

Tape Hiss, Compression, and the Stubborn Materiality of Sonic Diaspora

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Abstract

In an article for Pitchfork, music critic Adam Ward reminisces about digital music files that sound as if they're "being played through a payphone," and calls the extreme compression of the low-quality MP3 "this generation's vinyl crackle or skipping CD." The crackles, hisses, and compression that characterize such sound files are what I term "encoded materiality." [...]

Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Article, Asian And Asian American Studies, Canadian Studies, Diasporic Sound



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In an article for *Pitchfork*, music critic Adam Ward reminisces about digital music files that sound as if they're "being played through a payphone," and calls the extreme compression of the low-quality MP3 "this generation's vinyl crackle or skipping CD." The crackles, hisses, and compression that characterize such sound files are what I term "encoded materiality." Focusing on the encoded materiality of the digital helps us to reconfigure our approach to sonic media, understanding how the compression of early MP3s and tape hiss remind us not only of lost fidelity, but also of the richness of exchange. These warm and stubborn sonic impurities, having been encoded in our digital listening formats and thus achieving repeatability and variability, act as persistent reminders that we can think diaspora beyond melancholy and authenticity, sidestepping the questions of purity and loss that so often characterize dialogues in the field of diaspora studies.

In *Mechanisms*, his work on electronic textuality, Matthew Kirschenbaum proposes a "material matrix governing writing and inscription in all forms" composed of four elements: "erasure, variability, repeatability, and survivability" (xiii). The defects of sonic technology that become encoded in digital files are one such type of inscription. Tape hiss and other recording accidents—such as Casey Kasem ruining your attempt to tape record [the first Western song](#) you fell in love with after leaving Hong Kong by fading the outro and butting in with his banter—achieve repetition and survival during the digital encoding process, becoming a welcome reminder of time and place. Such materiality helps us to better understand the politics of diaspora. It clues us in to how the elements of textual encoding (erasure, variability, repeatability, and survivability) become embedded within diaspora's complex logic.



Image by DraconianRain @Flickr CC BY-NC.

To think through these complex moments of exchange, let me offer a story about my experience with tape hiss. I grew up listening to music touched by this particular sonic grain: a ground level of noise upon which my sonic experiences were built. After I received my first iPod in 2005, I connected a tape player to the input of my computer, recorded a stack of tapes, and then manually split them into MP3s—pseudo-piracy committed in earnest. A few weeks ago, I dug up these same files and put them on my phone, once again returning the buried albums to their former glory on a constant rotation playlist. I keep returning to these particular files, rather than finding the now easily available digital versions, because I admire the survivability of their

materiality. The materiality of these tracks allowed me to trace the complexity of my own history—the tape hiss is just as much a part of this history as the songs themselves.

After first moving to Canada from Hong Kong, my family and I established ourselves by unswervingly performing the same routine each weekend. We would have late lunch at our favorite dim sum restaurant, drive around for a bit, and then relax at home; there wasn't much to do in the ex-urbs of Toronto. On those drives, we listened to selections from a stack of cassette tapes in the glovebox of our old Pontiac Bonneville. Sally Yeh's 1987 album *Blessing* was on constant rotation and received its fair share of wear. This was one of the tapes I recorded to my computer, destined for digitization.

Because I hit the record button a few seconds early, my MP3 of Sally Yeh's *Blessing* begins with a few seconds of silence. It's enough to trick me into thinking that the song isn't playing. In a quiet enough spot, I can hear that it's actually tape hiss. No matter where I am, on the road or in the shower, my mind fills in the blank with the thick *ker-chunk* of the cassette entering that Pontiac stereo right before that familiar tape hiss would fill the car, always giving us a few sometimes-needed, sometimes-awkward moments of silence before the music started. The sonic texture of that tape stems from its material nature as plastic and metal. The hiss itself is due to the size of the magnetized particles on the plastic. Because of these sounds, the song tells its own story. It recalls our shared sonic and material experience as I migrate it from device to device.

https://youtu.be/5hJRq0F9_A

Before *Blessing* made its way into our car, it was one of the few cassette tapes that my parents carefully packed into a dozen cardboard boxes and shipped by sea to Canada in the late 1980s. This was in the midst of the countrywide protests in China that led to the events at Tiananmen Square. That insistent *ker-chunk* of plastic on metal that my brain inserts every time I play the MP3s keeps my experience of the music grounded in this earlier history, too. Strange that a fluffy pop song would remind me of the serious political strife taking place on the doorstep of a Hong Kong nervously awaiting its "handover." This sonic anchor's ability to recall to me these snippets of history, both personal, national, and transpacific has been crucial in the development of my own diasporic identity. Listening to this particular recording of *Blessing* helps me to keep track of my self and my history.

