they do look awful cool': Ageing rock icons and contemporary youth audiences," *Leisure/Loisir* vol. 32, no. 2 (November 2010): 259–78.

36. I'm thinking here of a comparison between country music and indie rock, both in terms of similarities (both genres produce sounds associated with whiteness) and differences (vis-à-vis the distinct uses of nostalgia I have described above). For more, see Geoff Mann, "Why does country music sound white? Race and the voice of nostalgia," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* vol. 31, no. 1 (September 2008): 73–100.

37. See *An Archive of Feelings*; Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009); Andrew Gregory, "Little evidence that chemical imbalance causes depression, UCL scientists find," *The Guardian,* Wednesday, July 20, 2022; Julia C. Becker, Lea Hartwich, and S. Alexander Haslam, "Neoliberalism can reduce well-being by promoting a sense of social disconnection, competition, and loneliness," *British Journal of Social Psychology* vol. 60, no. 3 (July 2021): 947–965.

glitching time-space referenced in the music video, the trauma portrayed in "Circle the Drain" invites a kind of universalist question—"Haven't you felt this way, too?"—and can thus be read as simply the condition of being young in 2020, the place from which we are imagining the nostalgic 90s past.

It should be clear how a musical portrayal of depression could resonate with young listeners generally, who grapple with the structural and historical conditions outlined above on a daily basis. But furthermore, this music might resonate particularly with "girls like [Cvetkovich],"[38] the young, feminist, queer, gender non-conforming and/or trans* youth facing the realities of cis-hetero-patriarchy, disproportionately at risk for suicidal ideation and violence, both structural and personal. That is to say that the conditions of everyday trauma for some are heightened, and therefore that music about the kinds of mental health fallout that can result from that pain might resonate in multiple ways with young listeners both burdened by the world and aware of their place in it. This is another way in which Soccer Mommy's music indirectly produces a queer-feminist affect, one that is not instructive, but which binds together sentiments commonly felt by those in community—even if said communities arise (in part) as a result of shared and painful social experiences.

I also think here of the fact that Soccer Mommy played political rallies for Bernie Sanders during his 2020 campaign, appeared in various official campaign media on Twitter and other social platforms, and recently participated in an effort to raise money for expanded abortion care in the wake of *Dobbs*.[39] These are further extramusical factors that speak to listeners and help orient them around the music: that it is not specifically about queer identity or feminist politics does not prevent portrayals of pain from resonating in nuanced ways with those communities, even as its themes also apply to more widespread conditions, even as its melodies hook us into a songspace in the same way that any catchy tune would. The music becomes a means of testifying to shared conditions, offering the possibility for locating therapeutic experiences both in the sounds themselves, and in the company of others who love those sounds publicly, at shows, where performers and audiences mutually cultivate a scene. Finally, this reading of Soccer Mommy, in which generational trauma plays out via personal, first-person narrative, also resonates with the project of nostalgia insofar as the 1990s were really the last major cultural moment wherein rock music took depression—or what Sarah Ferguson calls a "politics of damage"—seriously.[40] Big Feelings writ-large returns to a sound already culturally coded with such a politics and claims a place in that sonic space for the non-men musicians who were by and large excluded in its previous iterations, applying its trademarks sounds to their concerns.

38. Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 3.

39. Soccer Mommy,, Instagram Post, October 4, 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/CjTtDtYPAas/; Soccer Mommy, Instagram Post, October 7, 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/Cjas9nRr8MT/?hl=en.

40. Sarah Ferguson, "Kurt Cobain and the Politics of Damage," in *The Rock History Reader*, 2nd edition, ed. Theo Cateforis (New York: Routledge, 2012), 273–76.

