

Live Through This: Sonic Affect, Queerness, and the Trembling Body

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Abstract

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Keywords

Music (Subfield), Sound Studies and Aurality (Topic), Experimental and Cognitive Psychology (Subfield), Acoustics, Aesthetics, American Studies, Article, Fandom/Fan Studies



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Marginalized bodies produce marginalized sounds to communicate things that escape language. The queer body is the site of sounds that engage pleasure, repression, rage, isolation, always somehow *outside* of dominant language. Sound Studies tells us that we should trust our ears as much as our eyes, justifying our trust in sound, and of the resonating body. Affect Theory goes further, saying that all senses play into a body that processes input through levels of response, experience, and anticipation. Affect is the vibrational space that is both bodily memory and anticipation. So where do sound and affect meet in queer bodies? How do marginalized peoples use sound and the body to express liberation, objectification, joy, and struggle?

Our writers in *Sound and Affect* tackle these questions across a spectrum of the marginalized experience. Next week, **Kemi Adeyemi**, sloooooooooows thingggggggggs doooooooooownnnnn so that we can hear the capitalist connections between the work expected of black bodies and the struggle for escape from this reality through the sonic affects, temporal shifts, and corporeal elsewhere of purple drank. Then, **Maria Chaves** explores the connection between voice, listening, and queer Chicana community formation: through space, across time, and with laughter. The series finishes with **Justyna Stasiowska** bringing the noise in a discussion of the trans body and the performance work of Tara Transitory. Today, I open by offering the concept of the tremble, a sonic form of affect that is necessarily queer in its affective reach. Live through this. Get life from this. —**Guest Editor Airek Beauchamp**

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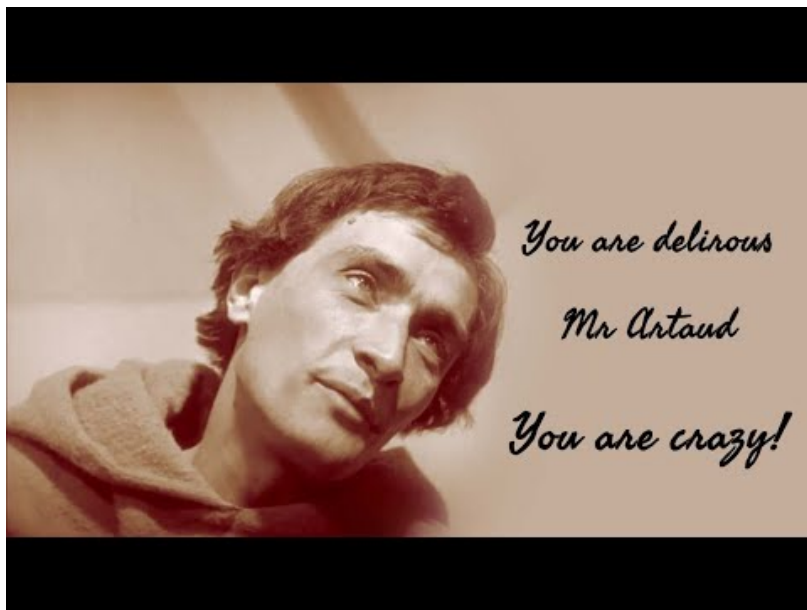
I first became interested in the intersections of sound studies and affect theory when, in graduate school, I began to research alternative rhetorics of the AIDS Crisis. ACT UP!, the noisiest and most politically effective of the AIDS advocacy groups from 1987 through 1995, posited noise as presence and silence as loss throughout their campaigns. ACT UP! was notorious for their actions in which they invaded public spaces, from the [FDA](#) to the [White House](#) and used militaristic chants to create a disruptive cacophony that ran counter to the official silence of government policy. The organization harnessed noise as powerful weapon to shake the status quo.



<https://youtu.be/q7BfwFqoicA>

The ACT UP! equation led me to a critique of AIDS-era politics in which sound and affect became the predominant modes of inquiry, allowing me to investigate how the situated body and the senses experience and invoke rhetorics of marginalization. This maneuver proved to be intellectually difficult, particularly because my post-structuralist training stubbornly insisted on a discursively constructed universe in which only language constructed reality. Instead, what sound and affective rhetoric allow for is exactly that which is beyond the text, that which communicates without strictly-defined language. Theorizing the AIDS crisis as a social event might be necessary in terms of understanding how our culture processes or catalogues such an event, but as I engaged with its archive, I felt bereft when facing the limits of such an approach. It offered nothing to soothe the pain or express the terror of those whose bodies disintegrated in the cruel grasp of the disease.

