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Maintenance, Violence and Renewal at The 7th Circle Music Collective

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MAINTENANCE, VIOLENCE AND RENEWAL AT THE 7TH CIRCLE MUSIC COLLECTIVE

The 7th Circle Music Collective represents a paradox. As an explicitly anarchist space with openly anti government and anti capitalist views, how does it maintain its social coherence? Using a model proposed by Brenda Romero (2015) and armed with insights from Michelle Kisliuk (2008) I explore the contradictions and rituals of the Collective, and how it identifies and expresses its human spirit in an inhuman world. I conclude that by engaging with its contradictions, best exemplified in the musical genre of “powerviolence,” the Collective reconstructs the devastating institutional violence of our society into direct, but harmless, violence of aggressive music. In doing so it provides sustenance and renewal to its members, to combat the alienation and isolation of the capitalist world in which it is couched.

Charles Wofford
MUSC 5112: Ethnomusicology pro-seminar
Professor Brenda Romero
December 18th, 2017
INTRODUCTION
I identify the 7th Circle Music Collective and the particular issues about it that I wish to explore.

THEORY AND METHODS
I discuss the relevance of Romero (2015) and Kisliuk (2008), and identify the particular ways the Romero model may create a space for investigating questions behind the Collective. The Kisliuk approach to “the Field” is shown as influential to my own approach in “the Field.”

THE SPACE
I describe the 7th Circle Music Collective’s physical space, with explicit reference to photos at the back of the paper.

THE SHOW AND REFLECTIONS
Here I apply the insights afforded to me by Romero and Kisliuk to my experience at the Collective, placing special importance on the genre of powerviolence as an expression of the Collective’s socio-political function.

CONCLUSIONS
Here I bring together the strands of my Kisliukan approach with the Romero model to paint a particular picture of the Collective, a picture which I think provides musicological insight.

PHOTOS
Bibliography:


Interviewees: Jess, drummer for Vulgarian, Scott from Poolside at the Flamingo.
**Introduction**

On November 24th, 2017, I attended a show at the 7th Circle Music Collective, a “multi-use, collective-run, community-oriented, DIY [Do It Yourself] music space/record store/art gallery,” with the goal of attaining a musicological insight into the space.¹ The following essay is both a report on my experience(s) there, and reflections and appraisal on what the Collective stands for, both in its own “collective” mind, and as I perceive it from my individual perspective. The Collective sees itself as anarchist and “community-oriented,” therefore I am working with the assumption that it is a real world example of an anarchist society, within a capitalist macro society.

Following the introduction, I will lay out my theoretical underpinnings, describe the space of the Collective, relate my experience in “the Field,” provide reflections on that experience, and lastly draw some conclusions about the nature of the Collective and its project. The 7th Circle Music Collective is an explicitly political space; political graffiti along the lines of “Fuck Trump,” “Fuck Fascism,” and the anarchist “A” symbols is ubiquitous. The website openly claims: “We’re all about free expression and we’re not about censorship, however we do ask that you (both as the performer and the attendee) please come here with an attitude of acceptance and tolerance towards all. As such, any forms of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and any other sorts of bigotry will not be tolerated within these walls.”² These admirable words are not the end of 7th Circle’s politics. While I will not provide an explicit commentary on the Collective’s political views, it should be recognized that my analysis works

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² Ibid.
with that knowledge. In other words, one should not walk away from this paper wondering if I have unfairly politicized the space. Rather, it should be understood that the politics are in the musicological analysis. I do not believe there have been other ethnomusicological explorations of this space.

