Partial Figures: Sound in Queer and Feminist Thought

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate Program in Literature in the Graduate School of Duke University

2017
ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation contends that sound and aurality ought to be more fully integrated into how gender and sexuality are thought. The dissertation’s title, “Partial Figures,” refers to its aims: not to exhaustively document the status of sound within discourses of sexual difference and dissidence, but rather to sketch how queer and feminist thought might draw on sound’s resources. The project is thus situated within the longer trajectory of visual approaches to power and gender. “Partial Figures” also describes what I suggest are sound and aurality’s specific erosion of the figure as a presumptive requirement of approaches to social life and aesthetic form. By partial, I mean both incomplete and nonunitary, subject to the decay and growth, the putative disfigurement, that Hortense Spillers describes under the rubric of flesh. Finally, the notion of being partial, as opposed to impartial, is also at play. Partiality -- having a weakness for something -- describes an orientation that bridges affection and dependency or debility; it compromises aesthetics as a site for the exercise of judgement. To be partial to something or someone is to be rendered incomplete by that thing, a torsion or disfigurement that marks queer and feminist method. By considering notions of musical flavor and corporeality (Chapter 1), queer sound ecologies (Chapter 2), and gendered ontologies of frequency and vibration (Chapter 3), I revisit key conceptual
knots within theories of gender and sexuality that require a more sustained attention to sound and aurality.

I focus on two fundamental preoccupations within queer and feminist scholarship that, I argue, are reconfigured by the methodological, material, and historical resources of sound: corporeality (Chapter 1) and ecology (Chapter 2). From this assessment of sound’s essential resources for theories of gender and sexuality, Chapter 3 then moves, through a consideration of sexual difference as noise, to suggest that sonic ontologies likewise cannot properly be thought without queer and feminist method.

The first chapter concerns corporeality as a principal site of feminist theory’s turn to questions of matter and affect in the 2000s. For some influential theorists, I argue, an ambiguous and overdetermined relationship between food, fatness, and “epidemic” debility became a cipher for the specifically causative or agential powers of matter and affect. I show, however, that these powers have already been thought otherwise in the overlapping contexts of black studies and musicology. I take up notions of musical flavor and culinary sound in the work of Fred Moten and Theodor Adorno, respectively, alongside Hortense Spillers’ account of ungendered flesh as resisting figuration in the sense of both embodiment and (ac)counting. Like fatness, musical flavor is felt as the distension and elaboration of form and enjoyment, its aesthetic and figural enrichments taken for a failure to budget and apportion pleasure, need, and dependency. Within
feminism’s turn toward corporeal matter, I argue, fatness and food have been made to
serve as both a hinge and an impasse. On the one hand, the purported links between
eating, fatness, and debility have been taken as the very image of self-evident causation.
On the other hand, however, fatness troubles etiology, generating endless (and to date,
inconclusive) speculation about what causes it and how its alleged social pathology
might be reversed. Its status as a site of commingled growth and purported decay, life
and “premature” death or debility, has presented itself to some writers as an apparent
conundrum. In addition to Moten, Adorno, and Spillers, I draw on critiques of causality
by Denise Ferreira da Silva and Michel Foucault. The nonopposition of growth and
decay, life and debility, enjoyment and dependency, emerges through music and
artworks by Future, UGK, Anicka Yi, Alvin Lucier, and Constantina Zavitsanos, among
others.

Chapter 2 concerns a second historically vexed site for thinking gender and
sexuality: nature and ecology. I approach the relation between sex, ecology, and sound
through one of queer theory’s founding preoccupations: “public,” outdoor, or
undomestic sexual gathering. “Public sex” has been imagined as a question of sightlines
and their obstruction, but I argue that its sociality is given form by acoustics and acute
sensitivity to environmental sound in spaces where visual obscurity offers both
protection and danger. I read the 1998 album Second nature: an electro-acoustic pastoral,
produced from field recordings of a parkland cruising ground by the group Ultra-red,
who develop an audio ecology of this queer sexual commons alongside a critique of the pastoral as a site of musical and ecological containment. Works by Samuel Delany, Simon Leung, June Jordan, Park McArthur, Lorraine O’Grady, TLC, and others situate Ultra-red’s *Second nature* within an understanding of a sexual commons that views need and dependency as forms of ecological wealth.

Chapter 3 considers noise as a figure for feminine sexual difference, suggesting that ontologies of sound must be conditioned by queer and feminist thought. My argument proceeds through an account of chatter, frequency, and perpetual motion, considering Drake’s “Hotline Bling,” chatbots, gifs, David Lynch’s 2006 film *Inland Empire*, consciousness-raising, and the work of artists Jessica Vaughn, Amber Hawk Swanson, and Pauline Oliveros. Questions of frequency and vibration have emerged as part of sonic ontologies in recent years; I trace the entry of vibration and “vibes” into U.S. popular discourse in the early 20th century through the theological and musicological writing of Sufi Inayat Khan. Among his areas of influence, I focus on the history of modern dance, particularly its Orientalist preoccupation with the animated wave-forms of loose fabric, which was demonstrably molded by Khan’s theories of vibration. This racially and sexually marked “signature” gesture was the subject of several intellectual property lawsuits that sustained legal ambiguity about the status of performance as property.
# Table of Contents

Abstract........................................................................................................................................... iv

List of Figures .................................................................................................................................... x

Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................................... iv

Introduction: The Ear’s Open Field ................................................................................................. 1

1. “In Excess of a Proper Cause”: Acousmatic Fatness, or One’s Figure .............................. 24
   1.1 Matter, Affect, Flavor .......................................................................................................... 24
   1.2 Distended Music: Adorno and the Culinary ....................................................................... 34
   1.3 Aromatic Scale: Anicka Yi.................................................................................................... 44
   1.4 Echoic Decay: Alvin Lucier ............................................................................................... 50
   1.5 Figure and Number: Flesh, Debt, and the (De)generative ................................................ 58
   1.6 In Excess of a Proper Cause: Fatness and Acousmatic Voice .......................................... 68
   1.7 Causality and Revolt: Silva and Foucault .......................................................................... 79
   1.8 Conclusion: Soul .................................................................................................................. 84

2. Field Recording: On Sound, Sex, and Ecology ...................................................................... 87
   2.1 Disturbing the Peace: Ultra-red in Griffith Park ................................................................. 87
   2.2 On Queer Pastoral Form: June Jordan, Adrienne Rich, and Ron Athey ............................ 98
   2.3 Reproductive Labor and Romantic Dependency: TLC and Park McArthur .................. 114
   2.4 Holes and Screens: Environmental Sound and “Public Sex” .......................................... 132
   2.5 Incompletion: The ‘X-Plicit,’ the Love Scene, and the Surround ...................................... 153

3. Chatter and Frequency: Sexual Difference and the Ontology of Vibration ............................ 169
3.1 Wave-Forms: Feminine Chatter and Vocal Consent ................................................. 169
3.2 Jiggle and Noise: Chatbots, Gifs, and Perpetual Motion ........................................ 180
3.3 Frequency and Seriality: Inland Empire .................................................................... 203
3.4 Waver/Waiver: Vibration, Property Law, and Modern Dance .................................... 211
3.5 Conclusion: Heyyyyyyy ............................................................................................... 227
4. Conclusion: Extended Play ........................................................................................... 232
Bibliography ...................................................................................................................... 239
Biography .......................................................................................................................... 258
List of Figures

Figure 1: Anicka Yi, *Tyrannical Eating* (2013) ................................................................. 24

Figure 2: Anicka Yi, *Sister* (2011) ...................................................................................... 45

Figure 3: Anicka Yi, *Convex Dialer Double Distance of a Shining Path* (2011) ..................... 46

Figure 4: Constantina Zavitsanos, *It was what I wanted now* (2010-2013) and *1885 / 1982 / 2013* ................................................................................................................................. 63

Figure 5: VALIE EXPORT, *The Voice as Performance, Act, and Body* (2007) ....................... 75

Figure 6: VALIE EXPORT, *I turn over the pictures of my voice in my head* (2007), video still ................................................................................................................................. 76

Figure 7: Ultra-red, Liner notes for *Second nature* (1998) .................................................... 88

Figure 8: First Radical Faeries gathering, with flyer, 1979 ....................................................... 107

Figure 9: From Womanshare Collective, *Country Lesbians* (1976) ........................................ 108

Figure 10: Camp Trans, shown here in 1993-94 ..................................................................... 109

Figure 11: Idapalooza Festival, Ida, Tennessee, 2015 ............................................................... 111

Figure 12: Park McArthur, *A Soft Limp Key*, 4-channel digital video, still (2011) .............. 127

Figure 13: Peter Hujar, *Christopher Street Pier #2 (Crossed Legs)* (1976) ......................... 130

Figure 16: Lorraine O'Grady, *The Clearing* (1991) ............................................................... 160

Figure 17: "Sexual consent is a voluntary active agreement," Columbia University poster ................................................................................................................................. 176

Figure 18: Leaked internal Ashley Madison memo, comparing the revenue value of human female users vs. chatbot "engagers" ......................................................................................... 184

Figure 19: Leaked Ashley Madison "engager" scripts .................................................................. 185

Figure 20: Leaked Ashley Madison "engager" scripts ................................................................. 187
Figure 24: Skai Jackson meme (2016) ........................................................................................................ 194
Figure 25: Hotline Bling meme (2016) ...................................................................................................... 195
Figure 26: Drake, "Hotline Bling" video (2015) .......................................................................................... 196
Figure 27: Umber Majeed, Still Life, digital video still (2013) ................................................................. 198
Figure 28: Jessica Vaughn, from the series Seat Configurations (2015-2016) ....................................... 201
Figure 29: David Lynch, Inland Empire, still (2006) ............................................................................... 210
Figure 31: maleminded.tumblr, “heyyyyy” (2012) ............................................................................... 228
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Introduction: The Ear’s Open Field

A certain opening finds itself everywhere repeated: the eye blinks, but the ear is always open. This formulation offers an idea of sound’s temporal ongoingness (always) and a corresponding perceptual receptivity (open) as a kind of respite from the familiar spatialized distances and mediations associated with vision. The notion of an always-open ear, its unguarded availability and vulnerability, also has a certain queer form, emphasized for example in Simon Leung’s 1991-1992 performance TRANSCRYPTS: Some Notes Between Pricks: “Did I hear correctly? Did he suggest … that my ear is an anus…? An asshole for an ear!”1

The claim that the ear is always open often takes the form of a critical seduction introducing an account of sonic media, or a concluding gesture affirming the ethics of listening.2 The critique of this claim also sometimes prefaces the writing of those who critique the so-called aural turn and its impulses. The notion that the ear, unlike the eye, is always open has appeared across an array of disciplines, including in work by Seth Kim-Cohen, Hillel Shwartz, and Jonathan Sterne, who have built arguments on its


In their view, this kind of appraisal of the specific capacities of both sound and hearing bestows an unwarranted exceptionalism on its object. Sterne writes:

A surprisingly large proportion of the books and articles written about sound begin with an argument that sound is in some way a ‘special case’ for social or cultural analysis. The ‘special case’ argument is accomplished through an appeal to the interior nature of sound: it is argued that sound’s natural or phenomenological traits require a special sensibility and special vocabulary when we approach it as an object of study.

Sterne points out that one wouldn’t expect a cultural history of the newspaper, or an analysis of a work of literature, to begin with a meditation on the material properties of light. Why then, he asks, do sound-based media seem to invite such an approach?

This dissertation is perhaps guilty of responding to just such an invitation. I do not share Sterne’s reservations, but I too am curious about what makes sound such an inviting site for considerations of matter and affect. Since the time of Sterne’s writing, in the mid-2000s, materiality and affect have been a preoccupation of queer and feminist theory, which – to speak very broadly – have shifted their methods and objects from the critique of structures, discourses, and representations, to the exploration of feelings, substances, things, and objects. This development has been part of a broad turn towards such questions, as has been widely observed. The apparent uptick of broad critical

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interest in sound from those outside or on the fringes of musicology, sound studies, and media studies, seems related to this development, and to sound’s particular susceptibility to it. With some exceptions, however, feminist and queer thought are still dominated by visual rubrics and corresponding political frameworks.

In the chapters that follow, I attempt to draw on the resources of sound and aurality in order to examine aspects of the ongoing feminist and queer preoccupation with materiality and affect. This “turn,” as I suggest above, allowed feminist and queer thought to develop two central sites of inquiry that were previously frowned upon as essentializing, naturalizing, or mystifying sexual difference: corporeality, and ecology. In Chapter 1, I take up feminist approaches to corporeality as a question concerning the figure and its growth and decay in the context of fatness, debt, and music. Chapter 2 then turns to the ground of that figure, assessing the question of ecology as it has moved through queer thought and aesthetic practice.

