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# The Female Music Producer and the Leveraging of Difference

Sharon Jagger and Helen Turner

*Introduction: Does gender matter in the recording studio?*

Our research into women and music production has led us to the London studio of a full-time female music producer who has agreed to share her story with us. It sits in a building that houses a cluster of recording studios on a small industrial estate and as we wait for the security door to open, we discuss whether such austere metal-and-concrete surroundings might have a phenomenological impact upon a woman's experience of working as a music producer. We resist seeing the space as masculine simply because of its industrial appearance; we resist until our interviewee tells us there are no female toilets in the building and most of them are labelled male. We laugh about the obvious semiotics. ("So, where do they put the tampon machine?" we ask). Testing whether "music producer" and the studio space are imaginatively male is one of the aims of our inquiry and the clue seems to be (rather prosaically) embedded within the material world of these purpose-built recording studios where signs of maleness are literally nailed to the doors.

We have stumbled on a "somatic norm" (Puwar, 2004, p.13), where male bodies belong in a constructed space and female bodies do not. This can also be said of the discursive; "music producer" conjures the image of the male, directing studio proceedings, in fraternity with the male engineer, who controls the (masculine) technology. If music technology and the production process have accrued masculine meaning, how does a female music engineer/producer belong? Research suggests that when women enter a male-dominated profession in small numbers they are sometimes regarded and find themselves behaving as the honorary male to fit in with masculine norms (see Bagilhole, 2002). We want to explore whether this can be said of the music production profession,<sup>1</sup> or whether the "phenomenal environment" (Young, 1990), that is, the physical and the social world of the music producer, emphasizes and reproduces sex and gender difference.<sup>2</sup> In other words, does gender matter in the technical and creative process of producing recorded music?

We are recording artists with decades of combined experience of the studio environment, yet we have never worked with, nor even met, a female engineer/producer. The truism that few women enter music production or music technology as a profession seems to be substantiated in our UK-based experience and we had to reach well beyond our usual networks to find women who are full-time professional music producers. The reasons there are so few women professionally active in this part of the music industry seem to be only partially understood, a research lacuna that explains the bafflement in the industry itself as to why music production is dominated by men (Wolfe, 2012). The

stories we have collected indicate there are potential barriers for women to overcome, but our interest also lies in the lived experience of women who have successfully developed careers as producers. There is plentiful research on how music genres reproduce and subvert gender constructions (see for example, Whitely, 2000; Downes, 2012; Hill, 2016) and on how music itself has a history of being encoded with gendered meaning (Citron, 1994), but less has been written about the gendered dynamics of the technical production of recorded music. As we have reflected on the experiences of two women who are full-time professional music producers we have found, intriguingly, that perceptions of sex and gender difference can be consciously and strategically leveraged by women producers as they deliberately cultivate *feminine* approaches to music production.

Our two interviewees are both based in London. Aubrey Whitfield is 38 and has been actively involved in the music industry for most of her life and like many producers she is also a musician and songwriter. She has produced hundreds of tracks, many of which have entered international charts. Aubrey's years of experience as both an artist and a producer are an important part of her story as she reflects on her approach to the production process:

I think I wouldn't have been able to do this job in my 20s because I don't think I had enough life experience to deal with all these people. Some of them are so difficult. But now I've got older and I've got my confidence, I think it's really helped me.

This is a clue to the amount of relational work that characterizes Aubrey's approach to producing. Whilst she finds being a music producer fulfilling, Aubrey has experienced the profession as "brutal", requiring a toughness and resilience that she has acquired over the years to build a music production business that values emotional labor as much as the technical and creative process.

Lauren Deakin Davies is 23 and is proud to be the youngest female producer to have had tracks played on BBC Radio 2 (one of Britain's most prestigious music stations) and the youngest member of the Music Producers Guild. A musician and recording artist from a young age, Lauren made the transition to producer, building her own studio as well as working in other established commercial studios; "I ended up being hired in [a] studio at 17 [. . .] this was like 'music is my life'. So that's how I got into the roots of production." Lauren describes the industry in benign terms, and she feels fortunate to have "been surrounded by a lot of positive men." Social capital is a feature of Lauren's story, which she recognizes is a way of mitigating the perception that the engineer and producer are always male.