Rather than relying on abstracted theory to force the affect of the plague into a logical form, I needed something like Antonin Artaud's work on the plague to explore the cultural but embodied affect of the disease. When Artaud was invited to speak about his essay "The Theater and the Plague" at the Sorbonne, he decided to actually incorporate his ideas about 'liquefying boundaries' into his speech. Artaud began with a standard oratory but slowly devolved into a theatrical performance of the plague, eventually ending in shrieks of physical pain. By the end of his speech, the only people left in the lecture hall were a minor contingent of his close friends, including Anais Nin, who recounted the tale (Eshleman, 12). Artaud's shrieks and howls engaged the whole body in the process of making sound, while also erasing semantic and syntactical codes. Here is a video compilation of Artaud performances, to provide the smallest hint of his vocal performances:



<https://youtu.be/NYxxuDzS8M>

To continue my research, I realized, I needed to understand bodies as instruments for processing, producing, and receiving sonic stimuli, while, at the same time, rethink how feeling, quite *literally*, moves bodies. Artaud led me to connect the sound and affect of AIDS in the 1980s through the unspeakable and the pre-semantic language of the body, deeply embedding these sound/feelings in a network of past experience, present and anticipatory states of being. His work gave me a different way to theorize, to grasp, to listen, to scream—to tremble and tremble in return.

I continued to connect the sinews between sound and affect in my February 2013 post for *Sounding Out!*, "[Queer Timbres, Queered Elegy: Diamanda Galás's The Plague Mass and the First Wave of the AIDS Crisis](#)." Through Galás's visceral interactions with the unendurable pain embedded in history, I keenly felt the presence of the material body so lacking from post-structuralist critique of lived experience, alongside an urgent sense of agency. Galás's performances made fascinating use of the "tactile effect of layered sound that is felt with the skin, in the bones, as well as with the ears, communicating a palpable experience that lies beyond the barely-nuanced music it is seductively easy to grow accustomed to." The experience of listening to Galás helps us to realize that the body is a series of machines of input and output—processor *and* producer—systems that often forego semantic language and instead listen and speak in *tremblings*.



<https://youtu.be/Th1hLNoOjn4>

In what follows, I flesh out the notion of *sonic tremblings*: how it links what we call sound studies and affect studies, of course, but more importantly, how it speaks past the post-structuralist insistence on a world confined to text, and how we might build upon this notion in future theory and research. Our bodies' materiality, a site of constant unfolding, engages with the world via a series of shimmers and impulses—such as the synesthetic vibration I am calling sonic tremblings—rather than with concrete events or objects in and of themselves. These tremblings, always intersectional, encompass past lived experiences, social and cultural constructions that restrict interpretation, and interpretations falling outside social or cultural codes. I understand the trembling body as both processor and producer of sound, a connection of trembling nodes eschewing the patriarchal structures of language. And, though I write through and about the particular tremblings of my own white, queer, cis male body, that experience is by no means universal or at the center of my theorizations. Instead, I hope that the way I experience and understand sound studies and affect theory will open up new ways of hearing the world, especially for people whose experiences are not mine and who can add depth, nuance, and texture to the conversation. It is in fact through their variety and unique resonances that tremblings speak simultaneously to and against the limitations placed on queer bodies.

My articulation of affect with sound studies is necessarily queer, as it rejects binaries and speaks without definitive vocabulary, syntax, or grammar. Marta Figlerowicz, in "[Affect Theory Dossier: An Introduction](#)," offers a good primer on the widely divergent ways in which scholars use the idea of affect. In Figlerowicz's explanation, affect is always a self in motion, be it "the self running ahead of itself," "the self catching up with itself," "the self as self-discursive and always constantly mutating and adapting to ambient stimuli," and/or "celebrations of Proustian moments when the self and the sensory world, or the conscious and the unconscious self, or the self and another person, fall in step with each other... to make a sliver of experience more vivid and more richly patterned than willful analysis could ever have" (4). In all of these cases, the body's perception and the discourse of the self remain in motion, trembling with identifications that are at best

fleeting, though richly communicative and expressive. Sound, as an always-present stimulus, works affectively in such a form of communication.



Image by Flickr User Graham Campbell, "Goosebumps"

Queer bodies are inherently intertwined in theorizing sound and affect. The actual concept of affect *itself* is queer, implicating the unknowable, but concretely felt phenomena of the body. But rather than forming a linear narrative, affect is produced, and received, in a web of physical and neural processes that rejects the linear concept of time and instead are never static but self-referential and constantly evolving in response to our environment. To navigate this space I adopt the term "affective field," used by Marie Thompson and Ian Biddle in their introductory essay to [Sound, Music, Affect](#). An affective field describes a textural field of play between stimulus, meaning, and response; it relies on reproduction and broadcast, a field of listening/emitting/processing machines all working in a sort of continuous flow, always already present. The affective field model encourages the removal of emphasis on subject/object but instead focuses on interfacial relationships as a point of contact. Eradicating the subject/object dualism is vital to exchange, as Yvon Bonenfant says in ["Queer Listening to Queer Vocal Timbres"](#): "We cannot exchange with an object, only other subjects" (76).



