

Introduction to Sound, Ability, and Emergence Forum

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Abstract

The language of sound studies, and even the word sound itself, doesn't do justice to our scholarship. Sound studies is, to me, a populist discipline that has given me a social setting and theoretical framework in which to develop my own ideas.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Disability Studies, Humanism, Listening, Music, Queer Studies

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The language of sound studies, and even the word *sound* itself, doesn't do justice to our scholarship. Sound studies is, to me, a populist discipline that has given me a social setting and theoretical framework in which to develop my own ideas. Into this field I can carry my own history and let it screech and flash until it finds at least passing resolution.

Sound studies is less about sound than vibration, though this distinction is not easy for me to clarify. My experience of sound studies is somewhere in the web of music-as-activism, music-as-tactile-experience, and cultural studies. It all comes back to music, but music is, to me, a fairly broad term. I have written about the work of [Diamanda Galás](#) and [Throbbing Gristle](#)— lately I have been going back to early [Sonic Youth](#) and Aphex Twin's song [\[Equation\]](#) which, at the end features noise that, when sent through a spectrogram analysis, reveals a visual face. The thread that runs through this music is a lack of "standard" musicality. Instead many of these artists create an atmosphere of sound, a deeply affective field in which the audience is immersed. Although not music in the traditional sense, these musical experiences produce the shrill prick of goosebumps in my body, the deeply triumphant bass in my bones. It is a convergence of things that can't be contained in the auditory cortex.



On rhythm: *My tattoo artist working on the last piece of my half sleeve. Usually I find the visceral rattle of the gun trumps physical discomfort, and I try to remain as quiet as possible and focus on the whir, the vibration, echoing between layers of my skin, somewhere in the connection between bodily stimulus and neural recognition.*

Eleni Ikoniadou's 2014 book [The Rhythmic Event](#) explores rhythm from a confluence of media theorists and artists who embrace the body and temporal experience as an immanent mode of

becoming. While criticized by Eddie Lohmeyer (2015) for not drawing explicit connections between theorists, I believe Ikoniadou prevails in her attempt to theorize the rhythmic event as a means of collapsing or decoding linear time and discrete experience into an underlying and rhizomatically immanent means of affective and affinitive connections. Rich in theory and exciting in promise, Ikoniadou's work builds on preexisting theory and syncs it with the body in its ambient, affective field. As she deftly explains, rather than a Platonic understanding of rhythm as a means of ordering time, Ikoniadou adopts a Deleuzian view of rhythm as "a middle force that occupies the distance between events, hinting that there is no empty space or void waiting to be filled by human perception" (13). This immanence— an ontology in which the universe thrums always with a richness of vibration, sets in motion new ways of understanding art and experience, replacing the subjective with the affective. In many ways Ikoniadou's work informs and reinvigorates the convergence of affect theory, queer theory, and sound studies. Often, it is transcendent, enabling "sound studies" to encompass any possible connotation of feeling, of touch, of culture, of intuition, of the intricate nature of intersectionality, interconnectedness.

While sound studies once fought to decenter the Western cultural reliance on the gaze as the default sense through which critical theory should run, we are now as a discipline much more textured, synaesthetic. Through sound studies we learned of [remote intimacy](#) (Jennifer Terry via Karen Tongson) and the network of interlinking experience that connected us past simple auditory stimuli. We now have constructed a vibrational ontology in which sound is essential, though it is not always experienced as simply sound.

The **Sound, Ability, and Emergence Forum** stretches, yearns, and trembles toward these critical questions: Where do we move from here? How will our language reflect the broadening sense of sound as delicately connected to all our other experiences? and how can we allow for theories and experiences from those who listen but might not *hear* in the traditional and often ableist sense of the word?

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