Both women tell remarkably similar stories about their experiences of the music production industry and their approach to the recording process. We do not claim these are universal experiences, however, these commonalities help to understand how gender discourses and perceptions impact on women's experience of the industry and on the production process itself. Aubrey and Lauren are both entrepreneurial, transferring their skills as musicians and songwriters to the role of producer to offer a full package to clients; they write, perform, engineer, and produce music. Both women see the music production industry as egalitarian, largely supportive of the small number of women producers that are active, and with few systemic barriers to female success. This description deepens the question of why so few women are drawn to the profession. There is, though, a leitmotif running through the stories of Aubrey and Lauren that suggests they are required to manage gender difference in the wake of sexist discourses, and both women identify situations where being female brings certain forms of precarity to their status.

We are seeking to understand how femaleness belongs in music production. In this chapter, we discuss three themes that arose out of the narratives of Lauren and Aubrey that reveal how gender impacts the music production process and the experiences of women producers. These themes are: entry points and how women might legitimize their status as music producers: the significance of emotional labor and how gender difference is reproduced through social processes: and the ways in which both women leverage sex and gender difference as an entrepreneurial strategy.

*"Leave it to the men": Music production as a non-traditional occupation for women*

Before elaborating further on entry and legitimization, emotional labor, and leveraging of difference, it would be useful to briefly examine the landscape in which we situate this discussion as feminist researchers. Understanding women's relationship to the music production process is not simply a question of counting how many women become professional producers and engineers. We have learned from previous research projects that increasing the numbers of women in a male-dominated profession does not automatically change an androcentric culture (Jagger, 2019). As part of the feminist project to understand and deconstruct the social forces that produce masculine and feminine arenas in music as a cultural process (see Cook and Tsou, 1994), we explore the ways sex and gender differences are reproduced and supported in the studio environment and in the professional world of music production that, at first glance, seems to be oriented around the male.

There are multiple feminist perspectives on what sex and gender difference means, ranging from humanist feminisms that see gender difference as a fiction and biological difference as something to be overcome, to gynocentric feminisms that seek to define and elevate sexual difference on women's own terms (see, Young [1990] for a concise discussion on these perspectives). For clarity,

when we refer to sex and gender difference in the world of music production, we understand such differences as socially and culturally constructed rather than being innate characteristics of male and female. Lauren and Aubrey also speak in terms of gender differences as learned behaviors rather than essentialized qualities, meaning they are conscious of the different ways they interact with male and female clients and understand that clients might expect a different approach from a *female* music producer. Both women have a sense of gender being a performance, the rules of which are laid down through a lifetime of socialization (see for example Butler, 2007). In other words, there are no natural reasons why women might be ill-suited to handling music technology or lack creative authority because they are women, but women may be transgressing gender norms when they enter a technological field. Equally, men are not naturally attuned (forgive the pun) to music technology, but its alignments to masculinity create the illusion of an inherent ability. Given this context, we suggest that Lauren and Aubrey consciously and strategically manage, subvert, and leverage such constructions of femininity and masculinity as they seek belonging in the industry as women.

So, what complicates women's experience of a non-traditional occupation is the accrual of gendered meaning around words, objects, spaces, traits, and sex difference itself (for more detailed discussion on women entering non-traditional occupations see for example, Reimer and Bridwell, 1982; Bagilhole, 2002). Music technology makes up a significant part of the producer's toolkit, especially in the context of a small business where producers are also the engineers, as is the case with Aubrey and Lauren. Technologies are associated with gender, whereby men are traditionally considered the producers and women the consumers (Lerman, Oldziel and Mohun, 2003). Research into the use of music technology (for example, Pegley, 2000) suggests that there are social and material processes that reinforce its alignment with masculine traits, and the studio space itself is understood as male space (Negus, 1992). It is important to acknowledge these cultural alignments in the context of the morphing of the music production industry into its digital form, which allows self- and entrepreneurial producing to thrive (see Wolfe, 2012). If music production and engineering are dominated by men because of a cultural tendency to see the technical process of creating recorded music as suited to masculinized traits, digital music technology continues to recreate the music producer as male.