For some critics, however, the interest in sound’s material and affective dimensions is linked to what they understand to be the problematic pull of nature both corporeal and ecological, what Sterne calls, citing Michel Chion, a “naturalistic rut.” Kim-Cohen and Sterne are particularly averse to what they see as a critical tendency to discover in sound objects an affective presence, sensory immediacy, and physical

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materiality, presenting those three attributes contiguously, if not interchangeably. Such gestures, they argue, aim to bypass the methodological rigors of visual studies and cultural studies, in order to prematurely reach a conceptual or affective payoff. For both Sterne and Kim-Cohen, sound ought to be subjected to the same critical protocols as vision. But to pose Sterne’s question about sound’s problematic exceptionalism another way, I would ask, instead: what might an attention to the specific material and affective resources of sound offer to precisely those critical visual protocols? Or we may also ask, along with Leung, about the sexual and gendered topology that the ear’s opening seems to mark.

To both sets of critics – those who are against sonic exceptionalism, and those interested in the specific openings sound affords – the idea of the ear’s always-openness is itself a kind of hole or passageway. Depending on one’s inclination, it may give onto a seductive material-affective nexus, or, on the other hand, simply constitute an easy shortcut to facile profundity.

Seth Kim-Cohen, writing about another hole, Doug Aitken’s *Sonic Pavilion* (2009), exemplifies this latter perspective. In an essay titled “The Hole Truth,” Kim-Cohen evaluates Aitken’s project, which consists of a concrete-lined tunnel, approximately one mile deep and one foot in diameter, drilled into the earth of a massive Brazilian estate, museum, and sculpture garden owned by mining tycoon Bernardo Paz. Into this shaft are inserted microphones and accelerometers, and the information they collect is scaled
to the range of human hearing and amplified through eight speakers arranged around a circular indoor pavilion, where it is rendered as deep rumble with occasional higher pitched sounds. For Kim-Cohen, Aitken’s massive project exemplifies a tendency among artists and writers to

turn to the medium of sound in an effort to create, as [Aitken] put it, an experience with ‘no beginning and no end, deep-rooted, pure, and direct.’ There is a pervasive sense … that the sonic is truer, more immediate, less susceptible to manipulation, than the visual.6

The architecture and landscaping of the work, which is accessed by a spiraling path and framed in a spare, cathedral-like ovoid structure with 360-degree, floor-to-ceiling views of the surrounding forest, suggest to Kim-Cohen “the impression of unprecedented access to secret sensory experience.”

Kim-Cohen compares Aitken’s claim about sensory apprehension of planetary movement to a 1919 essay by Rainer Maria Rilke titled “Primal Sound” in which the poet speculates about using a phonograph needle to trace and play the lines in a human skull. “Primal Sound” -- often cited in much the same way as the “open ear” claim -- asks,

What would happen? A sound would necessarily result, a series of sounds, music. … Feelings — which? Incredulity, timidity, fear, awe — which of all the feelings here possible prevents me from suggesting a name for the primal sound which would then make its appearance in the world? … Is there any contour that one could not, in a sense, complete in this way and then experience it, as it makes

itself felt, thus transformed, in another field of sense?”

Regardless of what one thinks of Aitken’s hole or Rilke’s exemplary skull, the conjectures they offer have something of an otherworldly character. In his introduction to The Audible Past, Sterne goes through a long list of such claims about hearing, which he calls “the audiovisual litany.” Hearing is, for example, “immersive… physical… about affect,” and so on, while vision in each case offers a counter-term. He notes that the word “litany” is intended in its true sense, as bearing “theological overtones.” But an unmooring from strictly secularist critique is not something I have a problem with. Indeed, it suggests something about the unremitting conceptual contiguity of matter and affect in general, and about the case of sound in particular.

I am curious about this contiguity of matter and affect. What underlies it, and why do critical preoccupations with matter and affect tend almost invariably to travel together? Their entanglement is so persistent that it seems almost difficult to name. Thus, for example, in Elizabeth Grosz’s ontology of music and sex in the ecological Umwelt, matter and affect are so entangled as to appear almost indistinguishable. For the organisms she is considering, vibration is linked to expression and intensification … Vibrations, waves, oscillations, resonances affect living bodies, not for any higher purpose but for pleasure alone. Living beings are vibratory beings: vibration is their mode of

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7 Rainer Maria Rilke, “Primal Sound,” in Rodin and Other Prose Pieces, trans. G. Craig Houston (London: Quartet Encounters, 1986), 127-32. 130
8 Sterne, The Audible Past, 15.
differentiation, the way they enhance and enjoy the forces of the earth itself.\textsuperscript{9} Film theorist Vivian Sobchack, meanwhile, writes about her fingers “feeling” the cinematic image, in the dual sense of tactile-material and affective sensitivity.\textsuperscript{10} These are just two examples, each from a text that has been taken as a signpost of the “turn” toward matter and affect within its field. In both of these cases, and, I would suggest, more widely, the conceptual armature that holds matter and affect in such close and entangled proximity is extravisual. Sound is an especially productive matrix or orientation for studying this contiguity; it seems to hold it within itself.

Kim-Cohen, however, is not feeling it. What truth, other than their own facticity, could be offered by the sounds of a skull’s crevice or a hole dug in the ground? Of Aitken’s \textit{Sonic Pavilion}, he asks, “what was I actually hearing? Stone moving against stone? Loose material shifting as solid material beneath it gave way? … The sound itself is nothing special. Only the suggestion of its source solicits our attention and grants it meaning.”\textsuperscript{11} Both Aitken and Rilke, he suggests, partake in an empty promise of metaphysical abundance … The Rilkean implication is that a phenomenal entity, like the earth, possesses immanent, essential properties that are consistently expressed across different sensory manifestations.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{11} Kim-Cohen, “The Hole Truth,” 100.
Again – without commenting on the fullness or promise of Aitken’s work, I would like to note a certain critical closure. More importantly, ecology, matter, and affect here come under the kind of scrutiny familiar from a certain mode of feminist critique. Kim-Cohen’s interest in introducing an anti-essentialism to sound studies owes less to the deconstructionist genealogy to which he attributes it, than it does to a now-exhausted debate about the category of experience within feminist theory. Emblematic of the historical divergence between US feminist theory and women’s movements in the 1980s and 1990s, the development and subsequent abandonment of this debate and others about the complex status of materiality and difference within feminism are relevant for sound scholarship for two reasons.

First, such “debates” over the status of materiality and difference constitute the unacknowledged feminist ground of the often masculinist field of sound studies. In other words, feminist theory has already conducted some of the inquiry that Kim-Cohen rediscovers. Second, the turn toward “material feminism” in the mid-2000s -- just at the moment when prominent writers such as Sterne and Kim-Cohen were dismissing sound’s materiality -- may offer some resources for sound scholarship currently subject to these exhausted critical protocols. My third chapter pursues some of these resources, arguing that sound studies ought to attend to some of the questions that queer and feminist thought have already prepared for it.
Conditioning the dispute about the status of materiality and sensation for which the figure of the open ear stands in is the experimental musical tradition of acousmatic sound, or sound whose cause is not visible – what Kim-Cohen, drawing on Jacques Derrida’s critique of a Husserlian metaphysics of presence, pointedly calls “sound-in-itself.” Douglas Kahn characterizes this tradition as one of “sounds clipped from their roots, from their embeddedness in the world, leaving only phonic, socially deracinated remains.”13 The acousmatic tradition stretches from Pierre Schaeffer’s musique concrete, and before that, from Dziga Vertov’s Radio Ear, to its present-day inheritors, supporting, along the way, a critical poetics of auditory experience.

Here, acousmatic sound appears as a suspect art-historical object. However, in my first chapter, “‘In Excess of a Proper Cause’: Acousmatic Fatness, or One’s Figure,” I consider the ways in which acousmatic sound bears more complexly on the question of causality, and it turns out, on a set of questions that have been central to the turn toward matter and affect within feminist theory. There, I approach corporeality through the notion of musical flavor, which yokes notions of aesthetic taste and sensation to formal and figural growth and decay. Flavor thus marks a useful site for thinking sound and corporeality together. I consider the extended conversation about flavor and musical form that emerges across the work of Theodor Adorno and Fred Moten. Surprisingly,

both flavor and the acousmatic emerge at key moments in two arguments by Lauren Berlant and Jane Bennett that have influenced the conceptual vocabulary of feminist studies of affect and matter since their publication in the mid-2000s. Although their arguments differ, both theorists rely on ideas about food, eating, and fatness to problematize the agency of subjects and discover the agency of things, respectively, where agency is defined as determinative or causative power. This problem of causal determination is where (musical) flavor and the growth and decay of (musical and corporeal) form enter.

Specifically, both theorists are concerned with the apparently self-evident capacity of food to cause corporeal growth and decay, a power which allows them to draw conclusions about the “agency” and importance of matter (Bennett) and affect (Berlant). Both, however, also linger on a strange contradiction: although, for them, corporeal fatness in itself demonstrates the power of matter and affect, nonetheless, neither writer can locate the causal mechanism by which fatness occurs. Berlant’s concern about the so-called “obesity epidemic,” especially, seems occasioned by this concomitance of indeterminacy and overdetermination, growth and decay, life and its curtailment (in her view) in and as debility. In all of these ways, it is a kind of cipher for her wider project and her understanding of affect and attachment, which have been so influential for feminist and queer studies of affect. I elaborate these questions of material and formal growth and decay in the context not only of Adorno’s worry about excessive
“culinary” enjoyment of music, but also in the context of works by Alvin Lucier and John Cage, Gayatri Spivak’s account of the figure of Echo, and related questions about sexuality, rumor, and the (an)echoic. I also consider artworks by Anicka Yi and other artists who specifically engage these questions about flavor, sound, chemistry, and form.

While Berlant’s argument is profoundly problematic in a number of ways, including its approach to debility, disability, black social life, and corporeal morphology, it nonetheless poses generative questions. I argue that epidemiology and communicability are important components of musical flavor, and suggest that the analytic of corporeal growth and decay, figuration and disfigurement, asks to be rethought within the context of black aesthetic and social life. I take up Hortense Spillers’ concept of flesh, which both anticipates and critiques these theoretical concerns with corporeality, materiality, and sensation, as another way to think through Berlant’s worry about fatness, debility, sociality, and the aesthetic. The question of one’s figure or form, and its supposed disfigurement by fatness and flavor, is central to Berlant and Bennett’s arguments about matter and affect. In engaging the figure and its growth and decay, I also therefore take up the question of number and debt, surplus and deficiency.

The chapter ends by considering of a question posed to Berlant about whether fatness could be considered “resistance” to social norms or structures. I engage Berlant’s response, alongside a series of questions about causality, critique, and revolt posed by Michel Foucault and Denise Ferreira da Silva. Flavor, as a corporeal site of commingled
need, enjoyment, and dependency, unsettles and enriches a notion of aesthetic taste. In its epidemic communicability, flavor, I argue, compromises the profile of a singular figure.

