

One Nation Under a Groove?: Music, Sonic Borders, and the Politics of Vibration

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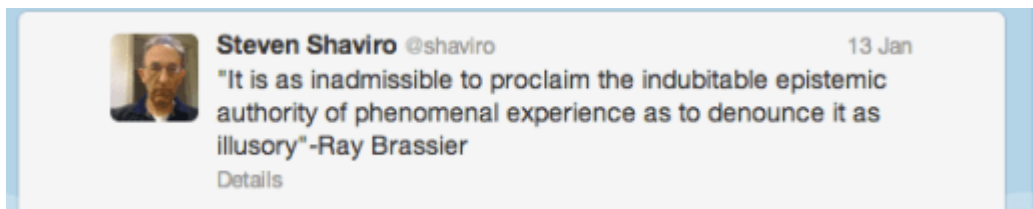
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Abstract

Welcome to week three of our February Forum on “Sonic Borders,” a collaboration with the IASPM-US blog in connection with this year’s IASPM-US conference on Liminality and Borderlands, held in Austin, Texas from February 28 to March 3, 2013.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Acoustics, American Studies, Article, Black Studies, Cultural Studies



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Welcome to week three of our February Forum on “Sonic Borders,” a collaboration with the [IASPM-US blog](#) in connection with this year’s [IASPM-US conference](#) on Liminality and Borderlands, held in Austin, Texas from February 28 to March 3, 2013. The “Sonic Borders” forum is a Virtual Roundtable cross-blog entity that will feature six *Sounding Out!* writers posting on Mondays through February 25, and four writers from [IASPM-US](#), posting on Wednesdays starting February 6th and ending February 27th. For an encore of weeks one and two of the forum, click [here](#). And now, get up and get ready for Marcus Boon, because there’s no parking on the dance floor at *Sounding Out!*—**JS**

What borders remain when it comes to thinking about sound today? The field of sound studies has exploded in so many far-flung directions in the last few years. However, I argue that what is still somewhat off limits in the field is a consideration of the ontological status of sound: in other words, what it means to understand our own being in the world as a sonic phenomenon. Out of attempts to approach this sonic ontology, comes the realization that there are prohibitions, perhaps universal ones, on thinking about sound in this way, and from that emerges what I call the politics of vibration.

For those, such as myself, who have grown up as a part of sonic subcultures, it is not difficult to ponder sonic ontologies, for the simple reason that many of the most intense and powerful experiences we have had have occurred on dance floors or at clubs, as DJs, musicians, clubbers and/or listeners. I still remember the moment of first hearing [Funkadelic](#)’s “One Nation Under a Groove” blasting through the speakers at a Pop Group gig at the Electric Ballroom in London in the late 1970s: tumbling polyrhythms, polyphony, polysexuality, polyeverything. The feeling was: “wow, the universe contains *this*! And it contains other people who know what *it* is!” And contrary to the [warnings of Slavoj Žižek](#) concerning the “autistic jouissance” to be found at the limits of language, here we all were: high; the histories of Afrodiasporic displacement and solidarity echoing off the walls; our own implication in those histories illuminated; flickering between utopia and shame.

<https://youtu.be/4supWXaFgbc>

To quote [Eric Satie](#): “When I was young they told me: You’ll see when you’re fifty. I’m fifty. I’ve seen nothing.” Me too. But I’ve heard a lot and I still experience that same power of sound in more or less the same way. If anything, sound’s power is more intense and surprising, each time it appears. Partly because I have learned how to be a social being through sound—how to love and be loved—enabling me to be more open to its impact than I was as an awkward youth. It makes me sad the way in Canada and elsewhere in el Norte people seem to lessen their involvement in the more intense aspects of sound cultures as they hit 30 or 40. It makes me sad that my four-

year-old son rarely gets to hear a real sound system. I look for music at carnivals, weddings, community centers, on the beach. . . anywhere that those age barriers are ignored. Even as a DJ, I increasingly look for new or different kinds of publicness than that of club or dancehall.