Women, on the other hand, are encouraged to be artists using the "soft" technologies of creativity and emotional engagement (Lerman, Oldziel and Mohun, 2003). Aubrey sees this unfolding around her in the industry: "I do think the industry is female-centered in terms of the singer songwriters and artists and they are encouraged to kind of go into those roles more than the technical roles." She wonders if women are resistant to the idea of producing because it is

associated with (masculine) technological engineering in the studio. Not only this, but as Wolfe (2012) points out, the skills of the (often female) singer in the vocal booth are overshadowed by the technical skill displayed by the (usually male) engineer/producer, who has access to power in the studio setting. The notion of power being accessed differently according to the roles played out in the studio certainly chimes with our own experiences as recording artists, and where these roles are aligned to gender, this access to power is also gendered.

Women who disrupt the usual gendered roles in the studio can be subversive. The alignment of music technology and the production process to the masculine is supported by the cultural capital<sup>3</sup> attached to the role – the music engineer and producer have access to power because of their elevated status. As she discusses how the technical intricacies may be a barrier for women, Lauren is intent on deconstructing the mystique that surrounds music technology and production and in doing so troubles gendered power discourses. Pulling back the curtain, she reveals how the creative magic harnessed to the power of ‘cool’ is illusory:

There’s very few careers that are actually cooler than being a music producer in public perception. Like, so I think anything to make something cooler. Because in reality you’re sitting in a dark fucking room, pressing buttons, slightly altering the snare. That’s what your day actually is. [. . .]. You’re really told that it’s so hard and so technical, just leave it to the men. And I think that’s what women do, and when they find it’s not hard, it’s like...

Lauren is subversively diminishing the cool capital of music production and refuses to prop up gendered meanings that have accrued around technology. She is suggesting that the barrier to women is a constructed one and that there is a sense of masculine distinction being generated through discourses of male technical prowess. Women, she ventures, are culturally discouraged from assuming they have the right skills to enjoy and be successful in music technology. Whilst undoubtedly there is skill and knowledge required to engineer, Lauren is deliberately uncoupling the “hard” technology from gendered alignments that direct power towards the male.

Both Lauren and Aubrey recognize their presence in the industry is juxtaposed against these masculine norms and associations. Does this context present obstacles for women once they have managed to enter the industry? A U.S. study by Reimer and Bridwell (1982) suggests that women entering traditionally male occupations face three significant barriers to belonging: male skepticism, sexual harassment, and feelings of personal inadequacy. To varying degrees, each of these barriers are experienced by Aubrey and Lauren as they pursue their careers in music production. Whilst both women face sexism that many women generally experience, we focus on those experiences that are

specifically related to their work life. The stories of Aubrey and Lauren reveal that male skepticism and feelings of inadequacy are significant issues that require the cultivation of resilience and are connected to how both women find legitimacy as professional producers.

Male skepticism can take the form of initial dismissal of a woman in the studio environment, as Lauren has noticed:

When I first started working [in the studio] a couple of people were doing rehearsals and [ . . . ] they would assume I was a secretary or something. And I'm like, I'm literally a multi-award-winning engineer and producer, this is so frustrating [ . . . ]. Or like people ring up and they go like, "oh I want an engineer, can I speak to one of the men please? Because I want to speak to an engineer." And I'm like, "I'm an engineer as well [ . . . ]." So, it's stuff like that that still happens.

Encounters like these reveal how Lauren is required to continually re-establish her credentials, which in turn suggests that the studio space is re-created as male space, containing roles that are highly gendered; the female is initially perceived as auxiliary. The need to say, "I'm an engineer" to reinforce Lauren's place at the desk highlights the dissonance between the female and the role in the imagination. This is enforced materially where the physical space is shaped around the male body, as we noted in the introduction with, for example, the absence of female toilets; women become "bodies out of place" (Ahmed, 2000; Puwar, 2004) when they do not fit in with the assumptions made about what a woman should be *doing* in the studio (singing, administration, cleaning, making the tea). This is a hidden skepticism that women face because they do not *look* like an engineer or producer.

For Aubrey, the male skepticism is more overt and consciously expressed in the form of hostility from male clients:

I've had a lot of trouble with middle aged men who are my clients [ . . . ] when I get very rude, harsh emails through [ . . . ] I thought about it and I looked at these quotes [from emails] and every single one of them was from a middle-aged man, which I thought was interesting.