According to Adorno, the juiciness and savor of what he terms “culinary sound” makes musical form available for premature moments of enjoyment, and thereby distends and distorts it. Although their objects and aims are quite different, Adorno and Kim-Cohen both seek to guard the ear. Against a preoccupation with sound’s material and affective dimensions, Kim-Cohen advocates instead – in an explicit parallel to Marcel Duchamp’s concept of non-retinal art – “non-cochlear sonic art.” The non-cochlear suspends and bars corporeal materiality, which, in Kim-Cohen’s view, is impossible to extricate from a phenomenological approach to experience. Instead, “non-cochlear” art emphasizes cognition, context, history, and sociality. But sonic materiality has a privileged relation to just these questions. The strength of this link between sonic materiality and sociality is affirmed by precisely the force required to sever it, so that one of the most fertile and often-cited passages in Ferdinand de Saussure’s *General Course in Linguistics* is his dematerialization of language, which proceeds by way of an excision of the phonic:

> it is impossible that sound, as a material element, should in itself be part of the language. Sound is merely something ancillary, a material the language uses. … Linguistic signals are not in essence phonetic. They are not physical in any way. They are constituted solely by differences which distinguish one such sound
pattern from another.\textsuperscript{14} Difference emerges as the motor of language on the basis of a noise reduction which is the dematerialization of difference itself. But the exclusion of phonic differences – of accent and the whole range of meaningful and non-meaningful voiced sound – marks one beginning of an exclusion of not only materiality, but social life from linguistic consideration.\textsuperscript{15} Phonic substance, in its social and material thickness, is conceived here as both a conduit and an obstruction. In Mladen Dolar’s formulation, “[t]he voice is that which cannot be said.”\textsuperscript{16} This brings us to the problem that Dolar will help me to frame in Chapter 1: how to “make our way in the opposite direction… from the height of meaning back to what appeared to be mere means”?\textsuperscript{17}

If we follow this line of thinking, the problem with Aitken’s \textit{Sonic Pavilion} is neither a deficiency nor an excess with respect to meaning. My aim here, however, is not to offer an alternate reading of \textit{Sonic Pavilion}. I have never been there, and from the description, its monument to sensitivity, like that of John Cage’s anechoic chamber, seems paradoxically to rely upon a violent noise reduction implicit in the private estate

\textsuperscript{14} Ferdinand de Saussure, \textit{Course in General Linguistics}, trans. Roy Harris (La Salle, IL: Open Court Co., 1986), 116-17.
\textsuperscript{15} For an extended treatment of the place of accent and the phonic in relation to aesthetics, language, performance and politics, see Moten, \textit{In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2003) especially the first chapter’s reading of an extended version of this passage from Saussure alongside Marx’s speculation, in the first chapter of \textit{Capital}, about what the commodity would say, if it had a voice and could speak.
\textsuperscript{17} Dolar, \textit{A Voice and Nothing More}, 16.
on which it is situated. Like Kim-Cohen’s ear, Aitken’s hole is guarded. In any case, Kim-Cohen is unmoved. His ears are vigilant but not “open,” at least not in the sense of a kind of susceptibility or permeability that the phrase usually implies. Their alertness is of a warier kind. Both Kim-Cohen and Aitken circle around what, for them, are the diagnostic capacities of a hole, its ability to offer or occlude perceptual access. I am interested, though, in how to think about susceptibility itself, a susceptibility of and to the hole.

Leung performed *TRANSCRIPTS: Some Notes Between Pricks* while screened from the audience, literalizing the etymology of acousmatic sound, which derives from a story about Pythagoras lecturing students from behind a partition, the better to solicit their attention. *TRANSCRIPTS* is concerned with sound, voice, speech, and “public space,” and with the relation between the form of the hole and that of the partition, specifically the glory hole and the restroom partition. More broadly, *TRANSCRIPTS* considers the architectures and acoustics of “public sex,” a preoccupation it shares with a range of other artworks from that decade, as I will discuss.

Leung’s performance text for *TRANSCRIPTS* is furnished with an introduction by Tom McDonough, in which McDonough cites Proust and other authors on the history of the public *pissoir* or washroom, or, in the parlance of cruising, the tearoom, as an institution both directed at and disruptive of notions of public hygiene. Introduced in Paris in the 1840s, by the 1850s the *pissoir* was already a site for police raids and the
interventions of city planners. McDonough describes how public officials blamed the architecture of the public restroom, with its simultaneous shadiness and publicity, its stalls and their susceptibility to puncture. “[W]hat ultimately makes a tearoom a tearoom,” Leung says in the performance, “is neither just the place nor its clients; nor just the activities, both physical and psychological; but the relationship between its inside and its outside.”

That relationship is given in the form of the partition and the glory hole, and in Leung’s multivalent invocation of the prick in not only its slang sense, but also in the sense of a small pierced mark or response to provocation (as in to prick one’s ears). He recounts the imprisoned Marie Antoinette writing letters with pin-pricks, and his reference to the glory hole as “just another prick in the wall” seems to suggest that the prick describes the hole itself, as much as what might move through it. The tearoom depends on the maintenance of a certain distribution of permeability and occlusion, hole and partition. “Glory has a price,” Leung writes. “There is no hole if there is no field.”

He goes on to quote from Lynne Tillman’s novel Haunted Houses:

There was a little girl who had a blanket. The blanket got a hole in it. She wanted to get rid of the hole so she decided to cut it out. She cut it out and the hole got bigger. She cut that out, too, and the hole got bigger. Eventually the hole disappeared but so did the blanket.

18 Leung, “TRANSCRYPTS,” 82.
The mutual dependency of hole and partition is a question of sightlines and their obstruction, but perhaps even more, it is a question of acoustics and acute sensitivity to environmental sound in a space where visual obscurity offers both protection and danger. This queer auditory sensitivity is the subject of my second chapter, “Field Recording: On Sound, Sex, and Ecology.” Leung describes “the silent tea dance,” a careful choreography that recalls, to me, something like a higher-stakes version of the constrained and attentive movements of latecomers entering the auditorium at a low-volume moment in a musical performance or lecture, trying to listen and not make too much noise:

Knowing and repeated glances, extended lingering at the urinal, eyes peeking through cracks, tilts of the head, hand signals and a gently tapping foot under the partition between two stalls are all part of the silent tea dance … The significance of this silence cannot be underestimated, for there is always too much at stake when a man is both compelled to signal, and forbidden to use voice … During these moments of signaling and decoding, all players are in effect playing ‘undercover,’ placing their bets against a field of silence. Is he trade or is he vice?20

This patient negotiation of a “field of silence,” or more precisely of a field of varied sound whose ambiguity amplifies its every minor contour, recalls nothing so much as R. Murray Schafer’s foundational account of the soundscape. In his 1973 pamphlet, “The Music of the Environment,” which would develop into his book Soundscape: The Tuning of the World, Schafer defines the soundscape in terms of the way it sensitizes or

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20 Leung, TRANSCRYPTS, 82-3.
desensitizes those who traverse it. A “hi-fi” soundscape, for example in a rural setting, entrains the ears “with seismographic delicacy,” while a denser, more lo-fi auditory environment produces a blur from which only the sharpest sounds can distinguish themselves.21

Visual obscurity and a compromised cartographic purview, and above all, ecologically-construed questions of diffuse threat and territorial management heighten sensitivity to the terrain of the soundscape. Schafer cites a series of literary passages from various authors to describe the notion of a hi-fi soundscape; all of them describe scenes of ecological danger and pastoral administration inseparable from settlement and colonization. The first such passage is from James Fenimore Cooper’s Leatherstocking Tales, which, Schafer writes, “are full of beautiful and terrifying surprises.”22 As the protagonist walks through a forest, meditating on the “quiet deep of solitude” in which “nature was speaking with a thousand tongues,” he hears something:

his vigilant ear had caught the peculiar sound that is made by the parting of a dried branch of a tree, and which, if his senses did not deceive him, came from the western shore. All who are accustomed to that particular sound will understand how readily the ear receives it, and how easy it is to distinguish the tread which breaks the branch from every other noise of the forest ... "Can the accursed Iroquois have crossed the river, already, with their arms and without a boat?"23

Schafer’s notion of the soundscape emerges vividly from this and other illustrative scenes of settlement surrounded, to cite Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s phrase, and vigilant in parsing the farm, domestic space, and wild space for audible signs of encroachment or, conversely, the patterns of ordinary functioning: the creak of a spinning weathervane, the crunch of tires on gravel, or the chatter of unseen birds suddenly falling silent. From these accounts emerges a notion of an idealized pastoral auditory sensitivity, which is then compromised in the denser, “low-fi” surround-soundscape of the city.

While Schafer explicitly does not advocate for urban noise abatement, Karin Bijsterveld, Jonathan Picker, and other scholars have tracked the related history and policing of “noise pollution” and its relation to ideas of ecology, civilization, and hygiene. Bijsterveld, in particular, charts the way in which a notion of traffic as both flow and obstruction emerged alongside ideas of noise pollution and hygiene. Despite the large-scale infrastructural changes that helped to produce traffic as both transit and commerce, she writes that noise was nonetheless criminalized as a lack of individual civility in both labor and recreation. Thus

24 Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, “Politics Surrounded,” in The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 14-20.
among the more minor accusations one might face after being arrested for cruising is the charge of “disturbing the peace.” Public sex may thus be understood as a crime on the order of noise, as I discuss in Chapter 2.

This question of “environmental sound” emerges as well in the context of the rezoning of sexual traffic in New York in the 1990s, which my second chapter takes up as part of the genesis of artistic and critical interest in the notion of “public sex” in that time period. For Leung, the soundscape of sexual traffic, however dense, ambiguous and blurred, is nonetheless not really what Schafer terms “low-fi,” in the sense that it does not numb its auditors. Rather, its very ambiguity demands an intensified sensitivity to modes of acoustic shelter and exposure, partition and permeability. Drawing on works by Samuel Delany, Simon Leung, and others, as well as concurrent conversations about the sexual ecology and infrastructure of New York City, I argue that “public sex” and the questions of shelter and exposure it invokes ought to be understood within an acoustical framework of environmental sound and sensitivity.

“Nature” and ecology have been sites of intertwined critique and desire within queer aesthetic practices and thought, an ambivalence reflected in disputes over “women’s land” and “queer land,” sites conditioned by a pastoral imaginary about music, sex, and agriculture. In Chapter 2, I read the 1999 album Second Nature: An
Electro-Acoustic Pastoral, by the “audio-activist” group Ultra-red, produced in part from field recordings of a queer black and Latinx cruising ground in a highly policed public park in Los Angeles. I situate Second Nature in the context of other “pastoral” artworks from the same period in the 1990s, which are likewise concerned with an occult sexual publicity, including Lorraine O’Grady’s photomontage The Clearing, as well as videos by Ellen Cantor.

Second Nature critiques the pastoral, a broad aesthetic category within which ideas about nature, governance, and sexuality are imagined in terms of musical form, yielding questions of harmony, distribution, reproduction, and enjoyment. Enjoyment here takes on both its erotic-aesthetic sense and the sense of a legal right to use or “enjoy” a resource, such as, in this case, land held in common. I take up the pastoral imaginary of the commons from the perspective of park sex, and “public sex” more broadly, asking after the musical romance that attends it. The commons is way of imagining social reproduction ecologically, and as such it has been an object of Marxist feminist thought. I examine critiques of the “naturalization” of unwaged reproductive labor as an endlessly renewable resource of love and romance, such as the Wages For Housework campaign and more recent variants on it. I argue that such approaches tend to valorize care by disavowing dependency upon it – not only the hypervisible dependency of disabled people and children, but also dependency in general. I examine the relation between love, dependency, and labor in these accounts, suggesting, with the
aid of TLC and their 1992 debut album, an alternative understanding of (in)value, wealth, and accumulation. From there, I consider the question of dependency as it is elaborated in a video by artist Park McArthur.

The pastoral is a kind of exemplary scene, a microcosmology marked, I argue, by a set-theoretic containment, and must be understood in the context of the field and the plantation. I examine “pastoral” poetry by June Jordan and Adrienne Rich that ambivalently takes up the question of nature, imagined both as a site of metrical, sexual, and legal enclosure, and a source of leaks and dispersal. I take up this problematic of containment and incontinence, elaborating an idea of biohazard.

On the one hand, the works I discuss in this chapter practice a stringent queer critique of “natural order” and the (policed) form of the pastoral. But they are also devoted to the atmospheric material and affective sound and texture of sexual ecologies. Mostly, though not entirely, made in the 1990s, they thus mediate a shift in the status of nature and ecology within queer and feminist thought and desire, from an object of critique to an object of theoretical curiosity.

Like the tea room itself, Leung’s TRANSCRPTS, among other works discussed here, makes evident the importance of aurality for queer and feminist thought. In the dissertation’s first and second chapters, attention to sound-based conceptual and aesthetic questions emerges as a necessary component of queer and feminist approaches. But it’s not only that feminist theory and queer theory that are aided by an attention to
sonic registers. In Chapter 3, I turn in the other direction, asking what queer and feminist approaches might hold for research on sound. Queer and feminist thought offer profound resources for sound studies and sonic ontologies.