Marcus Boon DJ-ing, image by JSA

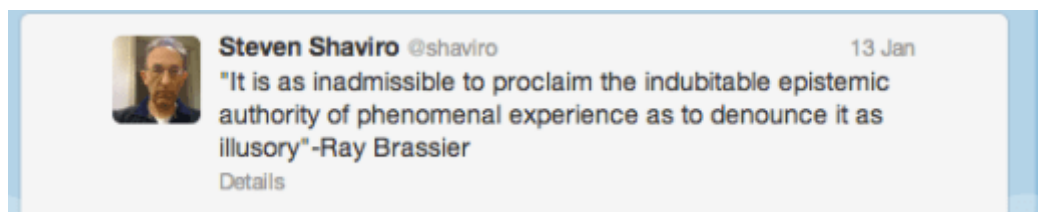
Still, I do wonder. Was the movement into sonic subcultures that my generation (and those that followed) made—especially in the UK where music (and intoxicants, and immigration) were one of the few escape routes from the brutalities of Thatcherism—a mistake, precisely because we accepted as ontological, a structure that in fact was smoothly integrated into the operations of late capitalism? From the Factory and Paradise Garage to Berghain or Ministry of Sound. . . how will history look on the era of the mega-club?

Although one could argue that the Internet put an end to the idea of subculture, since it breaks down the locality and secrecy around which particular subcultural communities grow, in fact what seems to be happening is an acceleration in the generation and dissolution of subcultural formations. Hip-hop has adapted very quickly to the internet. The cassettes or CD-Rs sold out of [DJ Screw's record store in Houston](#), Texas, for example, morph into the world of online mixtapes, Youtube clips and Twitter battles; the gray market availability of samples sounds a lacuna of time, appearing for a day on a hosting site rather than flying below the radar in some particular geographical location. At the same time, sonic subcultures are expanding around the world. If [Jacques Attali was right](#) that sound is prophetic, then [#idlenomore](#) was announced by Ottawa Native dubstep crew [A Tribe Called Red](#); [Tahrir Square](#) by [Chaabi](#) and [North African hip-hop](#).



<https://youtu.be/Uwai6oTAcMM>

In his book [1989](#), [Joshua Clover](#) describes popular music in the period of neo-liberal globalization as the sound of ideological containment. It's true that popular music is full of ontological claims about sound, of music that celebrates setting us free. . .but which fails to actually do so. A quote from [Ray Brassier](#) just came up on my Twitter feed:



If true, this would suggest that the intensity of moments of sonic jouissance does not necessarily mean anything in terms of ontology or the truth about what's Real. It could be entirely delusional.

All of which might be true. We might come to realize that, to put it in Heideggerian terms, we've been thrown into this, and that maybe there's not much difference between being thrown and being played. But somehow I think people on dancefloors already know this. The dramas of seduction, commitment and loss are at the core of disco, and many other kinds of popular music too. To quote the disco classic "Lost in Music" by Sister Sledge (later [covered by post-punks The Fall](#)):

*We're lost in music; caught in a trap.
No turning back. We're lost in music.
We're lost in music. Feel so alive.
I quit my nine-to-five. We're lost in music.*



<https://youtu.be/43qB9FpfCR8>

Other examples are not lacking.

Perhaps sound and music border on a vibrational ontology, rather than being truly the core of one. This is why, as [Michael Taussig](#), [Jayna Brown](#), and others have suggested, they can be concerned with healing. Perhaps any practice that is meaningful — and sonic subcultures are certainly a matter of practice, as [Julian Henriques](#) indicates in his book *[Sonic Bodies](#)* — must necessarily work at the boundary of a space that it can never entirely inhabit as a practice, but which it can push one towards, and also receive one from. The anticipation, fear, desire before one goes out, for example, but also the blinding daylight, the sensation of cool air on exposed skin when one leaves a dancehall or a party.