The pattern Aubrey has noticed in how her work is judged can be interpreted as both a gendered and generational conflict; the middle-aged male being more likely to display hostility, condescension, and disrespect which Aubrey suspects is related to her being female. Such male skepticism implies that women producers need to outperform male counterparts to overcome

(sometimes unconscious) beliefs that women are not “naturally” suited to the technical production process.

Perhaps more insidious and undermining than male skepticism are the feelings of inadequacy women experience in male-dominated fields. Such personal anxieties are clearly expressed by Lauren, who identifies the “imposter syndrome” as a typically female response to forms of skepticism. The sense of unbelonging the “imposter syndrome” fosters is fundamentally connected to how gender is framed in difference, which impacts on how women become credentialed. Whilst both Lauren and Aubrey have chosen individualized paths and have strategically used their femaleness to carve out a space in the music production industry, the cost is a vulnerability to feelings of inadequacy that surface as Lauren and Aubrey talk about the ways in which they seek legitimization.

*“They pick me because I’m a girl”: Entry points, legitimization and the imposter syndrome*

There is not a single route into the music production profession, but it may be that not all entry points carry equal validity and may indeed be weighted according to gender. Sandstrom’s (2000) discussion of U.S. women mixing engineers in the live music scene suggests that there is an audible difference in the quality of sound that women mix in comparison to that of male engineers and she argues this is partly to do with the gendered entry points to the profession. Men are apprenticed as roadies (the lifting of heavy equipment required for live amplification), leaving women to pursue the craft of live mixing through the classroom, grounding them in the basic science of amplified sound which Sandstrom argues produces more nuanced listening skills. Entry points may then artificially highlight gender difference. The choice between entry through education and entry through experience is more complex for Aubrey and Lauren, who have neither obtained qualifications nor have they served apprenticeships as runners or assistants but have entered the profession through the leveraging of social capital and self-training. What is significant in their accounts is the hint that established routes into engineering and production may be more difficult paths for women because of the cultural conditions that masculinize the role.

In contrast to Sandstrom’s commentary, Aubrey was resistant to the classroom route because, at the time she sought to enroll, such courses were dominated by men, something she observes, as a visiting lecturer, is still often the case. Lauren also eschewed the classroom route and left school as soon as she could to pursue a career as an artist before making the transition to producer. Both women disrupt the usual system of legitimacy, gained either through educational credentials or through employment in learner positions. Using Bourdieu’s (1984 [2010]) understanding of the



process of belonging, such legitimization is understood as designed to protect the boundaries of cultural fields; to be recognized as competent or expert requires the university certificate or the completing of an apprenticeship, however informal. To belong is to have command of specialist insider language and knowledge (Porcello, 2004) and to possess official credentials that allow entry. The autodidact (a person who teaches herself), using Bourdieu's framework, may not be recognized as legitimate.

It may be that Lauren and Aubrey jeopardize their belonging in music production because of their autodidactic approach. However, the educational entry point is perceived by them as weighted towards the male student, a situation that is challenging for women where they are in the minority. Aubrey's story of how she became a music producer offers a deeper insight into why female and male entry points might be differentiated. As a young person she had applied to a 'prestigious' university to do a music industry course. At the interview stage she was told by (male) lecturers that she would be the only female on the course:

That put me off [. . .] I just thought to myself, "I don't want to be the only girl on a course," so I decided not to go for that. [. . .] I think probably at that age I didn't want to, I liked to blend in, I wouldn't like to stand out. I thought I would get too much attention.

At the formalized entry point to a music or music technology career, where women are in an extreme minority, there is a gendered barrier. According to Young (1990) girls are often conditioned in feminine "modalities" that respond to "the threat of being seen" (p.155) giving rise to a self-consciousness that, in Aubrey's case, prevented her younger self from entering the classroom as the only female. Again, the "body out of place" (Puwar, 2004) is generated through being a minority body and the discomfort this brings may be a significant barrier for some women. Visibility is a burden and therefore a barrier.