The third chapter, “Chatter and Frequency: Sexual Difference and the Ontology of Vibration,” takes up questions of frequency and vibration that have emerged as part of sonic ontologies. Vibration is a way of thinking about the irreducible co-constitution of matter and movement, which has a privileged relationship to sound. Here, I suggest that such ontologies are, or ought to be, inflected, shaped, and structured by questions of sexual difference. I begin the chapter with an account of chatter and noise as sites of sexual differentiation, opposing them to a notion of the voice as a signature for consent. I consider the role of feminine chat and chatter within Nietzsche’s economy of sounds, as well as the troubled status of chatting vs. political speech in the context of feminist organizing. Chat allows me to approach the gendered and sexual dimensions of frequency and vibration by way of a range of aesthetic objects. The vibratory movement of the chatbot and the gif emerge alongside a notion of repetitive strain. I address Drake’s song “Hotline Bling” as well as works by artists Amber Hawk Swanson and Jessica Vaughn that rely upon these modalities of movement and sound. I attempt to resituate an older feminist film theoretical discourse on serial horror, reframing seriality as frequency, in a reading of the film Inland Empire (David Lynch, 2006). Lastly, I examine the notion of vibe as a site where matter and affect converge as sound. I trace its
history, which turns out to involve modern dance, property law, and immigration law in the early twentieth century.

Each chapter directs readings of artworks and aesthetic practices toward an especially generative knot in queer or feminist thought, drawing on theories of sound and aurality in order to examine the shape of this impasse. I aim not to exhaust or rehash an impossibly large index of queer and feminist scholarship on corporeality or ecology, or to review the disagreements that have shaped its course. Rather, I construct a series of exemplary scenes, case studies, and vocabularies in which these knots can be observed at work. My approach is premised on the idea that aesthetic forms and perceptual frameworks necessarily condition theoretical concepts and their capacities and aporias, and that aesthetic practices which emphasize sound will yield different lines of inquiry from, for example, those with an emphasis on visuality. More broadly, I proceed from the supposition that questions concerning gender and sexuality have a privileged relation to the aesthetic and to form and matter. To follow Leung’s claim about the ear’s unsettled topology, I hope that these bodies of thought show themselves, over the course of this dissertation, to be permeable and susceptible to one another.
1. “In Excess of a Proper Cause”: Acousmatic Fatness, or One’s Figure

Unnatural causes burden every step you take. … Between the oral and the aural there’s some commerce at the level of taste
Fred Moten, “Amuse-Bouche”

1.1 Matter, Affect, Flavor

In an essay on the sound studies blog Sounding Out, Kemi Adeyemi writes about music under the influence of the cough syrup-based mixture lean, whose dilatory effects

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on tempo make it, she suggests, “hip hop’s most audible drug.” Adeyemi notes that the intro to Future’s 2015 album Dirty Sprite 2 consists of lean being audibly “cut with sweet sodas and candies.” Before Future’s voice comes on, the track commences with the hissing of a bottle of soda being shaken and mixed over cinematic music, and twenty seconds in, a delicate, aerated sip and swallow. I want to think about not just the viscosity of lean’s sound, its wavering halo effect, imaged in rippling motion trails and abstract landscapes in videos such as A$AP Rocky’s “Purple Swag” (2013) and Future’s “Codeine Crazy” (2015) – but also how that sound makes its saturative delivery by way of sweetness as suspension and solvent.

This chapter is concerned with the question of flavor, and flavorful sound, as incitement, transmission, or circulating feel. How does sweetness, flavor, or intoxicant become music, and how does music also bear, extend, and transmit flavor? I take up flavor in the context of a critical trajectory whose fullness my argument here cannot encompass. Since the mid-2000s, some strains of feminist theory have undergone an uneven but pronounced shift in emphasis toward substances and affects. This “turn”


necessarily occasioned a corresponding shift in the status of sociology, structures, figures, and bodies, and, deeper, in how power and explanatory force are themselves understood and located. Flavor and its occult operation – the specific blur I will argue it introduces to questions of causality, dependency, matter, and affect – have been present at this transition, and both necessary and troublesome to its development.

In the context of aesthetics, flavor is neither purely (aesthetic) taste nor (sensory-affective) feel. I am interested in flavor as a descriptor of a person, a style, or a sound, as well in what Theodor Adorno cautions against as a “culinary” gratification in music. Flavor – in the overlapping contexts of music, nourishment, and social life – describes an inseparability of matter and affect, a site where the perceptual meets the aesthetic, material, affective, and chemical. The conceptual contiguity of matter and affect seems

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29 Much work has been done on food and the question of its broader relationship to cultural consumption, in the contexts of art history and literary studies especially. Oswald de Andrade’s 1928 “Manif Antropófago” (“Cannibalist Manifesto”) is a foundational text of Brazilian modernism and has remained influential in the context of Latin American art and culture, proposing cannibalism as a figure for both European colonization and as an anticolonial aesthetic strategy in the transformation and recomposition of cultures in the Americas. More recently, works by Kyla Tompkins and Parama Roy have theorized the connections between consumption and political subjectivity. Oswald de Andrade, trans. Leslie Bary,
to operate consistently across the critical shifts described above. Flavor is one key site of this contiguity; another is vibration and the popular notion of vibe, which I discuss in the third chapter.

Flavor in its multiple senses has, I argue, been at the site of a profoundly generative impasse confronting the broad critical orientation toward matter and affect within feminist theory since the mid-2000s. That impasse – represented in this chapter by two influential texts by Lauren Berlant and Jane Bennett from that time period that have shaped feminist vocabularies of matter and affect – occurs at the site where matter and affect may not clearly be distinguished from one another, and it concerns the specifically causative power of matter and affect.


I concentrate here on Bennett and Berlant’s work – rather than that of other influential writers who also helped give shape to this ongoing moment, such as, for example, Elizabeth Grosz, Patricia Clough, Karen Barad, Mel Chen, Sarah Ahmed, Sianne Ngai, or others – for two reasons. First, I focus on these two writers because their extended engagements with the affective world of matter (Bennett) and the material consequences of affect (Berlant) diverge widely enough to permit this inquiry a certain scope. And secondly, both writers turn to food, and to the enjoyment of food, as a surprisingly central conceptual mechanism, drawing upon food and eating in order to demonstrate the power and importance of matter and affect within a feminist framework.

Moreover, the role played by flavor in these arguments is remarkably similar across both texts, considering their otherwise divergent critical agendas. Both writers use the example of food and eating – imagined as a site of entwined need and enjoyment, growth and decay – in order to demonstrate the specifically causative power of matter and affect. More narrowly, both Bennett and Berlant are concerned with the supposed self-evidence of food’s capacity to cause fatness and, thus, in their understanding, debility. Evidence itself, and that which troubles it, are thus brought into focus for me. Feminist thought has arguably been preoccupied with the question and problem of evidence since its partial institutionalization as women’s studies in the 1970s occasioned an epistemological shift from, broadly, questions of social organization to the
need to meet evidentiary standards. That preoccupation, the seeming need to
demonstrate injustice, disprove our inferiority, or explain the misery or power of sexual
difference has operated as an implicit horizon and ground for some modes of inquiry.
The turn toward matter and affect marked a shift in this emphasis on the evidentiary,
the explanatory, and the explainable, exposing their limits.

To cause something is to give rise to it and to serve as its explanation: to
originate it and to be its condition of possibility, to be that upon which a particular effect
depends. Matter and affect, in Berlant and Bennett’s accounts, are powerful and
implicitly worth thinking about because they cause things, rather than being merely
effects of human will or agency. This is the intervention that the “turn” to materiality
and affect proposed to a feminist theoretical framework that might otherwise have
concerned itself for the most part with an understanding of culture and politics as
determined by human subjects and human agency.

Yet it is causality – and specifically the causative power of food qua matter and
affect – that offers a site of productive difficulty in reading these texts. Both arguments, I
argue, pivot on the self-evidently causative power of eating to cause fatness and hence
(for Berlant, at least) debility. At the same time, both writers linger on the difficulty of
grasping the causal mechanism at work, and its elusiveness both conditions their
arguments and provides their stakes.
This elusiveness or resistance to causal containment or explanation occasions different styles or approaches in each writer. Bennett approaches it with a kind of vitalist wonder at the power of flavor, food, and chemistry. Berlant’s response, on the other hand, is saturated with melancholic concern about pathological and pathogenic fatness. But in each case, where matter and affect converge as flavor, I argue that they seem to offer both a certain yielding susceptibility and a confounding resistance to causal containment and explanation. Expanding upon this question of troubled causality and troubling dependency, I will rely on Denise Ferreira da Silva and Michel Foucault on causality and purposiveness in the context of revolt. I engage, as well, a theoretical trajectory on acousmatic sound, or sound without a perceptible cause. This term describes sound whose source cannot be seen, sound “in excess of a proper cause.”

This improper excess – specifically with respect to explanation, resolution, cause, or origin – is another way of describing the qualities of the material-affective site which has been of interest to feminist theory. I will argue that flavor, and later, in the chapter, communicable, noncommunicative fatness, is another way of thinking this improper excess –again, with respect to cause, dependency, necessity, need, and enjoyment.

Dependency describes both the relation between an effect and its cause, and, in a social context, the condition of being dependent – associated with disability, debility,
poverty, and being very old or very young – states less susceptible to the frame or figure of the independent subject. Fatness and debility of the sort that concerns Berlant is a specifically social problem, a problem with or of sociality itself. It is therefore, I suggest, something that troubles the figure: what shape an individual is supposed to be, and how they are supposed to grow; the developmental trajectory of their life and death; as well as the very notion of individual figurability. Berlant can’t figure out where epidemic fatness comes from. But it is not an absence of, or freedom from, causal determination or dependency that troubles and provokes her writing. Rather, it is precisely an overdetermination – a dependency in the sense of both entangled causality and entangled sociality – to which she responds.

Like many other readers, I turn to Hortense Spillers and her deeply influential work on flesh, which offers an anticipatory challenge to the political economy of the figured body, and therefore also to Berlant’s account of disability, debility, and reproduction. In conversation with Spillers’ notion of flesh, Denise Ferreira da Silva’s discussion of what she calls the “no-body” offers additional resources for such a challenge.

The embodied figure and these challenges to it also necessarily pose the question of number and calculability. I draw on Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s work on the “more than plus less than one,” which describes the legal and economic status of the slave, as well as the preemptive objection that black being poses to ontology, political
economy, and law. The more-than-plus-less-than-one unsettles not only being and value, but also the legal notion of consent, and the individuated signatory that the form of the contract requires.

Moten, citing Éduouard Glissant’s phrasing, is concerned with what it is to “consent not to be a single being.” This surplus and deficiency with respect to being emerges in Berlant as a question of political economy, but also a question for pathology. She writes that fatness particularly “burdens...African Americans and Latino/as,” and I will suggest that Berlant’s position on fatness and its indistinct etiology within social life is entrained in an irreducibly antiblack lineage of pathology and sociology that shapes her melancholic encounter with flavor. Fatness – or rather, its confounding (de)generative, intergenerational sociality, known as the “obesity epidemic” – suspends individual attribution, and unsettles the subject, the figure, and questions of development. Throughout this chapter, I discuss a blurring of figuration that emerges in different forms, eroding the figure as it expands it, shadows it, halos or grounds it. That blur appears in different forms: as intoxicated, decelerated, slurred musical articulation; as fatness, debility, and disability; as debt and social reproduction; and as echoic resonance and multiplication.

In Berlant’s discussion of the “obesity epidemic,” and particularly “childhood obesity,” fatness is an apparently paradoxical intermingling of growth and decay, which poses problems for both etiology and form. The “obesity epidemic” and particularly “childhood obesity” represent for Berlant social reproduction and the perpetuation of life as debility, disability, and decay. In other words, the intermingling of growth and decay describes not only figural fatness, but also the irreducible entanglement of social reproduction with debility and disability.

The inseparability, concerning to Berlant, of (ongoing) social reproduction and (progressive) dependency is what I am calling the (de)generative. I linger with Berlant in her discovery of this entanglement, but differ from her insofar as I view it as a profound resource rather than a vexing problem. I also use the term (de)generative to describe the coextensive operation of accumulation and decay in the context of sound, music, and aesthetic form.

I outline Adorno’s critique of what he termed “culinary” sound, which for him describes a distension and premature deformation of musical form. From his notes and drafts, gathered over decades, in *Towards a Theory of Musical Reproduction*, I take up an argument he describes having with his cousin Franz and a friend, the harpsichordist Edith Picht-Axenfeld, in which they speculate about music as the body of a woman one loves, and about form as a diagnostic “x-ray” of that woman’s body. Later, I discuss Gayatri Spivak’s essay “Echo” alongside work by Alvin Lucier and John Cage in order
to elaborate the relevance of (de)generation for that quite narrow lineage of experimental music and sonic art, as well as for sexuality and the operation of rumor, all of which I take up here under the rubric of the echoic.