**Theory and Methods**

In *A Theory of Infinite Variations* (2015), ethnomusicologist Brenda Romero argues that music aids in and is a reflection of a process of infinite maintenance and renewal for human societies, and has also provided a model to aid in forming areas of inquiry along those lines.³ Romero relates the following axioms: (R1) that “The nature of music, as of humanity, is to endlessly maintain and renew itself,” and (R2) that “Maintenance and renewal are achieved through the rituals of interrelationship and interdependence.”⁴ If (R1) and (R2) hold, then we get the awkwardly phrased (C1): human nature is the rituals of interrelationship and interdependence. While it may sound like a simplistic conclusion, note that rituals are themselves highly complex, protean events of infinite variation. Concerts are clear examples of such rituals; ideal examples in fact, as they are themselves musical events. There is a fascinating intersection between Romero’s Second Axiom and the 6th Thesis on Feuerbach by Karl Marx, “but the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.”⁵ While not the subject of this paper, I think the intersection is more than

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⁴ Ibid., 140

incidental. Many disciplines, from biology to sociology, musicology to, perhaps most alarmingly, climate science, are recognizing the interconnectedness of our entire planet. Parenthetically, I would add that the work of aesthetician and philosopher of mind Susanne Langer (1895-1985) is of tremendous interest in this field, as she sees the role of ritual, particularly in the context of symbol creation, as a fundamental aspect of human nature.⁶

There is an apparent incongruence between the existence of the Collective as a real-world anarchist institution, and the wider world of capitalism in which it lives. How can it exist? Should it not be snuffed out by the market? Armed with Professor Romero’s model, I will explore how the 7th Circle Music Collective uses music to maintain its social coherence and continually renew itself as an anarchist space in a capitalist world.

I wish also to acknowledge Michelle Kisliuk’s 2008 essay on “(un)doing Fieldwork, Sharing Songs, Sharing Lives.”⁷ Her illuminations of “the Field” as an experiential realm rather than a geographic area provided me a philosophical grounding for how I wished to go about my own fieldwork. That in turn has unlocked realms of personal considerations related to fieldwork and musical experience that have aided me in constructing musicological knowledge. Her influence is less immediately palpable in terms of the questions asked, and more influential in the mindset I have adopted in this work.

When I was 24, I spent 5 months in Israel living on a kibbutz studying Hebrew in a program called “Ulpan.” While I was accustomed to feeling alienated as a socialist Jew at home in Christian capitalist America, in Israel I had become “normal” in ways I had never been. This

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⁷ Michelle Kisliuk, “(un)doing Fieldwork, Sharing Song, Sharing Lives,” in Barz and Cooley, 2008:183-205
resulted, paradoxically, not in an experience of “finding myself,” thereby overcoming my alienation, but rather the opposite: I became hyperalienated. I had never thought of alienation as a “comfort zone,” but when I had become “normal” in ways that I had been alienated all my life, I necessarily became alienated in ways that I had been “at home” all my life. The point of this is that I think this is a Kisliukan experience: rather than “doing the work” of bringing myself to the Biblical homeland as a Jew, thereby fulfilling my Jewishness according to some premise of Jewish essentialism, I had undone the identity of Jewishness constructed by and for me in the United States. That “fieldwork” (hardly ethnomusicological, but absolutely identitarian) resulted in the construction of new knowledge, new insights, new questions and perspectives, but it did not result in definitive or easy answers. More specifically, I thought I would have some sort of spiritual fulfillment through work and study on the Kibbutz. I had been on a birthright trip in the summer of 2012, and while that was essentially a vacation, I knew going into the kibbutz program was different: I was going to work and live there for a time. This glimmer of foresight did not prepare me for how difficult the whole experience was: I knew no one, Israelis tend to be distant at first contact so it was hard to make friends, I was severely jet lagged, I had roommates who, by turns, snored too loudly for me to sleep, stole my belongings while I was sleeping, or who were drunk and belligerent at almost any hour of the day. The man who ran the program was tough and cruel on the outside, but by the end of the trip I learned that his real weakness was his inability to actually do anything to maintain civility among the Ulpanists. It is hard to say when the realities of Israel as a western construct rather than a sacred Biblical homeland became clear to me; at the time of this writing the numerous tourist traps throughout the Old City of Jerusalem (traps into which I fell many times) come to mind most clearly. Another relevant
experience was a trip to the town of Arav (literally “Arab” in Hebrew), a poor Palestinian city with a nice restaurant on the outskirts. Our presence was tolerated because we spent a lot of money on food. But the obviousness of the poverty was difficult to overlook. After the program was over, I spent a week in Israel with my mother. Together we visited the Western Wall in the Old City, the most sacred site in Judaism, a fragment of the old retaining wall of the Second Temple, destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. It is believed that this section of the western retaining wall is the closest area to the Holy of Holies, where the Divine Presence resided within the temple. Upon our departure, my mother remarked, “If God ever lived there, He ain’t there now.” Neither of us were ever especially religious, and by that time both of us would likely have identified as unbelievers. Nevertheless, the sense of disillusionment was real. It is also worth noting that this was politically disillusioning: I had gone to Israel as an ardent Zionist, and these experiences are instrumental in eventually leading me to abandon that perspective.