Where women are resistant to the classroom route to gain credentials because of their minority status, the autodidactic route is available. However, this lack of official credentials means those who are self-taught are more vulnerable to the "imposter syndrome." Lauren sees her lack of a formal education in engineering and production as problematic at the same time as strongly defending her individualism:

I think the common thing with women in music is like the imposter syndrome situation, because I haven't followed a path, I have no seal of approval, I have nothing, sometimes I do feel like, I've dug really far into this hole and I have no

support backing me. [. . .] someone's gonna go, "she doesn't really know what she's talking about" and I'm going to go, "I don't" [laughs]. So, definitely, like, that is a disadvantage, but at the same time, because I've always had the mindset of being different, I kind of don't care and go OK you may think that but I'm just going to carry on doing my own thing. You can judge me however much you want.

It is the lack of a credentialed entry into the profession that allows Lauren's sense of being an imposter to undermine her confidence. At times, she feels fraudulent because her legitimacy is problematized; she has no certificate that proves her abilities as an engineer and producer, yet she remains proud of her ability to carve out her individual path. She also subverts credentialism by announcing on her website (Deakin Davies, 2019) that she is self-taught, giving the autodidact an elevated status and troubling how legitimacy is defined.

Our conversation with Lauren took a more interesting turn. The imposter syndrome is gendered not only because she is the precarious autodidact, but also because her femaleness itself is made the basis of her success and therefore simultaneously undermines her sense of deserving that success on a level playing field of skill:

But the imposter syndrome is really evidence through practically every female, even artists, and engineers, especially the engineers and producers I know. They don't feel like they deserve it, because, and this is like the crux of the situation of being given advantages for being a woman, because I feel like I've only achieved this because I'm a woman, and my skill set doesn't match the opportunities that I've been given. So that's where imposter syndrome comes in, thinking, "I shouldn't be working on this session, I don't know what I'm talking about." But they pick me because I'm a girl.

Being treated favorably because she is female, being the recipient of positive action, feeds Lauren's sense of unbelonging and compounds the feelings of inadequacy that the lack of credentials generates. What Lauren is describing is the toxic side of leveraging sex and gender difference. Whilst there are benefits to marketing the notion of the *female* producer, which we discuss shortly, chasing legitimacy becomes a perpetual task for the self-taught female which is undermined by the suspicion of being given opportunities "because I'm a girl" rather than being skilled enough for the job.

Being recognized publicly within the industry may provide a credentialed status that can be used as an antidote to the feelings of inadequacy, but this can be double-edged. Returning to Lauren's response to being mistaken for the secretary in the studio, she uses her award-winning status as a

defense against skepticism. However, Lauren's ability to maintain confidence in her status is jeopardized by her anxieties about inadequacy: "This goes to the women's imposter syndrome. I think I won because I'm a woman." The sense of legitimacy is continually undermined by the powerful feelings of female unbelonging.

As Lauren and Aubrey reflect on how they cultivate their status as producers, they identify other sources of legitimacy. Aubrey sees legitimacy in collaborating with popular artists, who accrue cultural capital from which she can borrow, becoming an unofficial talent spotter as she attempts to catch hold of an artist's upward trajectory; "You kind of have to do a bit of A and R scouting as producers as well because you need to figure out which ones are potentially going to take off hugely and you kind of latch on to them and produce them." Both women invest significantly in the relationships they have with artists to benefit from a *quid pro quo* arrangement where legitimacy is shared.

The attainment of credentials through awards and through relationships with significant people who have already accrued social and cultural capital demands a high level of emotional labor of both women. Whilst there are benefits to being able to provide continual emotional labor, particularly when leveraged by women, there is a negative side, a cost that both Aubrey and Lauren recognize they pay.

*"I definitely overcompensated": Emotional labor and the economy of smiles*

When Lauren began her foray into music production, she invested heavily in emotional labor to accrue the social capital she felt she needed to progress. Networking as an entry point for Lauren is gendered in nuanced ways:

Starting out is I did, I have to proper like, "Oh my God, you're so amazing. You're so lovely, like so really, really enthusiastic. [. . .] I would say starting out I definitely overcompensated. And it was crucial that I did, because otherwise...and I'll admit some of these guys liked me to be around because I was nice, smiley and laughy [. . .]. I don't think the guys have to be overly enthusiastic, smiley, laughy, to get the same level of response [. . .] I had to invest so much into my emotional, social expression to get the same return [. . .]. A bit 'hmmm, alright, maybe she's into me.'