The critical turn toward matter and affect, and the idea that their power lies, in part, in their troubled and excessive relation to causality, explanation, and evidence, seems inevitably to beg the question of soul. In the chapter’s conclusion, I follow others in restoring the conceptual contiguity of matter and affect to the context of soul, where I think it belongs. I draw on Emily Lordi’s essay “Souls Intact,” which considers literary and vocal soul performances in order to propose soul as a site of entwined exhaustion and generativity.33

1.2 Distended Music: Adorno and the Culinary

Across Adorno’s writing on music, the culinary seems to describe how the fullness, richness, or elaboration of a tone, passage, or a player’s interpretation begins to pull away from the overall structure of the work which it is meant to support and disclose, as if led astray or misguided.34 The culinary thus poses questions about the

development, maintenance, and (de)generation of aesthetic form, under the pressure of sound as matter and feeling.

What Adorno terms “culinary sound” or “culinary listening” bears a curious relation to the apprehension and development of aesthetic form: it threatens to circumvent the artwork’s dynamic structure through a kind of premature sensory and affective gratification. Over years of gathered notes that comprise Towards a Theory of Musical Reproduction, Adorno describes the culinary as an untimely “surrender” to the materiality and feel of musical sound. In one passage from 1959, he reminds himself to argue against the separation of emotion and intellect in presentation based on the matter itself. Highly organized music always means the presence of the non-present, i.e. recollecting and glancing ahead, and for the performer this is always a mental and categorial function. Only one who does not simply feel music, but also thinks it, can feel it properly. – At the same time, from the work’s perspective – leaving aside the critique of mass culture – this is the argument against culinary listening and playing, ‘easy listening’, and against any passive attitude. Whoever simply surrenders themselves falls short of whatever they are surrendering to.\(^{35}\)

Here, surrender seems to mingle enjoyment with need and dependency, approaching a ‘chemical’ dependency; later in the same notebook, recounting the questions he was asked after a lecture, Adorno argues against what he calls “’”\(^{36}\). Surrender to the culinary thus describes a question of central concern in this chapter: the commingling of need

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\(^{35}\) Adorno, Towards a Theory, 97.
\(^{36}\) Adorno, Towards a Theory, 112.
and enjoyment, and the way it troubles the aesthetic, which I will return to in my
discussion of Berlant’s essay on the so-called “obesity epidemic.”

The culinary occasions both surrender and resistance, the latter in deferral of a
future surrender proportionate to the work, and temporally meted out. It’s not that
sound or sensory enjoyment is “simply to be negated,” avoided or opposed, but that it is
to remain a means, not an end: material, and not form: “Concerning the problem of the
culinary, the beautiful tone. The point is not to strive for the opposite of sound, but
simply that sound is a means of representing sense, a means of shaping...”37 I am
interested in the sexual politics of this this account of surrender and resistance, matter
and form. Later, in his notes from August 1966, Adorno recounts an argument with his
cousin, Franz and the harpsichordist Edith Picht-Axenfeld:

The strongest argument against me came from my cousin Franz, and Edith Picht ...
Namely that one should present only the sensual appearance, as the structure
communicates itself. ‘If I love a woman, I want her body, not her x-ray image.’
But this, as plausible arguments usually are, is pure sophistry. Apologia for the
pre-artistic culinary element. For the hidden structural aspect is that which lends
sense. If it is not realized in the appearance, then this latter becomes mere sound
material and thus senseless.38

Adorno and his friends differ about the status of music, photography, desire, and
enjoyment. Franz and Edith say that “structure” is a belated diagnostic image,

37 Adorno, Towards a Theory, 99.
38 Adorno, Towards a Theory, 161.
secondary to matter’s own internal differentiation, its process of involution or unfolding. I like the way that, in their argument, a conditional mood conjoins matter and fantasy: “If I love a woman, I want her body, not her x-ray image.” That sensual appearance seems to describe an entanglement of matter and feeling with fantasy suggests that “the presence of the non-present” is the domain not only of “intellect,” as Adorno suggests in the prior passage from 1959, but also of feeling, or that the two are already inseparable; his cousin and his friend begin the task of arguing against the separation of emotion and intellect that he had set himself.

The x-ray photograph is Adorno’s favored shorthand for how performance reveals the structure of the work, all that is “subcutaneous” within it, which “otherwise lie[s] concealed both under the mensural notation and the sound’s sensory surface. This is why,” he writes, “a desensualization of musical interpretation becomes necessary.”

The score and the sound of its performance enflesh but also obstruct, obscure, and resist the work’s form. Such enfleshment and objection – the specific threat that sonic materiality has been thought to pose to what it bears – are delineated in the first and last chapters of Fred Moten’s In the Break.

Musical sound covers the work, a skin or “sensory surface.” The question of diagnostic and photographic capture as a mode of access to what Adorno calls the

38 Adorno, Towards a Theory, 202.
subcutaneous is key here. It recalls Sigmund Freud’s explanation in “Dora” that in order to apprehend psychic structure, he has “simply claimed for [himself] the rights of the gynecologist,” who “does not hesitate to submit to making them [‘girls and women’] submit to uncovering every possible part of their body.”41 Freud’s claims the rights of the gynecologist as a metric of harmlessness specifically because of the divorce of the medical from the erotic, or rather because of the separation of two regimes of access and property. This claim however must be understood in the context of modern gynecology, an epistemology inseparable from slavery, black maternity, and disability, as Riley Snorton has demonstrated.42

Freud refers to gynecology twice in “Dora” as a preemptive response to readers who would take offense both at his sexual suggestions to his analysand, and at Dora’s perversions, presented diagnostically and without moral condemnation. Of note for us here, the perversions are defined as a kind of improvisatory distension with respect to sexual form: “We must learn to speak without indignation of the sexual perversions, instances in which the sexual function has transgressed its limits, either in relation to the part of the body chosen or to the sexual object chosen. … Each one of us transgresses in

his own sexual life to a slight extent – now in this direction, now in that…”⁴³ Such improvisatory distension of erotic form is what Adorno seeks to capture and negate as culinary enjoyment; this is, for him, the meaning of the X-ray photograph of work or the loved person’s body. As in Adorno’s conversation with Franz and Edith, in the context of psychoanalysis, “sensual appearance” – in this case, the analysand, and the vocal “material” she submits for analysis – both bears and obstructs the diagnostic sense that must be imposed upon it.

Adorno’s reply to Franz and Edith lies in a tradition outlined in detail by Emanuela Bianchi, in which form bestows or imposes itself – here, as a loan – upon undifferentiated feminine matter which bears, supports, and gradually discloses or obscures it, swallows it or permits it to reveal itself.⁴⁴ He observes of one performance of Beethoven’s Trio in B flat major, “‘Too beautiful’. Here that means: the sensual euphony of the sound eclipses the realization of the construction.”⁴⁵ At stake for Adorno is the temporality of matter’s (non)disclosure of structure, the measure or meter of this gradual disclosure. Surrendering to flavor is supposedly a matter of bad timing, of giving in to present enjoyment, whereas intellect is here an alertness in and against time, giving it a certain measure.

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⁴³ Freud, *Dora*, 43.
⁴⁵ He observes of one performance of Beethoven’s Trio in B flat major, “‘Too beautiful’. Here that means: the sensual euphony of the sound eclipses the realization of the construction.” Adorno, *Towards a Theory*, 75.
an alertness to the “presence of the non-present”: the anticipation or recollection of the not-yet or no-longer through which a formal structure begins to show itself.

Leaving aside that Adorno’s argument “against the separation of emotion and intellect” seems to enact that separation, I am interested in the way flavor bends or distends temporal form and temporal perception. This distension – a question of growth and decay, of (de)generation – is of primary concern to me in this chapter, and it, again, has a lot to do with fatness, epidemiology, and sound. Flavor, which conditions form, also appears to threaten it; it seems to exercise a buoyant or gravitational force on form as a whole, so that form threatens to get away from itself, or to get away within itself.

Fred Moten, whose account of flavor and engagement with Adorno my writing is indebted to, describes flavor in terms of this constant “slide away” from and within a knowledge of constraint:

My concern has been with the relation between fugitivity and the musical moment, between escape and the frame. Adorno, after Kant, is, on the other hand, interested in freedom. If freedom is a matter of taste, perhaps escape is a matter of flavor.46

This interplay of fugitivity and the frame pertains in Moten’s essay to both music and photography, and specifically to a photograph of a little black girl made in Thomas Eakins’s studio in 1882. In the Eakins photo, the little girl “quickens against being stilled,

studied, buried, stolen, as she steals away, moving without moving.” For Franz and Edith, the x-ray is incidental to what escapes it.

Moten concurs with Adorno’s admission that the affective and material dimensions of musical sound condition, occasion, and bear musical form, and he elaborates the racial and sexual ground of that labor. Moten’s understanding of the relationship between form and flavor necessarily departs from Adorno’s, insofar as for Moten, the sensory-affective richness, fugitivity, and untimeliness denoted by the culinary do not mark a lack of formal, intellectual, or temporal sophistication. Flavor represents not an abdication of formal constraint, but its elaboration and invagination through “the continually auto-augmentative miniature that the black apparatus affords.” This is a matter not of simple presence, or present immediacy, but rather of cutting and elaborating the frame of the work:

what if the constitution of the whole is precisely the intensified reproduction and internal structure of the climax (however premature or, more precisely, untimely), sustained and interrupted. That’s what jazz is—in the break that is and breaks the climax. Tarrying, lingering, (productive) of bone deep listening. Consider Marvin Gaye’s plea ‘Don’t make me wait’ as a profound manifestation of musical patience, offered by someone who has been waiting for a long time, uttered so far behind the beat that its adherence is a kind of displacement. His is a climax way too long in coming. It is Adorno who is impatient, who simply cannot wait for, refuses to wait upon, the continually auto-augmentative miniature that the black apparatus affords. It is, perhaps, an impatience born of the legitimate critique of the delusional work to which the black apparatus has been put. Nevertheless, Adorno relinquishes something that he cannot live
without.  

This is a sadder surrender, under the guise of a refusal to yield. Adorno writes that the culinary cannot be opposed, but should rather be captured, and savored, in its dialectical negation within the longer process of form’s self-disclosure. The x-ray photograph that develops in the work’s performance is for him such a capture. The relation between capture and flavor, frame and fugitivity that Moten describes is also not one of opposition, but rather apposition, a “step away” that conditions the dialectical encounter, undercutting the very operation of capture, apprehension, and recognition.

This slip away from capture – not through freedom, but through, precisely, untimely surrender to something else – is evident as well in the way that the culinary cannot be fully located, however adulterated by racialized “local flavor” it always seems to be. Note the shift from player to music in Adorno’s notes:

The pre-artistic aspect of the virtuoso: when the means becomes the end. ‘Tone’ is much the same. As soon as it begins to relish itself, the musical context suffers. ... The culinary qualities are regressive.

As soon as it feels itself, savors itself, extends or embellishes itself, tone begins to slip away from its role in the (non)disclosure of the work as a dynamic whole, taking on a

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49 “A critique of the ‘culinary’ element of musical interpretation should be carried out dialectically. It is not simply to be negated, but is only captured as something negated.” Adorno, Towards a Theory, 105.
50 Fred Moten, In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2003), 21.
51 Adorno, Towards a Theory, 158.
kind of premature autonomy: what Adorno again describes elsewhere in his notes as “an element of self-relish.”\textsuperscript{52} I am really interested in this “self-relish” and the way sonic materiality seems to offer the temptation of premature enjoyment not only to the listener or performer, but also to itself.

Where is sound’s “self-relish” located? Sound’s worrisome autonomy seems to describe nothing other than its radical dependency on a general social surrender to it. In \textit{Towards a Theory of Musical Reproduction}, sound’s excessive savor moves indiscriminately across audition and performing. Anthony Gritten describes Adorno’s notion of the culinary in terms of an oscillation, “an oscillating connective link between performing and listening.”\textsuperscript{53} This lush nonlocality of enjoyment, its extended circulation, is precisely what is at stake for me in the question of flavor. At the same time, as Moten shows, the nonlocality of flavor is inarguably bound up with what Adorno sees as the vulgarity of an excessively local enjoyment: not only the overly sensual and affective focus on a particular sound that detracts from and distends the overall work, but also the local, as in racialized and supposedly parochial, vulgarity of such enjoyment. In the midst of this particular nonlocality we might find the cousins and instrumentalists who were flavor’s “strongest” defenders, in their weakness for it.