Image From Flickr User Alvaro Sasaki, From Brasília Queer Fest!, 31 March 2013

Finding a theory that worked with the body and with subject/subject communication allowed me to make more sense of the ways in which ACT UP! used noise and silence as a way to build community, and allowed me to dig deeper into the idea of queer communication. The silent scream of the slogan Silence = Death succinctly articulated ACT UP!'s most definitive tactic: manipulation of the affective field. Their chants initially filled the streets, of New York, but by 1990 their actions had united them with Europe, creating world-wide noise in protest of the now-global epidemic, creating a distinct disjuncture to the silent death falling over gay communities. Noise offered the queer community both a form of protest and community, becoming an affective mechanism of agency. ACT UP!'s use of noise not only speaks to the dire need of queer bodies to exercise agency and demonstrate social worth, but it also helps break down the essential binary between encoded language and un-encoded sound. Rather than syntactical sound, noise communicates in trembles, resonating in both the psyche and in the actual body. Noise worked to unify disparate parts of identity—and disparate identities—a coalescing rather than normalizing process, a trembling vital to queer identity.



<https://youtu.be/s70aCOflRgY>

However, while ACT UP! worked to create noise—and to develop community through the trembling of their rage—they also communicated affectively with silence. Staging their now infamous [die-ins](#), ACT UP! manipulated the affective field through the deafening buzz that accompanies silence, a somber quiet that refused to go ignored. These actions were not done *to*—but instead *with*—people, a disruption of the subject/object, or perhaps the subject/abject. But, it is the unexpected *noise* of the die-ins that I find most interesting. Not just the ambient noise of occupying bodies in space—people moving, coughing, breathing—but the loud silence created by the protest itself: a hushed roar that trembles through the room, the microphones, and the bodies of the listeners, a disruptive noise crafted from intentional silence. This silence itself resonates in the body, enabling them to erupt in tremblings of loss, of mourning, and of rage, the painfully loud silence of marginalized bodies at war with an epidemic about which no one in power seemed to care.

<https://youtu.be/H3zefhq9QL4>

ACT-UP's die-ins reclaimed agency within silence's palpable materiality, using its noise to disrupt the affective field and reclaim space within it. Using the material body as both receptor and transmitter of the affective field, their noise created tremblings and spoke in associations both somatic and psychic. In the case of the die-ins, the silence mediated the noise of the voices of the dead, all talking at once through the trembling bodies of the living.

Adapting silence and the noise it brings, one of ACT UP!'s historical legacies, offers contemporary listeners agency over our marginalized bodies. We must make some noise, and then "listen out" for particular affects of noise and silence in turn, as Bonenfant suggests, seeking the tremblings that touch our skins and resonate in our brains, bone, and flesh. The affective field permeates queer communication and offers to the marginalized an opportunity, through sound, to make noise, establish self, and establish communities.

At once subversive and coalescent, noise resists the codification of what our culture might traditionally consider to be "music" or other codified sounds, making it a necessarily affective communication. The discordant, unruly strains of Throbbing Gristle's "[Discipline](#)," for example,

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jarred, shaken, and trembled me into a powerful feeling of community amid dissonance and difference, of community *through* difference at key moments in my life.



https://youtu.be/HRcgQ_e3w4g

At other moments, the shriek, fuzz, and wail of riot grrrrl punk act Bikini Kill, in particular, Kathleen Hanna's growl in "[Suck My Left One](#)," has awakened in me a strain of tremblings that move freely associative in their rage against the marginalization of women and the ways in which socially constructed gender roles also marginalize and demonize queer folks. While post-structuralism maintains that the self is necessarily disunified and can only be defined by its difference to others, I have to disagree. While academic methodologies make it difficult to form an argument based on my lived experience, when I feel the tremblings connecting me to Genesis Breyer P-Orridge or Kathleen Hanna and to their audiences, I am hard pressed to feel them as anything but real.



<https://youtu.be/jJfsHYBRDF0>

In fact, it might just be in endurance that I can best articulate tremblings as a sonic, somatic, affective phenomenon. Born of present stimuli, always connected to past experiences and anticipatory of the future, tremblings are unruly, unable to be pinpointed. They do not just express the order or pleasure that we find in traditional music, though they can encompass this as well. Instead, tremblings are communicative, they move through the *I*, the subject, while unifying other subjects through their rich and unnamable identifications. It speaks simultaneously to and against the limitations placed on queer bodies, expressing joy, pain, pleasure.

Featured Image: Genesis P-Orridge by Flickr User [Jessica Chappell](#)

Airek Beauchamp is a Visiting Assistant Professor at Arkansas State University and a Ph.D. candidate at SUNY Binghamton, where he specializes in Writing Studies. Airek is currently working on his dissertation, which details ways that universities can offer social and academic writing support to graduate students to better help them professionalize in their fields. His other areas of research include queer theory, affect theory, and trauma in the LGBTQ community.



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