A question of interpretation needs to be raised. A philosopher friend of mine once chided me for turning the concept of “deconstruction” into a verb, “to deconstruct.” “Everyone just uses it to mean ‘analyze’ now.” But one does not engage in an action of deconstructing, rather one is constructing further knowledge by bringing out what is inherent in the logic of what is analyzed. Along these lines, my experience as a Jew in Israel and America did not lead me “to deconstruct” my identity, but enabled me to recognize the inherent (il)logic of that identity. This leads directly into Kisliuk’s concept of “(un)Doing” fieldwork. Did Kisliuk undo her preconceptions, or did she create new concepts to help understand the music, exactly part of her job as an ethnomusicologist? Likewise, did I really “undo” my previous naive Jewish identity, or did I

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construct new knowledge and a space for a new approach (a maturing) to that identity? On the surface these may seem like questions of little practical importance. However, our conceptions of whether we are moving forward to new paradigms (constructing) or looking backward for inspiration under the idea that we may have “left the path” at some point (deconstructing) have tremendous implications for ethnomusicological practice. It is this lens or grounding that I wish to bring from my own experience in the kibbutz, through Kisliuk, into the Field at the 7th Circle Music Collective.

There are larger questions implied by this framework as to how one might best organize against capitalism if it is possible to forge anti-capitalist communities within the capitalist world. Those, however, are not musicological questions. I am not making any promise to explicitly answer all permutations of inquiry the Romero model suggests, nor am I promising to address every topic conceivable within the Kisliukan attitude.

The Space

The 7th Circle Music Collective fits snugly into an unassuming area in Denver, CO. It is nearby to taverns, supply stores, and the like; neither neighborhood, nor downtown, it is in that grey, in between part of every city. The space is not especially comfortable at first glance: there are too few chairs, it gets cold, it is a bit harsh and industrial. Upon further investigation one discovers a heater, a fairly advanced soundboard, a projector, and other things that allow the space to function as more than just a venue for garage bands. Almost every night the Collective hosts shows spanning any number of genres ranging from folk, punk, rock, grindcore, death metal, to any other genre nameable to crowds of young, mostly white anarchists who stand mostly
unmoving in the audience space to experience the music. There are also events of other sorts, such as their hosting of a campaign event for Mimi Soltysik, the Socialist Party USA’s 2016 Presidential candidate, complete with journalists and other figures.9

The Collective is divided up broadly into three separate spaces, to which I have given my own labels. The first is the Shop (PHOTO #1), which is the building facing the street. It hosts cashiers, a record and CD store, political ‘zines, and even a few arcade games.10 The space is very “old school:” The walls are wooden with carvings, drawings, graffiti, paintings, and every sort of feature one might imagine in a self-described anarchist space. The record selection ranges from Beethoven to Sinatra (probably not much of a choice, they sell what they get), while the CD section contains mostly home-burned, sharpie-marked CDs of bands that have come through the Collective. The second space is the Courtyard (PHOTO #2), which is little more than its namesake: a large, outdoor concrete space behind the Shop.11 Behind the shop and adjacent to the Courtyard (to the right if you are facing the backdoor of the Shop) is the Garage (PHOTO #3): a space somewhat smaller than the Courtyard with a stage, amps, lights, and soundboard.12 The Garage has a large cloth, on which is painted a rainbow mammoth’s skull. It is unremarkable on its own, yet its placing behind the stage seems to give it a kind of idol-like status. Upon further examination it becomes clear that the mammoth skull is some kind of symbol for the Collective itself: bumper stickers of the mammoth skull with “7th Circle Music Collective”