\textsuperscript{52} Adorno, \textit{Towards a Theory}, 78.
1.3 Aromatic Scale: Anicka Yi

The Top 40 syrup-influenced music that Adeyemi discusses, with which this chapter opens, derives from the openly culinary enjoyment of chopped and screwed aesthetics. Developed in Houston in the 1990s by DJ Screw, UGK, and others, and spreading through the Gulf and the southeastern United States, chopped and screwed describes the practice of slowing down recordings to 60 to 70 beats per minute, dilating vocals and instrumentals to an “underwater slur” – and “chopping” up the rhythm to open up “even more goopy space between beats.” In UGK’s 1996 track “One Day,” mourning mingles with distended tempo and the decelerated, ponderous savor of the Isley Brothers’ “Ain’t I Been Good to You.” In its deployment of lush, funerary decay and nourishment, I want to consider it alongside works by the artist Anicka Yi. Yi works frequently with breath and smell, movements on the outskirts of vocal sound. Most recently, she has worked with bacteria and mold, but I am interested here in slightly earlier sculptures, which make use of milk, oil, pills, honey, and edible substances, alongside other materials, invoking questions of flavor, intoxication, decay, and temporality.

54 Adeyemi, “Straight Leanin’.”
Figure 2: Anicka Yi, *Sister* (2011). Tempura fried flowers, cotton turtleneck.

In *Sister* (2011), a huge, funereal bouquet of flowers has been deep fried, then mounted in the collar of a red turtleneck attached to the wall. Initially sharp-edged, stiff, and fluffy with batter, the stems eventually droop, releasing oil into the front of the shirt in a downward seep that resembles sweat, tears, or a spill. The gesture of this droop, occurring over time, remembers a certain time and space, offering intermingled nourishment and decay. It moves with a specifically and imperceptibly slow motion.

Another work from the same year, *Convex Dialer Double Distance of a Shining Path*, consists of a large aluminum soup pot sitting on a warm electric burner on the floor. Inside the pot is an opaque bath of heated reconstituted powdered milk in which antidepressant pills and various other materials are suspended and dissolved. Most of the materials listed, including a “steeped Swatch watch,” are not visible below the
surface of the liquid, but function as imaginary smells transferring their potency to its medium.

Figure 3: Anicka Yi, Convex Dialer Double Distance of a Shining Path (2011). Recalled powdered milk, abolished math, antidepressants, palm tree essence, shaved sea lice, ground Teva rubber dust, Korean thermal clay, steeped Swatch watch, aluminum pot, cellphone signal jammer and electric burner.

In its evaporation, this work operates as a pharmaceutical and nutritive variant on Robert Barry’s Inert Gas Series: From a Measured Volume to Indefinite Expansion (1969), in which Barry, known for conceptualist work, photographed the release of invisible inert gases into the desert air around Los Angeles. These “measured volumes” of helium,
neon, argon, krypton, and xenon were then subject to an immeasurable expansion, raising questions of sculptural scale and perceptibility.\textsuperscript{55}

In Yi’s *Tyrannical Eating* (2013), part of a series of similar sculptural and installation works, a compact disc is mounted in a slot in the wall, as if mid-insertion into a player. Its reflective underside – the side that would be scanned – faces up, and on it rests a spill of honey that bulges slightly over the disc’s edge, appearing to be held there by its own tension. Honey, like ketchup, frog saliva, blood, custard, and gravy, among other substances, is a non-Newtonian fluid; it does not behave like a normal fluid, but changes its behavior under stress. Under the strain of gravity, for example, honey – relatively stiff when at rest – stretches into long filaments, losing viscosity and becoming more fluid, while slowing the formation of individual droplets. It also never decays. Here it moves with extreme slowness toward the edge of a pristine, already obsolete recording surface. Its enticement seems inseparable from the severely decelerated potential energy of its drip and nourishment, as well as from the pleasure of messing something up.

What I want to get back into is that saturative transfer of sweetness to sound by way of oral transfer that Moten observes in Samuel Delany’s writing,

> where aesthetic experience is a literal and literate transfer of substance. Between the oral and the aural there’s some commerce at the level of taste: material

tactility, material event, material inscription. ... Knowledge of this dedication is given by way of parental — but please, in the interest of another movement, of mmm and all it stands for, of the general and pansexual maternity that animates materiality, indulge me if I say marental — lesson and lesion and loss. There’s a kind of violence to black/queer maternity that deals in the liberatory force of endangerment. Toni Morrison speaks of a certain extremity of this force, but its mundanities — not necessarily any less spectacular — animate the tradition she extends. The hazard is abandonment, which is inseparable from the grace of abandon.56

Delany’s work is notoriously engrossed in the mucosal – its texture, edibility, transferability, fragrance, and warmth. The transfer of semen, of milk, of sugar, of the labial sound of enjoyment, that Moten discusses in the work of Delany and James Baldwin in the passage above, is a question of black maternity, or the marental. I would like to pursue this question of the passing of flavor, abandon(ment), and transfer -- a transfer that Spillers calls being “handled by the mother,”57 what Moten describes as being “handed.” Black maternity, the handling Spillers invokes and the abandon Moten describes, has a complex and apposite relation to the juridical-evidentiary logic of descent and to the violent logic of heritability and property, of genetic sequence and consequence.

In “The New International of Rhythmic Feeling(s),” Moten takes up the frequent description of the rhythm section of an ensemble as maternal. The rhythm section’s

56 Moten, “Amuse-Bouche”
black maternity operates not only insofar as it performs a reproductive labor of maintenance and mediation, the upkeep of a kind of metrical play area, but also, crucially, in its capacity to “walk away,” to stop playing or change tempo and “throw” a musician whose playing is too martially tight or too arrogantly loose.\textsuperscript{58} That essay takes up the question of locale, of the center and the eccentric, by way of at least three circles: the circle of the ensemble; the technique of “rotary perception” that Charles Mingus describes as the maintenance of an indeterminate circle around the beat; and Mingus’s transnational circuit of black aesthetic influence and antagonism. Moten writes that “Mingus plays like a (play) mother; she keeps walking, walking away.”\textsuperscript{59}

I want to linger briefly here on another play mother. In 1976, Grand Wizzard Theodore, inventor of the “baby scratch,” famously came upon the technique through his mother’s disruption. Insofar as the undeniably savory distension the baby scratch inserts tends to invaginate and augment mensural structure, it could be said to be a flavorful or culinary technique. At twelve, he was making a mixtape from his mother’s records to play over the PA system in the school cafeteria when his mother walked into his bedroom and told him to turn it down. Afraid she would “start swinging,” and not wanting to mess up the


\textsuperscript{59} Moten, “New International,” 41.
transitions on the cassette, he pulled the record back and forth to slow it down, as he had seen DJs such as his older brother Mean Gene do when cuing up records at parties.

In the presentation I saw and recount here, Grand Wizzard Theodore restaged his discovery of the baby scratch by soliciting an actual “play mother” from the audience to interrupt the record he was playing at the time of his discovery (“Apache” by the Incredible Bongo Band, the source of an incredibly important, much-sampled break beat). Because the tape was still running through his mother’s interruption, the now-iconic slippery, stretchy distension and rhythmic delay of the baby scratch became available as recorded music, the recording of a certain maternal hazard, interruption, and law.

1.4 Echoic Decay: Alvin Lucier

Within a certain history of “sound art,” we might consider what Adeyemi terms goopy space in relation to Alvin Lucier’s 1969 *I am sitting in a room (for voice on tape)*. Lucier recorded himself reciting a text, then rerecorded the playback, continuing to rerecord each subsequent playback until the initially crisp words evolve into a blur, like an nth-generation photocopy. The words Lucier recorded were as follows:

I am sitting in a room different from the one you are in now.

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I am recording the sound of my speaking voice and I am going to play it back into the room again and again until the resonant frequencies of the room reinforce themselves, so that any semblance of my speech, with perhaps the exception of rhythm, is destroyed.

What you will hear, then, are the natural resonant frequencies of the room articulated by speech.

I regard this activity not so much as a demonstration of a physical fact, but more as a way to smooth out any irregularities my speech might have.⁶¹

Over the course of forty-five minutes, the text’s articulation decomposes into shimmery, silky liquefaction. Most often emphasized in accounts of the work is this offering of the “resonant frequencies of the room.” With each subsequent playback, the recording site makes a gradual, ghostlike appearance, elaborating the metallic halo around Lucier’s speech. Incrementally engulfed by what sounds like a kind of decorative edgework, Lucier’s recorded voice becomes a vehicle no longer for words, but for the room’s echoic capacities.

In the score’s last sentence, however, Lucier disavows any “demonstration of a physical fact” in favor of another effacement, the “smooth[ing] out” of “any irregularities my speech might have.” Two kinds of (de)generation are offered: that of the recording, and that of a potential spoken irregularity, or speech pathology, the voice giving something away. Lucier’s stutter, in particular, has been much commented upon,

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and has come to stand for the “irregularities” the score describes. In the most-widely circulated recording of the work, it is especially audible in the pronunciation of “r-r-r-rhythm,” and disappears into undulations by the track’s end. As the playback thickens and smooths it, Lucier’s stutter gives way to the slurred speech of the inarticulate chamber.

Writing in 1998 on John Cage’s recurring pronouncement “I have nothing to say and I am saying it,” Jonathan Katz developed a question about the sexual politics of such concurrent effacement and articulation. This demurral -- the statement lavishly extending and covering itself – circles back from “saying it,” from a mode of disclosure associated with coming out of the closet. Instead, it offers cover, the recursive, echoic hollow of “nothing to say,” in which the color, ambiguity, fullness and thingliness of “it” might resonate.

This sculptural hollow recalls the muted or potential rattle of Marcel Duchamp’s With Hidden Noise (1916), in which the wrapping of a secret object, placed there by its collector, protects against the evidentiary tinkling that might disclose it. The dampening

Brandon Labelle describes the stutter as “driv[ing] the work,” and an “auditory figure haunting the work.” Seth Kim-Cohen disagrees: “It would be misguided to map the term ‘irregularities’ to Lucier’s stutter … All speech is irregular.” Brandon LaBelle, Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 126. Seth Kim-Cohen, In the Blink of an Ear: Toward a Non-Cochlear Sonic Art (New York: Continuum, 2009), 191.

of the object’s sound amplifies the force of rumor, of the discursive halo that extends and comprises a history of performance.64 We might then ask about the sexual politics of the anechoic chamber, or what Douglas Kahn has called the “anecdotal chamber.”65 A room whose interior surfaces are designed to absorb and break up acoustical signal reflections such as echoes, resonant frequencies, or unintended sounds, an anechoic chamber might be used to test equipment, measure signals, or record sound. Within the narrative trajectory of a certain strain of composition and “sound art,” the anechoic chamber has a role to play: John Cage’s “silent score,” 4’33” (1952), and the idea of “panaurality” that its author has come to represent, were said by Cage to have developed in part from his visit to an anechoic chamber at Harvard the previous year. There, Cage described hearing two humming sounds, which the engineer then told him were his own nervous system and circulating blood: “Anybody who knows me knows this story. I am constantly telling it.”66

From this, Cage famously concluded, “try as we may to make a silence, we cannot … Until I die there will be sounds. And they will continue following my death. One need not fear about the future of music.”67 Kahn’s sidelong appraisal of the

67 Cage, Silence, 8.
“anecdotal chamber” as a feature of Cagean mythography describes its circulation as a “technological emblem” that secures panaurality as an (in)audible sublime of hypothetically knowable sounds.\(^68\) The story recurs over decades of lectures and publications. In “Composition as Process” (1958), it appears in all caps, followed by a similarly emphatic revisitation of the statement concerning “nothing to say”:

Will it ever stop?

Why won’t it?

THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS SILENCE. GET THEE TO AN ANECHOIC CHAMBER AND HEAR THERE THY NERVOUS SYSTEM, AND HEAR THERE THY BLOOD IN CIRCULATION.

I HAVE NOTHING TO SAY AND I AM SAYING IT.\(^69\)

In this exhortation, the anechoic chamber is the nunnery to which Hamlet directs Ophelia, on threat of sexual shame, sexual rumor.\(^70\) And this is more or less one critique of Cage, in another vein: that the Cagean imaginary of sound as a field of nonhierarchical difference paradoxically depends upon the figure of a hierarchical

\(^{68}\) Kahn, 190.

\(^{69}\) Cage, *Silence*, 50-51.