This vignette of female emotional labor is part of the "economy of smiles" (Bartky, 1997, p.135).

Lauren's description of gendered expectations in interactions relates as much to her body as to her emotional work. As Bartky explains:

Feminine faces, as well as bodies, are trained to the expression of deference [. . .]. Women are trained to smile more than men, too. In the economy of smiles, as elsewhere, there is evidence that women are exploited, for they give more than they receive in return [. . .] (p. 135).

Lauren reflects that to gain her entrée she needed to provide effervescence, especially in her contact with men. She hints at a sexual undercurrent underpinning interactions between the young female neophyte and the established male – women in positions similar to Lauren must negotiate how their need to engage in the “economy of smiles” is sexually interpreted. Lauren is in her 20s but says she looks younger: “People do think I’m sixteen, which is, whatever, their issue.” This statement acknowledges the negative side of the gendered nurturing economy, a “dark side” that is documented in other research (Ward and McMurry, 2016). At the same time as relying on the ability to provide emotional labor, Lauren must manage the male gaze that constructs her as object, even as she seeks to develop subjectivity in the industry.

Lauren describes this process as “crucial” to establishing herself because she is unable to benefit from the tacit fraternity to which men have access. For a woman to resist the “economy of smiles” may stymie a fledging career. But, to balance this dark side to emotional labor, there is also the positive side, where women can use the gendered nurturing economy to their advantage and this becomes part of their approach to music production, the crux of the leveraging of perceptions of femininity. We might describe this as a “difference dividend”; the expectation that a female producer will be aligned to the relational is fully embraced by Aubrey and Lauren and, we suggest, this has a significant impact on their business success, but also may change the production process and the music product itself.

Partaking in the nurturing economy and being willing to undertake significant amounts of emotional labor means that both Lauren and Aubrey being to be visible as *female* music producers. They are both seeking to bring something different and valuable to the role in ways that they perceive men are less inclined or are less equipped to do. This is a more positive approach to the nurturing economy that seems to pay off, entrepreneurially. In other male-dominated professions, the emotional labor that women are expected to undertake is often devalued, invisible, and certainly unlikely to be marketable (Bagilhole, 2002)<sup>4</sup>. Both Lauren and Aubrey see their gender difference as a way of standing out from the male crowd, contrasting with the context of the denigration of relational, pastoral and emotional labor in other industries. Women in music production can capitalize on difference, on the idealized feminine relational skills.

Lauren senses and experiences the difference in approach to emotional labor in the studio in gendered ways amongst her clients. Whilst she is uneasy about feeding gendered stereotypes, nevertheless, there is in her experience a different dynamic with male clients and female clients:

[. . .] before any session I do with female artists, we literally will spend an hour or two talking [. . .]. Male artists are like “I know what I want. Let’s go.” I’ll start recording in the first five minutes with a male artist [. . .] that was a hundred percent of the time. I can’t deny it. [. . .] but I think a lot of the time it’s just that the guys aren’t taught to talk a lot.

The difference is not naturalized or essentialized by Lauren, but she understands tendencies to engage in talk as learned behaviors that accord with notions of masculinity and femininity. The ability and willingness to listen to the artist is framed as an opportunity to leverage perceptions that a female producer and engineer is likely to have a sensibility that changes the dynamic of the process, and therefore the sound of the product itself. Commenting on how mixing recorded and live music is influenced by gender, Sandstrom (2000) argues that female engineers respond more sensitively to what is asked of them by the artist, which is how both Lauren and Aubrey explain their approach. Reflecting on this phenomenon more deeply, we suggest this is a two-way process and that female artists may also undertake emotional labor in return; women working with women are able to leverage this dynamic, a process that becomes anchored in the relational.

The emotional labor offered by female music producers is something that Aubrey sees as the appeal for artists, and again sees a difference between the male and female client and their expectations:

The majority of them will say, “this is great, I’ve been looking for a female producer, I spotted you working with a male producer and I wanted to work with [a female producer].” The girls say that more than the men.