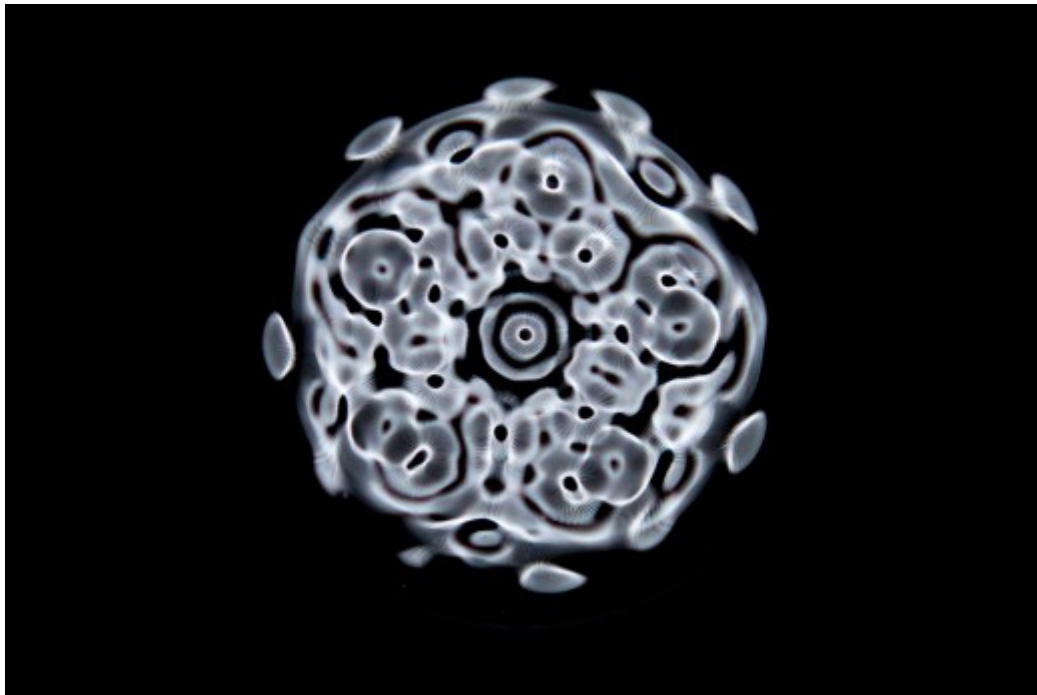


Lasers in a dance club, image by flickr user gabriel.jorby

Sound studies has not truly begin to explore these moments of exposure to and abjection from the vibrational core of sound. No doubt, [Steve Goodman](#) performed heroic work in [Sonic Warfare](#)—which sets out a proposal for a vibrational ontology in the midst of the commodification and militarization of the sonic—as have various explorations of the phenomenology of sound, such as those in [Salome Voegelin’s](#) [Listening to Noise and Silence](#). Yet in both cases, a full consideration of sonic ontology is in the end foreclosed. In Goodman’s case by *Sonic Warfare’s* emphasis on the militaristic applications of sound and vibration that are appropriated by sonic art and subcultures, which gives the violence of sound and vibration something like ontological status, while the aesthetic and cultural “uses” of the same have only a secondary, somewhat parasitic status. Conversely, in Voegelin’s work, an emphasis on the phenomenological rendering of the moment or event of sonic relationship forecloses a broader investigation of sonic ontology, because it “brackets” (to use [Husserl’s](#) term) considerations beyond that of the subject-object relationship. In both cases, the sonic thing in itself, or indeed an ontology of vibration, risks being lost.

The recent turn to the speculative and to realism in philosophy has yet to make an impact in sound studies, despite the fact that the object of sound presents a provocative and very intimate entry point to that problematic. One of the more intriguing and improbable hypotheses emerging from the speculative realist movement is that of [Quentin Meillassoux](#), who, in [After Finitude](#), makes an argument that speculative knowledge of the real, unmediated by correlation with the [Kantian subject](#), is possible through mathematics. It is roughly [Alain Badiou’s](#) thesis in [Being and Event](#) too. As much as music is clearly about the contingency of sonic experience, there are strong arguments, going back to Pythagoras and beyond, about the relation of music to mathematics.