\(^{70}\) Shakespeare, “be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny. Get thee to a nunnery, go. Farewell.” *Hamlet* 3.1.136-138. References are to act, scene, and line.
devotional containment devoid of social interchange, or where such traffic is suppressed.\footnote{Douglas Kahn, “John Cage: Silence and Silencing” \textit{The Musical Quarterly} 81, no. 4 (1997): 558-598. Performed in a concert setting in which the anticipation and quietness of an audience might amplify stray coughs, shuffles, and candy wrappers, 4'33” relies upon norms of social noise abatement to get people to listen to – and appreciate as music – the unintended “sound[s] of [their] own making” (to borrow the title of Robert Morris’s \textit{1961 Box with the Sound of Its Own Making}). The anechoic chamber likewise discovers sound as a field of nonhierarchical difference only by “cordon[ing] off” social sound through rigorous noise abatement (Kahn, “Silence and Silencing,” 582). Kahn suggests that these figures of containment and suppression tend to induce attention by muting the sociality of the very persons and things that constitute the panaural environment.}

The growth and decay of the voice as figure, as signature, is addressed by Gayatri Spivak as a specifically gendered concern in her 1993 essay “Echo.”\footnote{Gayatri Spivak, “Echo,” \textit{New Literary History} 24, no. 1 (1993): 17-43. Many thanks to Professor Kimberly Lamm for introducing me to this essay. On “echoic listening,” see also Brandon LaBelle, \textit{Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life} (New York: Continuum, 2010), 39-41.} Wondering about the persistent association of narcissism with women, Spivak turns to Ovid, remarking that while Narcissus is a boy, the story’s other character – his admirer, the girl nymph, Echo – does not appear in psychoanalytic doctrine. Ovid’s \textit{Metamorphoses} finds Narcissus engrossed in his reflected liquid image, while Echo, his nonreciprocal complement, is bound to acoustic reflection. From Echo, Ovid writes, \textit{quot dixit, verba recepti} (M 150, 1. 384): “he [Narcissus] receives the words he says.”\footnote{Quoted in Spivak, “Echo,” 24-25.} Both Narcissus and Echo eventually starve, melting into an echoic space whose shape their remains assume.

Punished for distracting the goddess Juno with pleasurable conversation while Juno’s husband Jupiter pursues other dalliances, Echo is given to sound reproduction...
beyond death and the decay of her body: “…you can no longer speak for yourself. Talkative girl, you can only give back, you are the respondent as such.”

Chapter 3 takes up the Spivakian problematic of (not) “speaking for oneself” in relation to the “talkative girl” and the chatbot. For now, I am interested in Echo as a figure of decay and accumulation who, within Spivak’s deconstructionist purview, comes close to a description of certain Cagean protocols:

Echo in Ovid is staged as the instrument of the possibility of a truth not dependent upon intention, a reward uncoupled from, indeed set free from, the recipient.

For Echo is obliged to echo everyone who speaks. Her desire and performance are dispersed into absolute chance…

Here, the protocols of aleatory performance that suffuse the work of Cage’s cohort, as well Fluxus and its scattered heirs, appear in their gendered and sexual dimension as an unrelenting instrumentality. Like the much-discussed figures of both the monster and the female victim within horror film, Echo returns again and again as a resonant frequency, a specifically feminine accumulation.

Here Spivak quotes Samuel Weber’s *The Legend of Freud:*

a recurrent fatality [is] linked to the female … nothing is more difficult to do away with than this persistent female: you kill her once, and her soul returns, "imprisoned in a tree"; you "slash with (your) sword at (the) tall tree," and a voice

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74 Spivak, “Echo,” 23.
75 Spivak, “Echo,” 24, 27.
comes to accuse you.\textsuperscript{77}

This sense of an “irregular,” internally differentiated, gendered and sexual voice emanating from resonant space – a semblance of speech that reinforces itself through a decay that is also an elaboration – approaches both the formal aims of \textit{I Am Sitting in a Room} and the condition of rumor.

What interests me about the anecdotal chamber is this sexual and reproductive force of rumor as a specifically (de)generative modality in which amplification, spread, growth, and decay are inseparable. The “closet” is a recording booth is an echoic chamber, a camera obscura in which the voice as a signature of individuated “visibility” or “exposure” tends to dissolve.

\textit{I Am Sitting in a Room} likewise depends upon the (an)echoic, and on a related idea of the corrosion and preservation of speech. The work dates to 1969, but it is the March 1970 recording, made on a snowy day in Lucier’s living room in Middletown, Connecticut, that became the most widely circulated version. The story told of this recording is that an anechoic cocoon of snow encased the echoic room whose trippy “resonant frequencies” decompose the speaking voice.\textsuperscript{78} What interests me about this anecdotal recording booth is the way it shelters and preserves recording’s degeneracy. This decay, and its preservation specifically as (de)generation, results precisely from


\textsuperscript{78} See for example Kim-Cohen, \textit{In the Blink of An Ear}, 191.
reproduction, accumulation, and growth, as layers of recording and playback pile up like blankets, or snow.

1.5 Figure and Number: Flesh, Debt, and the (De)generative

In tending to the (de)generative, I follow in the wake of Lauren Berlant’s concern about fat and sugar in “Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency),” her 2007 essay on the “obesity epidemic,” a version of which also appears in her 2010 book Cruel Optimism. “The obesity epidemic,” writes Berlant, “is also a way of talking about the destruction of life, of bodies, imaginaries, and environments by and under contemporary regimes of capital.”79 Epidemiology offers Berlant a way into what, for her, is a troubling concomitance of growth and decay on the scale of populations:

The phrase slow death refers to the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence. … It [the phrase “slow death”] takes as its point of departure David Harvey’s polemical observation…that under capitalism sickness is defined as the inability to work. This powerful observation about the rationalization of health is an important part of the story, but it is not the whole story either. Through the space opened up by this concept I offer a development in the ways we conceptualize contemporary historical experience, especially … where life building and the attrition of human life are indistinguishable, and where it is hard to distinguish modes of incoherence, distractedness, and habituation from deliberate and deliberative activity, as they are all involved in the reproduction of predictable life.80

I am particularly interested, however, in Berlant’s remark about the difficulty of establishing a clear distinction between decay and growth: “life building and the attrition of human life are indistinguishable.” Fatness, as both growth and (for Berlant) debility, marks this failure of discretion. Part of the conceptual knot she discovers is that eating, admittedly “necessary to existence, part of the care of the self, the reproduction of life,” and the evident cause of growth, is, in an apparent paradox, deemed by her and her medico-sociological bibliography to be “burden[some],” sloping toward future debility.81

What Berlant describes as a “scar[y]” confluence of growth and decay is specifically and enigmatically black:

[W]hat does it mean that African Americans and Latino/as are especially bearing this body burden along with the symbolic negativity long attached to it, so much so that one physician, a member of the Black Women’s Health Network, observes that the ‘most lethal weapon’ against black people in the contemporary U.S. is the fork?82

This interweaving of the lethal and fatal with nourishment and social reproduction follows a specific epidemiological and sociological line exemplified perhaps paradigmatically by the infamous Moynihan Report of 1965, and its advancement of a “tangle of pathology” centered on black maternity. Rather than reply to this ascription of pathology to black life and social reproduction, I follow Spillers and Moten in shifting

81 Berlant, “Slow Death,” 778, 765, 772. On burdensomeness, for example, see 757, 771, 773.
the site of inquiry. Discussing Fanon, pathology, social life and “social death,” Moten writes,

The question concerning the point of view, or standpoint, of the pathologist is crucial but so is the question of what it is that the pathologist examines. What, precisely, is the morbid body upon which Fanon, the pathologist, trains his eye?83

It’s the reproductivity of fatness and debility which is of concern to Berlant. This concern seems to require the conceptual intervention of what Spillers, in her critique of the Moynihan Report, described as ungendered black maternity, and what Moten calls the “general and pansexual maternity” of the marental.

What Berlant’s assessment makes clear is that epidemic fatness is a question of discretion, distribution, and proportion: in other words, a question of both aesthetic form and governance. The blurring of fatness and disability, their blurred causality, arises as an aesthetic question of disfiguration: a problem of the development and devolution of the figure.

The aesthetic question here is one of proportion and pedagogy. “Slow Death” resumes a queer theoretical deliberation over reproductive futurity and the child. Berlant is concerned with the intergenerational (de)generation of taste, through “the inculcation in children of a taste for fat, sugar, and salt.”84

84 Berlant “Slow Death,” 772-3.
This remark about the (de)generation of taste suggests that Berlant’s suspicion of the culinary, like Adorno’s, is concerned with when to surrender to enjoyment and need, the timing required in order to maintain the proper orientation toward form. Diet conjoins austerity to futurity, and fatness is evidence of a failure to budget, resulting in a “premature” curtailment of life: “Paradoxically, of course, at least during this phase of capital, there is less of a future when one eats without an orientation toward it.”\(^8\) In Berlant’s account, dietary frugality must accrue as investment or incur bad, fatally reproductive debt. However, it’s not, as she claims, the curtailment of a future that troubles Berlant, but rather the form of debility’s specific futurity: its reproductive aesthetic extensibility, its spread and movement, its heritability and sociability.\(^8\) This growth is the (de)generate growth of debt. The problem of ‘one’s figure,’ and its specific denotation of proportion, calculability, and form, is overshadowed by debt as a site of another aesthetic and social mode.

In referring to debt, I follow Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s assertion, in their essay “Debt and Study,” that “Credit is a means of privatization and debt a means of socialization. … Debt is always mutual.”\(^8\) Their affirmation of debt as a fundamentally

\(^8\) Berlant, “Slow Death,” 780.
\(^8\) Moten and Harney, Undercommons: Black Study and Fugitive Planning (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 61.
reproductive mode of sociality and entanglement runs counter to left analyses of financialized debt by David Graeber, Andrew Ross, and projects such as Rolling Jubilee and Strike Debt, the telos of which is something like debt relief or the cancelation of debt.\textsuperscript{88} Debt in the sense that Moten and Harney employ it is ontologically unpayable, cannot be settled, and does not refer to exchange or interdependency. Its mutuality is not reciprocity. It is, rather, a refutation of those terms.

Engaging with these divergent approaches to debt, in 2010 the artist Constantina Zavitsanos enrolled in a federal student debt program in which debtors must apply to have their monthly payments linked to a percentage of their income; after 25 consecutive years, if all the payments are made, the balance of the debt is “forgiven.” Zavitsanos began daily tabulations of the accumulation of her student debt, prorated over the course of 24 hourly increments, arrayed against the available funds in her bank account. In 2013, Zavitsanos printed the resulting document, in a stack of letter-sized paper. Beneath it, she stacked sufficient blank paper to accommodate the remaining 22 years of calculations. The pile, about three feet high, sat on the gallery’s first floor as a sculptural “takeaway” from which visitors were free to take pages if they chose, in the lineage of

Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who installed mounds of candy or stacks of posters or prints for viewers to take.

Figure 4: Constantina Zavitsanos, *It was what I wanted now* (2010-2013) and 1885 / 1982 / 2013

In the basement below the gallery’s main floor, the stack appeared to continue, a column of paper stretching from floor to ceiling. Together, the two stacks constituted a number line: 25 years upstairs, and, continuing the same unit of measure, 276 years below, stretching back to 1737, the year in which Zavitsanos’s maternal ancestor was sent to the American colony as an indentured penal servant, in punishment for stealing a pig. Inserted within the lower stack is a photocopy of the shipping contract on which the ancestor’s name is listed.
Debt is often colloquially described as a “hole.” I like the way that this divided column of both calculable credit and incalculable debt imagines debt as a reproductive pile or pillar, an element of architectural support. What is conventionally imagined as a negative accumulation, Zavitsanos calls a “positive hole.”