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written on them are found on the wall. There is some space in front of the Garage, but it is little more than a “front yard” with a small gate, and is often cluttered with band equipment. The anarcho-fashion of those who frequent the Collective is usually well within “crust punk:” patched vests, spiked belts, denim jackets with spikes, converse sneakers, skinny black jeans, etc. Those who dress slightly more “mainstream” will be seen simply wearing t-shirts and torn jeans. Teenagers often frequent the space as well, leading to an explicit “no underage drinking” rule for the Collective.

The Show and Reflections

I arrived at about 7:00 PM for a 7:30 show. Outside the band “Poolside at the Flamingo” was smoking and hanging out. I was greeted by Scotty, a member of the band who looked about 40 years old. After going through the shop, the courtyard and the garage a bit, I learned that one band, named “Ekelhaft,” had to be dropped from the bill at the last minute, so the show was delayed.

The premise of the show was “grindcore vs. black metal.” I chose this show in particular because I had only the most vague knowledge of the genres. Grindcore is a genre of hardcore punk music where songs are distorted with growls, shrieks, harsh sounds, and are often played as extremely fast tempos. It is common for grindcore tracks to last less than a minute, and in some cases less than 15 seconds. Black metal is most easily contrasted as being more atmospheric, and less explosively violent. Whereas grindcore bands often dress down to appeal to the hardcore punk aesthetic, black metal bands often wear corpse makeup.
While hanging out I informally interviewed a few members of the bands and the audience. Pitched as a competition between two “extreme” styles of rock music, I asked a drummer if there was really any kind of competition going on. He laughed off the idea as absurd, and clarified that it was just an excuse to put on a show. He also said that while he was in a black metal band, he was sitting in as the drummer for the first band, which played grindcore. As an aside, he then said, “And I may include flashes of X, Y, and Z,” where “X”, “Y,” and “Z” are wholly different genres of music that I did not hear or write down. This leads to an interesting issue of theory, that is, how these musicians think about their music. The punk aesthetic would probably dictate that formal “classical” music theory would not be a language spoken by most musicians here. Rather, they speak the language of Genre Theory, in which genre categories are applied extensively to distinguish different forms and techniques.

By 8:21PM the band Vulgarian, “named after the fucker who’s president,” took the stage to an audience of 5. They played several songs, most of which around a minute or two in length, and as the show progressed over a dozen people filed into the room. The music was loud, blasting, and oddly meditative. Although extremely violent, I did not feel that I was in the presence of violence; there was no “fight or flight” sense. The audience mostly stood around and bobbed their heads in time. During a quiet moment I interviewed a young black-clad woman named Jess who was standing very near the stage and had been there early. She said that she lived with the band and played with them occasionally. After I told her the nature of my project, she also warned me several times that she “might be biased.” I also told her several times that that was ok, and that her biases were valuable too. In retrospect, she probably thought I was

\[13\] Charles Wofford, “Field Notes on 7th Circle Music Collective.”

\[14\] Ibid.
going to ask her about who she was supporting in the competition, but by then the idea of the competition had already been debunked to me, and I assumed no one really believed in the competition. Maybe if I had interviewed further on that topic I would have found that some people take a very serious attitude toward the competition.