CONCLUSION: FEELING, GENRE, AND IDENTITY

If the common experiences tying listeners together are informed by pain, it is the response to that pain by Big Feelings that is queer: an insistence on taking care of one another in community, an insistence on the importance of feelings both as indices of our values and orientations as well as aspects of our health that need to be attended to, processed, and collectively held. Informed by my interviews with listeners, I suggest that this experience of queer care is communicated affectively, and can therefore be experienced—albeit differently—by people of diverse experiences and orientations. Following Kara Keeling,

> "Queer" involves how one signifies or how groups of living being as are made to signify within a given set of significations. It may include what one does, how one does it, and where those actions place one in relationship to the maintenance of the present organization of things . . . *"Queer" is palpable, felt as affect*.[41]

"Queer is palpable, felt as affect." I have heard this claim borne out anecdotally in my interviews, where fans gravitate toward Big Feelings artists through vibration and emotion, perceiving variegated shades of queerness before, in excess of, or in spite of statements by the band on matters of identity and desire.[42] I have heard this claim borne out by self-identified queer fans and their "beloved straight dude friends"[43] who attend shows and sing together, both differently experiencing something of the same vibration, who "walk away crying."[44] As another respondent put it:

> KM: Something in this life I'm livin', whatever that's attributed to . . .is starting to value a specifically feminine queer care sort of situation. I feel like there's a growing culture . . . of supporting each other and being honest with each other about doing poorly and making art with that.[45]

As a concluding gesture, then, it seems to me that identity is critical to both understanding and participating in this musical scene so long as identity is understood not as a rigid category but as a series of experiences and orientations in varying degrees of coalescence. Keeling's clarifying articulation also prompts a further consideration of identity, raising the question of race that needs to be addressed not only because *Queer Times, Black Futures* theorizes experiences of blackness and queerness together, but also because the indie rock space Big Feelings enters has been historically overdetermined by both whiteness and white people.[46] To leave this unacknowledged is to reify the hegemonic status of whiteness by default, concretizing it through the common mechanism of invisibilizing it

41. Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 17–18 [my emphasis].

42. See for example this Instagram post from Lady Lamb, in which she reacts to a fan who heard queerness in her music in spite of it being deliberately downplayed: https://www.instagram.com/p/CVTIS-9FxaC/?hl=en

43. Katie M., interview with the author, September 30, 2022.

44. Daniel G., interview with the author, October 6, 2022.

45. Katie M. interview.

46. Matthew Bannister, *White Boys, White Noise: Masculinities and 1980s Indie Guitar Rock* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

(and thus allowing its unmitigated proliferation). This is to say that it is important to name the ways in which the feminist affects I am thinking through via Soccer Mommy remain also white affects—particularly insofar as it has traditionally been white women who have been permitted to perform their feelings in public[47]—at the same time that the whiteness of a particular cultural formation never precludes non-white people from participating in it.[48]

For one thing, Big Feelings remains in the realm of whiteness insofar as it reaches back into those earlier 90s precedents for inspiration: invoking music from another decade is never only a stylistic choice, but one that brings along various cultural associations and semiotic resonances. To draw from grunge, riot grrrl, and other indie rock genres from prior decades is to reference musical spaces that were and in many ways remain associated with white performers and audiences, and thus to a certain degree to connote notions of whiteness within their musical expressions—this in spite of another reality that has been well established, which is that rock music was invented by Black women, and that punk, grunge, and indie all were created in part due to the important innovations by people of color who were subsequently erased from those histories.[49]

For another, indie rock's institutional apparatus remains stubbornly segregated, with artists of color in the minority, and experiencing the same kinds of implicit and explicit barriers that have made success more difficult across every industry in the U.S.[50] The minority status of artists and fans of color in indie rock scenes is also reflected in the demographics of those I have been so far able to interview for this project, the majority of whom have been white. So although there are both artists and fans of color in these indie rock scenes, it's clear that non-white practitioners have different experiences in them, and perhaps in part for these reasons, also tend to produce music that doesn't always fit neatly into the aesthetic categories I have been so concerned with identifying through the language of Big Feelings.

For example: as Keeling and many others have demonstrated, Black aesthetic practices have always maintained different postures toward temporality and nostalgia, where the past is almost never referenced from the perspective of straightforward desire or

47. I also think here of Gayle Wald's analysis of the racialized double-standard that allowed white riot grrrl bands to perform political work through reimaginings of girlhood (even if misconstrued by the media), in contrast to bands like Shonen Knife, who were infantilized by the press in ways that had everything to do with their identities as Japanese women. Gayle Wald, "Just a Girl? Rock Music, Feminism, and the Cultural Construction of Female Youth," *Signs* vol. 23, no. 3 (Spring 1998): 585–610.

