Clapping Back: Responses from Sound Studies to Censorship & Silencing

Sounding Out! Authors

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Abstract

DOI: https://doi.org/10.59350/912zd-n6k06 ***SO!* Amplifies. . . a highly-curated, rolling mini-post series showcasing cultural makers and organizations doing work we really dig** — The MS Sound Forum invites papers for a guaranteed session at the Modern Language Association's annual conference in Toronto, Canada in January 2026.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Black Studies, Conferences, Listening, Politics, Protest



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***SO!* Amplifies. . . a highly-curated, rolling mini-post series showcasing cultural makers and organizations doing work we really dig** —

The MS Sound Forum invites papers for a guaranteed session at the Modern Language Association's annual conference in Toronto, Canada in January 2026. The session responds in part to the MLA Executive Council's refusal to allow debate or a vote on Resolution 2025-1, which supported the international "Boycott, Divest, and Sanction" (BDS) Movement for Palestinian rights against the ongoing genocide in Gaza. In light of the Council's suppression of debate, some of the Sound Forum Executive Committee members decided to resign in protest while others remained to hold the MLA accountable for its undemocratic procedures. To acknowledge and respect the decision of those who left, the remaining members chose not to immediately fill the vacancies to let the parting members' silence speak.

At MLA 2026, the Sound Forum seeks to provide a space for dialogue and meditation on silencing, censorship, and the role of organizations like the MLA in systemic violence and suppressing

academic freedom. Sound studies scholars have long articulated listening as a practice for critical interventions, especially in the face of oppression. For example, Sonali Chakravarti's *Sing the Rage*—written in the wake of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission—argues for an engaged and good faith reception of anger in the aftermath of colonial and institutional violence like apartheid and genocide. Chakravarti posits listening as the ground of recognition and a key path for attaining justice in the aftermath of mass violence (123). Drawing on Chakravarti, Naomi Waltham-Smith in *Free Listening* insists that listening "isn't restricted to a power of relief but is precisely what enables catharsis to transform into a vehicle for justice because it promotes trust" (67).

To entrust MLA with the task of upholding one of its core values—the commitment to champion intellectual freedom—does not come easy. Indeed, Waltham-Smith reminds us that "Rage—and especially Black rage—is figured as an excrescence to the European rational *logos*. It's too loud or too dissonant for the ears to parse" (55-56). The MLA Executive Council's justification for their pre-emptive silencing of debate on Resolution 2501-1—as chronicled by our colleagues Anthony Alessandrini, Raj Chetty, Cynthia Franklin, Hannah Manshel, David Palumbo-Liu, Neelofer Qadir, S. Shankar, Rebecca Colesworthy, Chris Newfield, and others—remits to this noise-logos dichotomy, appealing to legalistic and fiduciary logic as a rationale for denying debate.



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Waltham-Smith develops this argument in dialogue with Black feminist thinkers like bell hooks and Audre Lorde, asserting: "Rage is also connected with aurality in that a lack of listening—a feeling of going unheard—is itself a spur to anger, which is further compounded when the expression of that anger and, hence, its legitimacy is denied through silencing of one kind of another. It is this double injury that Jean-François Lyotard articulates in *The Differend* with his notion of the *différend*, whereby the original damage is compounded by the fact that it cannot be brought to the attention of or recognized by others. [...] The assumption here is that listening has

always already softened the blow" (63). This double injury occurs when one's rage is discredited, deemed to be out of proportion to the weight of the wrong, or simply unheard, thus compounding the rage and shutting down avenues for multiracial collectivity when "white people remain unable to hear black rage, if it is the sound of that rage which must always remain repressed, contained, trapped in the realm of the unspeakable" (hooks, *Killing Rage* 12).

It is no accident that we are invoking studies of Black rage when discussing the plea of our Palestinian colleagues. Indeed, one of the seminal sound studies monographs, *The Sonic Color Line*, was written by Jennifer Lynn Stoever in part to historicize the state and police violence Black Americans were subjected to in the 2010s by positioning these instances of brutality—often triggered by disputes or disagreements over what a soundscape of the public space ought to be—within a larger history of the racialized listening practices. Those of us who experienced the Ferguson uprising in 2014 witnessed Palestinian allies sharing—over Twitter and in solidarity against the state violence—their first aid strategies when assaulted by the police tear gas for standing up for the dignity of Black and brown lives.

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It is within this context of the MLA's *refusal to listen* that we organize this panel. Beyond the immediate confines of the MLA, we also bear witness to contemporary practices of silencing, such as CEO Elon Musk tweaking X's algorithm to penalize posts he deems to be "negative"; the Trump administration's defunding of research on marginalized communities on the basis of flagged terms like "historically" and "female" (Palmer); and anthropocentric disregard for the more-than-human in enacting environmental policies, among others. At this juncture, resisting the erosion of democratic decision-making procedures and the freedom of expression is imperative.

While the panel theme is motivated by our collective desire to hold the MLA to account for its undemocratic procedures and to improve the Association's processes from below, **we also invite proposals thinking capaciously about questions of silencing, censorship, or free expression—as well as the role of listening and sound in these dynamics—through a sound studies framework**. Topics might include: silencing of the more-than-human; AI and social media censorship (algorithmic black boxes); scholasticide and epistemological imperialism; ableism as silencing; authoritarianism and political censorship, etc.



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Please submit your 200-word abstract and 50-word bio by March 20, 2025 to:

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- Tamara Mitchell, tamara.mitchell@ubc.ca

Please note that all speakers must update their MLA membership by April 7th, 2025 to participate in the conference. We look forward to receiving your proposals.

While the MS Sound Forum has decided to hold this guaranteed session at MLA 2026, we acknowledge and respect the decision of many of our colleagues to resign from their MLA-affiliated positions and withhold their membership, financial contributions, and labor in protest.

The MLA Sound Forum Executive Committee

John Melillo, Tamara Mitchell, Julie Beth Napolin, Setsuko Yokoyama

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