Natural harmonics, rhythm: the elements of music express mathematical relationships. I am not interested in reducing music to a kind of vulgar scientism. But what if when we listen to music, we are exposed to a mathematical ontology and at the same time, the contingency of an unprecedented event? What if music is speculatively real? The word “speculative” here would refer not to philosophical propositions, but to the uncanny movement across subject/object individual/collective borders that the sonic matrix offers when “we” listen to “it.” Music not as the source of a speculative discourse on the real, but a speculative practice in which order and contingency meet.



A cymatic image, made by sound vibrations on a visible medium by flickr user evan grant

Genres, styles form around places of cohesion, of transport, of passage. Not an instrumental mathematics (though it can be that too), but a speculative one that seeks out locations of collective affect, of resonance between micro and macro spheres. It matters little whether a specific knowledge of mathematics is invoked here, since many traditional musics find their way to structures that, according to scholars such as [Alain Danielou](#), already express mathematical relationships. And in this way, music and musicians can be said to participate in a sonic ontology.

Reluctantly perhaps. Ready or not. The question remains: how many institutional, historical, disciplinary, intellectual, social and political barriers remain in order that a cultural artifact like “One Nation Under a Groove” can be considered to have ontological significance? That is what I mean by the politics of vibration, and in terms of borders, it’s an important set of borders for researchers in sound studies to consider.



Tyler, the Creator crowdsurfing, image by flicker user choe.brandon

Much of my current work focuses on tropes of abjection in recent hip-hop and RnB music, notably that of [Odd Future](#) members [Tyler, the Creator](#) and [Frank Ocean](#), artists like [Azealia Banks](#), and a new generation of [queer rap MCs](#) emerging out of New York City such as [Zebra Katz](#), [Le1f](#) and [Cakes Da Killa](#). All of their work is bracingly obscene, funny, violent. . . a tumbling deck of cards of performances of gender, race, sexuality, class and more. Of course, cursing to a beat is nothing particularly new, but the way in which these artists multiply and collapse identities to an ever more minimal, humming beat perhaps is.

Katz's remarkable "Ima Read" and its equally remarkable video is a case in point. Although Katz occasionally claims dryly that the song is "pro education," the "reading" in question mostly refers to the drag queen balls of the Harlem ballroom/voguing scene of the late 1980s/early 1990s, where to read meant to verbally trash, i.e. abject, someone at a ball. The song is rapped by male and female voices, crisply denouncing a "bitch" who they are going to "take to college." The violence of the song is ironic, as much a marker of queer community and Eros as of sexual difference, of racial and trans-racial solidarity as much as racialized violence. It is performed over a minimal beat with a humming, in-your-face bass drum that is the only recognizable tonal element.



<https://youtu.be/oo4Sqt2Bmag>

Why make the leap to talking about ontology in discussing this admittedly awesome Youtube clip? Both [Judith Butler's famous elaboration of the performativity of gender](#), one of the bases of queer theory, and Katz and friends play with taboos concerning gender, sexuality and race in contemporary hip-hop emerge from that moment of the ballroom scene.



<https://youtu.be/Te6Bk8G1Wkw>

But what if Butler's emphasis on performance actually covered up or abjected the ontological nature of experiments at the balls? Perhaps we need to rethink why the ultimate ball anthem is [Cheryl Lynn's "Got To Be Real."](#) What is sonic 'realness'? In restoring the sonic dimension to the ballroom scene, and learning, from Zebra Katz, to face that constitutive abjection that Kristeva amongst others has pointed us towards, we can begin to feel for ourselves what a vibrational ontology is.

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Featured Image by Flickr User [depinniped](#)

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Marcus Boon is associate professor of English at York University in Toronto, and was a Fellow at Cornell's Society for the Humanities in 2011-12. He is the author of *The Road of Excess: A History of Writers on Drugs* (Harvard UP, 2002) and *In Praise of Copying* (Harvard UP, 2010). He writes about contemporary music for *The Wire*. He is currently co-editing a book on *Buddhism and critical theory*, and a new edition of William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin's *The Third Mind*. He is also working on a book entitled *The Politics of Vibration*.