Ker-chunk.

The act of withdrawal that many of us perform in order to interface with our sonic technologies, as Alexander Weheliye shows in his reading of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* in *Phonographies*, can play a powerful role in understanding one's own racial subjectivity. Weheliye focuses on the scene in which the titular narrator-protagonist retreats to a subterranean cave-like space to listen to Louis Armstrong's recorded, disembodied voice in complete solitude. He asserts that the narrator builds his own subjectivity through a recognition of the self by projecting that self onto Louis Armstrong's "vocal apparatus," that is, his voice coming through a phonograph (143). "The phonograph's ability to disconnect the singing voice from its face, or rather to replace it with a technological visage, further heightens its materiality, which impels the protagonist to imbue Armstrong's voice with a surplus of signification" (Weheliye 145).

More than a black and white photo or a stern historical lecture from the elders, the “heightened materiality” of the digital format, a type of “technological visage” cathects my own diasporic history most forcefully to the sonic anchor of tape hiss because it acts as a “voice without a face” in the same way as the phonographic Armstrong. But despite the privacy of the phonographic listening act in this scenario, Weheliye suggests that

the phonographic listening modality also bears the traces of sociality... since the listening subject is drawn out of him/herself by encountering the technologically mediated sounds of other subjects—we might even go so far as to suggest that the phonograph itself functions as a subject, especially in its interfacing with various humans. (165)

So it is with similar sonic technologies that can encourage the “eschewing [of] the social” such as iPhones, CDs, and, yes, cassette tapes. Like Ellison’s narrator interfacing with the mechanical apparatus that conveys Armstrong’s voice, the insistent “defects” kept on the digital file keep the mechanism of its delivery at the fore, allowing me first to understand that diasporic feeling of dis-ease—and to imagine beyond it.



Sally Yeh’s “Blessing.” Image used with permission by the author.

What I gain from the digital yet still stubbornly material tape of *Blessing* is not any overt lyrical or thematic gesture to a diasporic subjectivity on the artist’s part, but rather an induction into what Giorgio Agamben calls, “the idea of an inessential commonality, a solidarity that in no way concerns an essence” (18), or perhaps a community based on “belonging itself” (84). Likewise, Weheliye’s “diasporic citizenship coarticulate[s] the national and transnational instead of playing

a zero-sum game with political identification” (369). If diaspora is defined by the perpetual desire to seek an imagined originary point of true identity that inevitably leads to melancholy, as psychoanalysis maintains, tape hiss and other encoded materialities turn the gaze away from the mists of origin, validating instead the development of diasporic identity in the aftermath of emigration. Of course, loss and melancholy are legitimate psychic aspects of the diasporic experience, as persuasively demonstrated by scholars such as David Eng, Shinhee Han, Anne Anlin Cheng, but they neither define the whole experience nor are they mutually exclusive to it. It is in this way that we can think of diaspora as a community of belonging by becoming.

A consideration of the stubborn ways that materiality is encoded in the digital helps us to think of diaspora as more than psychic *fait accompli*—it is also a ‘coming community’ characterized by the process of belonging. Kirschenbaum’s matrix provides the right foundation for a study which considers how material inscriptions are related to our diasporic lives. The inscription that defined my diasporic becoming came from the cassette tape that travelled across the ocean in a boat for five weeks, escaped erasure, survived repeated playings, became digital, and lives on now as a hissing reminder of our history of emigration. What else may we find about our own becoming and belonging if we attune our ears to the encoded materialities of sonic diaspora?

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Featured image “Decayed Cassette” by darkday @Flickr CC BY.

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Chris Chien is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of English at the University of Southern California working variously in the areas of sound, diaspora and transpacific studies, all with a distinctly queer bent. He completed his M.A. in English Literature at Loyola Marymount University and his Honors B.A. in English Literature and Latin at the University of Toronto. Chris has presented papers on angelic gender fluidity in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and post-colonial affect in the work of Herman Melville and Amitav Ghosh at the Rocky Mountain MLA and South Atlantic MLA conferences respectively. He is currently developing a paper that examines the performativity of diaspora, masculinity, and the capitalist ethos in Eddie Huang’s memoir *Fresh Off the Boat* and its adaptation as an ABC sitcom.

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