In the shop there is a list of rules (PHOTO #4). The most fascinating, and the one which, I think, encompasses what the Collective is really about, reads “No violence – Powerviolence OK.” Powerviolence, like grindcore, is an “extreme” form of punk music, characterized by fast tempos and harsh, aggressive sounds. It is often explicitly rebellious and politically contrarian. What is most fascinating is the term: powerviolence. While “actual” violence will result in being kicked out of the Collective (presumably via collective action), a genre of music that defines itself as violent is labeled “OK.” Furthermore, as an anarchist institution, the idea of violence committed by the powerful would be especially loathsome. Powerviolence, at first glance, would seem to be the very worst kind of violence. But another interpretation may lead to the idea that by engaging in “violent” music, one is personally empowered. The opening lyrics to Vulgarian’s first song were, “What the fuck!??” screamed in full throated grindcore fashion. This is not the sort of behavior that one may engage in outside of that ritualistic space of the concert, even when one is directly confronted with information that would reasonably lead to that reaction. Within the ritual of the concert, however, those who are (or feel) powerless in the wider society have appropriated violence to empower themselves. The ritual space and the ritual itself are constructed so as to translate the violence into a temporary, evanescent form: music. The violence in powerviolence is not the subtle, institutional violence experienced by all of us every day. Rather it is the negation of that violence through a ritualistic act that exposes it, and thereby
rejects it. As the institutional violence is a negation of our common humanity, the powerviolence is the negation of the negation. This negation translates even into the aesthetics of these two forms of violence: whereas “real” violence is done through the larger political arena, and lacks any sort of aesthetic element, in powerviolence, the aesthetically violent lacks the substance of violence, which is to cause harm.

The instance of an anarchist institution living in a capitalist society is, therefore, not the bizarre contradiction that it appears, but a natural reaction of a social, ritualist species, dependent for their survival on rituals of interdependence, to a world which is continually isolating, atomizing, and “Other”ing. Working within the assumption that our society is sickly (see R1, R2, and the tendency of capitalism to atomize and isolate), we might see the 7th Circle Music Collective as a societal antibody. The “organism” of the society has developed its own ways of persevering against what is tearing it apart. If we choose a more status quo-friendly perspective, we might see the Collective as a cancerous growth on a civilized society. However, I do not wish to pursue the biological analogy too far.

**Conclusions**

The 7th Circle Music Collective is a paradox wrapped in an enigma. By engaging in its contradictions through ritual, the Collective maintains and renews itself in a hostile world. While it adopts an aesthetic of hostility, it also denies the normative values that see certain things as “beautiful” or “ugly,” and, perhaps by extension, “hostile” or “welcoming.” That music, the most immediate and evanescent of the arts, should be the artistic locus of the Collective’s identity, is not incidental. Through music, the members of the Collective abrogate the subtler but profoundly
more damaging violence inflicted on their lives everyday, living under a rapidly changing world they have rejected. This could be seen as a form of “damage control,” or perhaps even a medical application of music. If alienation, isolation, and “Other”ing are inflicted on us through capitalism, and if music is a ritual that allows us to “continually maintain and renew” ourselves, then that powerviolence in which the members of the Collective engage is a collective treatment, a medicine. These rituals bring people together, forge bonds, create communities, and contradict the cold market-rationality of the modern “neoliberal” world. It is also not incidental that the term “kibbutz” is derived from the Hebrew verb “to gather,” or “to come together.” Like the Kibbutz, the 7th Circle Music Collective is a deconstruction and reconstruction of human identity, human meaning, human *humanity* and ritual in a world of exploitation, markets, and the *inhuman* humanity of relationships based on individual cost-benefit analysis, and it achieves this construction through the rituals of human interrelationship and interdependence.
PHOTO #1 (the shop)

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http://www.westword.com/music/aaron-saye-on-seventh-circle-music-collectives-fifth-year-anniversary-9500510
PHOTO #216 (courtyard)

PHOTO #3 (the garage)

17 Charles Wofford, “Field notes on 7th Circle Music Collective.”
PHOTO #4 18(Rules)

18 Charles Wofford, “Field notes on 7th Circle Music Collective.”