48. There are clearly many non-white fans of Big Feelings artists, and I am working to incorporate more of their reflections into future work on this topic. As future work will elaborate, there are also non-white and bi-racial artists who I hear definitively in the Big Feelings aesthetic camp, including Indigo De Souza, beabadoobee, Fazerdaze, Jay Som, SASAMI, and Vagabon.

49. See for example Maureen Mahon, *Black Diamond Queens: African American Women and Rock and Roll* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020); Daphne A. Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2021); Runchao Liu, "Sounding Orientalism: Radical Sounds and Affects of Asian American Women Who Rock," PhD Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 2021.

50. Sarah Sahim, "The Unbearable Whiteness of Indie," *Pitchfork*, March 25, 2015; Matthew James-Wilson, "What It's Like To Be Black In Indie Music," *Pitchfork*, September 28, 2020.

uncomplicated longing.[51] Black rock, in particular, as Maureen Mahon has shown,[52] remains to my ear above all oriented around questions of style and genre as matters of a kind of blistering virtuosity—Black indie artists such as Bartees Strange, Anjimile, and NNAMDÏ demonstrate a kind of stylistic capaciousness and expansive capacity that create sounds from composite, often disparate sources. They stretch, in other words, with a breadth that isn't necessarily present in the bands I hear coalescing (to varying degrees) around this approach I call Big Feelings.

That being said, I don't ultimately conceive of Big Feelings as a per se white affective orientation, but rather one that takes place within an indie rock space that has been long associated with whiteness. This distinction is important insofar as that hegemonic association has always been built upon a fiction: bi-racial and non-white artists have been central to rock music generally, indie rock more specifically, and, as future work will explore, are particularly influential on the sound I hear as Big Feelings. So while the overall discursive climate and structural inequality of the music industry are essential contexts for considering Big Feelings, I also believe that the affective constellation itself is not reducible to whiteness—even as individual artists will vary in their approach and effect. In all cases, the characteristics with which I am concerned are tendencies that overlap to varying degrees in specific contexts and scenes, which change with the participation of particular people in those contexts. As with all music and cultural production more broadly, any overarching commonalities established in this essay must be taken as opening gestures to a conversation in which each band participates as singular examples, above and in excess of those same commonalities.

As I hope to have demonstrated here, Soccer Mommy's music is exemplary of a distinctive approach to indie rock in which feelings are central, and through which listeners come to indirectly but no less powerfully experience queer-feminist affects, or expressions of emotional experience that resonate obliquely because of shared cultural contexts. Aware of the rapidly collapsing environment, the disproportionate power wielded by corporations, the weaponization of the state against racialized populations, the overt legislative assaults on women and queer folks, and more, Big Feelings makes space for self-exploration and joy that is hard-won, contingent, and still important. It does not make this space didactically, but through affects, orienting listeners toward community through a shared sense of what feels—and is—urgent. ■

51. I'm thinking for example of Cornel West's reminder, in the context of an interview about postmodernism and poststructuralism, about Black America's retention of a real sense of history as it actually was, as it continues to be, and in contrast to the fragmented ways in which postmodern culture renders history broadly ungraspable under conditions of contemporary capitalism. For that interview, see Anders Stephanson, "Interview with Cornel West," in *Universal Abandon? The Politics of Postmodernism,* ed. Andrew Ross (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 269–86. For the persistence of the past in the present where concerns Black life and aesthetics, see Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

52. Maureen Mahon, *Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks and much appreciation to Richard Davila, Kyle DeCoste, Elliott Powell, Lee Kimura Tyson, Mikkel Vad, Steve Waksman, and Kai West for engaging with this material so thoughtfully during the American Musicological Society's Pop Music Study Group Junior Faculty Symposium, as well as Amy Coddington, Daniel Goldmark, Paula Harper, Brian Wright, and everyone else who made the symposium possible. I am also grateful to Raechel Anne Jolie and Christine Capetola for reading and helping with early drafts, as well as Alex Reed and Varun Chandrasekhar for talking with me about major 7 chords. Finally, thanks to the team at *JPMS* and my anonymous reviewers, all of whom have been incredibly helpful and generous.

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