The notion that male and female artists may sometimes be seeking different experiences from music producers is coupled with the understanding that women producers are better equipped – or perhaps more willing – to deliver the emotional labor sought. Both Aubrey and Lauren spend time talking and getting to know their clients, in some cases develop friendships. Significantly, Aubrey sees her work as enhanced by traits that are perceived as feminine:

There’s been a lot of stories that with men, they can’t connect with the producer that well. So, they’re not getting what they want musically, they don’t feel comfortable. So, I think a woman may be more empathetic and will take the time

to get to know them and build a relationship. I think that's the feedback I seem to have had.

It is the explicitly *feminine* (if constructed) ability to undertake emotional labor that becomes the basis of how both Aubrey and Lauren leverage gender difference, not only to genuinely nurture the artist through the process for the sake of musicality, but also to establish themselves as *female* producers, standing out against the male crowd.

### *"Best of the girls": The Leveraging of Difference*

Sandstrom (2000), a music engineer herself, suggests that in some cases when women enter a male-dominated world, such as music technology, there is a suspension of gender. The stories of Aubrey and Lauren suggest, however, that far from dissolving gendered distinctions, their identity as music producers relies heavily on their femaleness and on perceptions of feminine nurturing traits. This is leveraging a *strategic* difference, and both Aubrey and Lauren understand their femininity as marketable. In whatever terms difference is couched, Aubrey seeks to elevate her femaleness to establish space in which difference is positive. On her website, she writes:

I am also proud to be one of the very few successful female Record Producers from the UK and I do all I can to promote the important role of women in music by teaching Music Production at colleges, running monthly online masterclass sessions and offering an internship scheme specifically for female students (Whitfield, 2019).

Aubrey believes that being female in the male-dominated music production industry does not require her to be the honorary male, but that her difference, manifested through those traits of relationality that are perceived to be feminine, is a boon to her career. She is not seeking to belong in the same way as the male producer but is rather elevating the feminine and moreover encouraging other women to do the same; promoting femaleness is connected to a political sisterhood that will encourage more women to call themselves music producers through the construction of credentials that are tailored to women. Aubrey is consciously carving out female space in the industry.

Aubrey's taxonomical choice – calling herself a "female producer" – is subversive. Aubrey is troubling the notion that the female negative semantic space must always be overcome (Spender, 1985; Weatherall, 2002)<sup>5</sup>. In other words, rather than attempting to rehabilitate the title of "music producer" to incorporate the female, she makes herself visible in being entitled as a "female music producer" which capitalizes on the currency she generates by acting out the positive gender

difference in the studio. She is also eschewing the idea of being the same as the male, declaring difference in positivity rather than attempting the same belonging as the male producer. We see this in paradigmatic terms; Aubrey is establishing a feminine approach to music production, one she believes some artists seek out, and is profoundly affective because emotional labor is affective (see Ahmed, 2004; Liljeström, 2016)<sup>6</sup>. In other words, the emotional is an intrinsic part of the production process that is given currency using attributes accorded to the feminine.

Leveraging difference through language makes Aubrey highly visible, but this is a strategy that may only pay dividends whilst women are in a significant minority. Both Aubrey and Lauren, however, are committed to trailblazing to draw more women to the industry. For the time being, though, emphasizing gender difference allows women who are producers to carve out a distinction in a competitive field. Aubrey is ambitious, but she couches her definition of success in gendered terms: “My goals are kind of high ones, you know, to be one of the biggest *female* producers of all time” (italics ours). When we asked whether this was a deliberate choice of differentiating language, she was taken aback at her own unconscious use of the term “female producer.” As we discussed this use of language, Aubrey theorizes why she carries the pre-fix, and this reveals a profound sense of separation because of her sex:

Ok, that’s interesting that you’ve picked up on that. Because in my head, God, if I had any ambition it would be to be the best recorded producers in this country, but in my head that’s completely out of reach because it’s so competitive. So, the next best option is kind of best of the girls [laughs]. But if you think about it, you are, there are some really successful female producers at the moment, not a huge amount, but one or two. But it’s still an open playing field. For there to be someone, if you think of the huge producers [. . .] they’re just as famous as artists. You know, we know who they are. But there’s no female producer you can say they’re as big as an artist. So, there’s no huge role model. I just think it’s so important to fill that space, to help encourage people.

For Aubrey, entering a field that is dominated by men means the space at the top is already crowded with well-known male producers. The feeling of there being no room for the female in this elite circle indicates a perception of outsidership. To mitigate the inability to penetrate the field on male terms, Aubrey can see the emerging space ready to be occupied by the female; “an open playing field.” That Aubrey sees success as measured against the male elite as unreachable raises several questions about how women see themselves in the music production and engineering field. The benefit of seeing the figurative space in separated and gendered terms is that women become

visible and this is important to Aubrey, who has a passion for being a role model to other aspiring women producers and engineers; seeing the industry as carved into gendered spaces may help women raise their profile *as women*, and on their own terms. This is a positive visibility that contrasts the out-of-place visibility that both Aubrey and Lauren have experienced; being visible as *producers*.

### *Conclusion: The emotion of production*

During this research process, we have been affected by the idea that working with women producers may profoundly alter the experience of the music-making process. Reflecting on our own experiences in the studio, we speculate whether the product has an appreciably different quality under the production of a woman who values the relational and who is willing to not only listen, but to engage in emotional labor to make the artist *feel* good. The feminine attention to nurture and emotion is part of an affective process that we suggest can change the final recorded product. As recording artists, we find this proposition extremely attractive and it seems to us, having listened to the stories of Aubrey and Lauren as well as drawing on our own experience, that producing recorded music is as much an emotional process as it is a technical one.

We have shown that visibility for women in music production is double-edged; they can be out of place, becoming visible because they are transgressing gendered expectations and because of their minority status. We have argued that women as music producers are at times constructed as “bodies out of place” (Ahmed, 2000; Puwar, 2004), being required to adapt to a masculinized space and to overcome perceptions that they do not look like a (male) music producer. But visibility is also marketable for women; Lauren and Aubrey have a genuinely nurturing attitude and harnessing traits that women are expected to possess, their approach to the production process is sought out by artists (especially women). However, there remains a cost to differentiation for women in music production which is not entirely mitigated by the attempts to elevate a feminine approach. Entry points may be gendered, and Lauren’s story suggests a heavy reliance on accruing social capital through gendered (and sometimes sexualized) emotional labor. Moreover, there remain background binary alignments between gender and technology that frame the female engineer as transgressive.

Ultimately, the success stories of Aubrey and Lauren are about leveraging strategic difference to carve out space that allows women to flourish as producers without being required to compete with, or be the same as, male producers. Of course, this leveraging of strategic difference is not simply an entrepreneurial quirk, but a way of troubling binaries that are constructed as part of a masculine paradigm that leave women alienated from technology and production. This troubling is appealing to us, as it seems to be to many other artists who wish to elevate the emotional in the process of



making music. The continuation of this research may lead us to record our next album on a London industrial estate where the signs of the masculine will be limited to the toilet doors.

## Notes

1. We focus here on women who are professional music producers, rather than women who self-produce as artists (see Wolfe, 2012).
2. We separate the terms sex and gender to emphasize that sex is the biological difference and gender is the constructed set of characteristics given to feminine and masculine. This separation of sex and gender has been an important feature of feminist thought, given early prominence in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949 [2009]).
3. 'Cultural capital' is a term coined by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984 [2010]) and describes the accumulation of specialized knowledge that enables a person to maintain distinction and belonging in a particular field.
4. Bagilhole's discussion of non-traditional occupations includes the priesthood, where pastoral skills are often seen as feminine, but also marginalized, juxtaposed against leadership qualities that are aligned to the masculine. In academia, Bagilhole argues that women take on nurturing, pastoral and administrative roles that are neither rewarded financially nor contribute to a career trajectory. It is an interesting and important point to raise, then, that both Lauren and Aubrey feel able to leverage the emotional labor they provide.
5. There are debates in feminist linguistic studies about how to overcome the negative semantic space of the female – that is, the way the female is invisible in language that encourages the imagination to see the male as universal. Requiring the prefix of "woman" generates a separate feminine taxonomy that many feminists would see as sexist (see Spender [1985], for an overview of this debate). For the music producer, there is clearly value in being differentiated linguistically.
6. Feminist theory has engaged with what has become known as the "affective turn" which explores the ways in which emotion and intimacy are forms of power and have an impact on social and cultural processes. Further research is needed into the affective economy in the studio.

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