What debt makes visible is the way that the figure is not only a question of aesthetic form and proportion, as well as discrete embodiment, but also, and relatedly, a question of calculability and number – the question of population management that Berlant sets forth. In considering a jiggliness that messes with and augments figure and number, I want to briefly invoke Nadia Ellis’s concept of the \textit{waver}. In her book \textit{Territories of the Soul}, Ellis introduces “an effect that [she] call[s] the \textit{waver} … a vocal, aesthetic, and epistemological distortion that is both surplus and deficiency,” which she locates in the work of reggae artist Burning Spear, and particularly his appearance in Nathaniel Mackey’s \textit{Bedouin Hornbook}.\footnote{Nadia Ellis, \textit{Territories of the Soul: Queered Belonging in the Black Diaspora} (Durham, NC and London: Duke, 2015), 149.} Surplus and deficiency approach the conditions that theorizations of black being have laid before ontology, what Moten and Stefano Harney describe as the “more than \textit{plus} less than one.”\footnote{Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, “Mikey the Rebelator,” \textit{Performance Research} 20, no. 4 (2015): 141-5.} The “more than \textit{plus} less than one,” a distortion or torsion of surplus and deficiency, wavers at the seam of value and being, what Du Bois calls the “strange meaning of being black,” what Nahum Chandler renders as a “paraontological disturbance,” and Denise da Silva formulates as “to be \textit{and} 

\footnotesize
\textit{Nadia Ellis, \textit{Territories of the Soul: Queered Belonging in the Black Diaspora} (Durham, NC and London: Duke, 2015), 149.}
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not to be,” which she describes as “an answer, not a question.”\(^91\)

Moten and Harney follow Marx in understanding the employment contract as a distension or warp in which the exchange value of labor power only appears to be fixed at the outset of the contract. The contract, Harney has observed, is “only the beginning of a process of valuation.”\(^92\) The free laborer enters the contract “as one” – “at one” – representing themselves, in other words, as an individual signatory with the capacity to consent. And that one undergoes a process of “discounting,” of devaluation, insofar as he agrees to be paid at the end of a certain term, and during that term his employer is trying to get more work out of him, more value for their buck. The value of the one diminishes over the course of the dilated work-time of the contract.

The slave, on the other hand, enters that exchange at zero, such that the slave is “by far the most valuable labor or commodity.”\(^93\) The intensity of that a priori devaluation means that the profit spread is much greater, asymptotically approaching the infinite. The slave’s immense value, the way that she approaches invalue, stems directly from the fact that her labor is posited as worth nothing. This calculus is related, Moten and Harney suggest, to the problem that blackness poses for the figure. Drawing on Glissant, Moten is concerned with what it is to “consent not to be a single being” – a


\(^{92}\) Fred Moten, Stefano Harney, and Constantina Zavitsanos, “Speculative Planning Session 1” (New Museum, New York, April 25, 2015).

\(^{93}\) Moten, Harney, and Zavitsanos, “Speculative Planning Session 1”
waver or waiver of the individuated signature of consent, of the right or imposition of representation.

Insofar as it elaborates the problem that blackness poses for the gendered figure, Spillers’ concept of flesh is necessarily the ground and destination of any real response to Berlant’s account of the “obesity epidemic.” Flesh emerges in distinction to the figured body. Spillers describes slavery as a “theft of the body,” not only as physical abduction, but also in that the “captive community” was rendered flesh, rendered available for violent corporeal and social reorganization, dismemberment, scientific study, and use—not as discrete bodies, but as “captive flesh”:

I would make a distinction in this case between "body" and "flesh" and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the "body" there is the "flesh," that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography.  

Spillers’ concept of (un)gendered, de-individuated flesh gestures especially at questions of disability and disfigurement, and the relationship between medico-scientific and sociological epistemology and subjection; “the entire captive community,” Spillers writes, “becomes a living laboratory.” The rendering of captive flesh both radically deterritorializes and ungenders the body, breaks down its articulation as anatomy, and undercuts the link between the anatomical and the human as such. At the same time,

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95 Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 68.
flesh, because it is shared, describes a sociality that refuses individuation, and thus subjection. Spillers has also said that flesh is another name for “empathy,” without de-emphasizing the absolute brutality the term denotes.66 Flesh as empathy might also be described as the wealth of no-bodies, what Silva has called “difference without separation.”

What of the weight, buoyancy, feel, and movement of flesh? Park McArthur has linked dependency, and its denotation of causality, need, and condition, to its etymological root in the material figure of the pendant, what Berlant repeatedly calls the “paralyzing burden.”67 The aesthetic and social resources of such pendentousness, such suspension, such suspense, appear repeatedly in the sculptural work of Shinique Smith, Mike Kelley, Ayesha Kamal Khan, David Hammons, and others. At play in these artists’ work is the potential energy of the fall, the fallen, the dependent, the paralyzed, hyperactive, slow, potently non-kinetic, under-performing, or non-performing. Might this slow yield resemble the internally differentiating surrender that Adorno worries about? And does its potential energy bear a relation to the “slow death” – which is to say, slow life, and its inheritance – that Berlant worries about?

66 See her remarks in Dreams Are Colder Than Death, Arthur Jafa, 2014.
1.6 In Excess of a Proper Cause: Fatness and Acousmatic Voice

Reproduction or the (de)generative necessarily calls up the question of unsettled origin, which is to say, the question of causality. Within Berlant’s argument, fatness operates as both self-evident cause and effect of debility and dependency. Fatness, as evidence of eating—evidence of need or enjoyment, or more precisely, the enjoyment of need—comes to stand in for diagnostic causality and culpability. Within an ongoing feminist critical preoccupation with materiality, affect, and ontology, the causative status of food has played a pivotal role.

Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter* influentially argues for the causative power of nonhuman forces to influence conditions, politics, and events. Within Bennett’s argument, food—and in particular, fat and oil—paradigmatically exemplify agential matter. Food is an “agent or force with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of [its] own.” In the process of metabolization, Bennett argues, “human and nonhuman bodies recorporealize in response to each other; both exercise formative power and both offer themselves as matter to be acted on.”

Like Berlant, Bennett is concerned with fatness. Berlant’s discussion takes up fatness as what she considers to be both cause and effect of debility and dependency,

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99 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 49.
circling around the relation of (de)generative fatness to governance, futurity, and melancholic feeling. This sequence in turn relies on the causative power of (certain kinds of) food and eating; in other words, that eating causes fatness. This part of the sequence is where Bennett lingers. The supposedly evidentiary status of fatness offers Bennett a way to demonstrate the causative power of matter and nonhuman forces in general. Bennett is interested in fatness and other physical and affective states as effects of food qua actant matter:

That food can make people larger is a fact so ordinary and obvious that it is difficult to perceive it as an example of a nonhuman agency at work. The case becomes a bit stronger, perhaps, when we learn of hitherto unrecognized powers of dietary fats, in particular their ability to make a qualitative as well as quantitative difference.100

Such sequencing (eating → fatness) is “obvious,” but as the notoriously wide range of epistemologies for the control and correction of fatness and fat people demonstrates, nobody seems to know how this consequence occurs. One hardly needs to cite the long history of wildly variable diet doctrines to show that there has never been a clear understanding of precisely how (or definitively whether) diet shapes bodies. Within the two texts I consider here, fatness thus simultaneously provides both a self-evident display of matter’s causative power, and a site of matter’s generative incalculability, its productive resistance to the straightforwardly evidentiary. Berlant and Bennett both rely upon the former, but they respond differently to the latter.

100 Bennett, Vibrant Matter, 41.
This zone of incalculability, between “modes of incoherence, distractedness, and habituation” and more purposive or conscious intention, is a frequent site of Berlant’s work, and much of Cruel Optimism takes place there as well. The epidemiology of fatness makes it “hard to distinguish,” Berlant writes, between intention and the unintentional, between “deliberate and deliberative activity” and something like momentum – since, I guess, it is difficult to say how much something like will or intention effects figural form. On a sociological scale, as well, “No one meant to fatten up the world population scarily.”101 Because of this blurred etiology, (de)generatively reproductive fatness and debility can properly be thought neither in the language of “personal responsibility” nor sociologically as “crisis.”102 The disfiguration of fatness is prelude to the general erosion of individual and sociological figuration that makes such approaches inadequate. Fatness is a social problem, a problem with sociality. Berlant thus proposes what she terms “distributed causality”:

This analysis thinks about agency and causality as dispersed environmental mechanisms at the personal as well as the institutional level and so far has been demonstrating the overdetermination of environments that create the dramatic consequences of endemic overweight.103

102 “Long-term problems of embodiment within capitalism, in the zoning of the everyday and the work of getting through it, are less successfully addressed in the temporalities of crisis and require other frames for understanding the contexts of doing, being, and thriving.” Berlant, “Slow Death,” 764.
Under the notion of “dramatic consequences,” a set of questions about the drama of consequence and inconsequence, somebody and nobody, begins to show itself. But what Berlant terms “distributed causality” is basically just a way of recuperating the contagious indeterminacy of fatness as environmentally overdetermined. The “obesity epidemic” is a consequence of so many things, for Berlant. In the blur, waver, incomprehensible infectiousness of fatness, Berlant finds an indistinct etiology: causality as environment, as medium.

The color and appeal of Bennett’s vitalism also depends as much upon the attractions of culinary incalculability as on the purported self-evidence of eating causing fatness. These qualitative effects are not exhausted by “mechanical causality,” but instead allow Bennett to think about the nonlinear “assemblage in which persons and fats are participants”:

In nonlinear assemblages, ‘effects’ resonate with and against their ‘causes,’ such that the impact of any added element (omega-3 fatty acid) or set of elements (high fish diet) cannot be grasped at a glance.104 Central to these arguments about matter and affect, then, is paradoxically not just the causative power of food, but also fatness as “an effect without a proper cause.” Bennett’s wonder, like Berlant’s dolor, revolves around this blur; accounts of affect as well as matter hinge upon it, linger in it, as “difficulty” (Berlant) or pleasure (Bennett).

104 Bennett, Vibrant Matter, 42
The phrase “an effect without a proper cause” is Mladen Dolar’s, and occurs in his reading of acousmatic sound. In *A Voice and Nothing More*, Dolar elaborates the voice as psychoanalytic “object-cause” and under-examined companion to the extensively theorized operation of the gaze. For Lacan, the voice and the gaze are variants of *objet-a*, or object-cause, attachments whose lack sets desire in motion. Dolar’s attention to the voice as absent cause accordingly seeks to sidestep its interpretation as aesthetic medium or a carrier of meaning. However, this premise also does not allow for vocal materiality; Dolar is concerned rather with a contradictory and elusive relation between matter and voice. Dolar draws on Pierre Schaeffer and Michel Chion’s influential term *acousmatic sound*, or sound whose origin is concealed: for example, cinematic sound whose diegetic cause is not visible, like the sound of footsteps or a phone ringing off-screen. The acousmatic, in its most narrow sense, thus names an interrupted perceptual relay between hearing and vision. In a chapter titled “The ‘Physics’ of the Voice,” Dolar argues, however, that where the voice is concerned, all sound is acousmatic:

we must draw a paradoxical conclusion: ultimately, *there is no such thing as disacousmatization*. The source of the voice can never be seen; it stems from an undisclosed and structurally concealed interior; it cannot possibly match what we see. … Every emission of the voice is by its very essence *ventriloquism*. Ventriloquism pertains to voice as such, to its inherently acousmatic character: the voice comes from inside the body … from something incompatible with and irreducible to the activity of the mouth. The fact that we see the aperture does not demystify the voice; on the contrary, it enhances the enigma. … It is not the

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haunting voice impossible to pin down to a source; rather, it appears as the void from which it is supposed to stem but which it does not fit, an effect without a proper cause.\textsuperscript{106}

For Dolar, the uncanny voice is an effect not of concealment and secrecy, but rather of the exposure of a mechanism, in this case the aperture of the mouth. Dolar pursues accounts of the persistent spookiness of mechanical “speaking machines,” beginning with an automaton constructed by Wolfgang von Kempelen in the 1780s, which consisted of hand-operated bellows and valves attached to a movable rubber mouth. Despite or because of the visibility of the entire mechanism, stage demonstrations of \textit{die Sprech-Maschine} and its “human voice and human speech which apparently didn’t come from a human mouth” reportedly provoked in its audience what one observer called “goose-flesh produced by horror in the first moments.”\textsuperscript{107} Kempelen accompanied his invention with a treatise outlining its construction, but Dolar observes that “no matter how much this thing was described for everybody to study, it nevertheless kept producing effects which can only be described with the Freudian word ‘uncanny.’”\textsuperscript{108}

This apparently irreducible resistance to explanation is of interest to me here. It is an uncanniness to the “speaking machine” which renders the voice in general.

I would like to think of the voice here – appearing acoustically, as an effect without a proper cause – as a kind of plot hole, as a disruption both of causal or

\textsuperscript{106} Dolar, \textit{A Voice and Nothing More}, 70.
\textsuperscript{107} Dolar, \textit{A Voice and Nothing More}, 7.
\textsuperscript{108} Dolar, \textit{A Voice and Nothing More}, 7.
sequential logics, and perhaps of the plot as territory or property. Narratively, a plot
hole is both an opening, or loose end, and a kind of dead end, or more precisely an
excess of means, of improperly resolved instrumentality. In other words, you need it to
get somewhere else, but the plot hole itself isn’t going anywhere other than its
instrumentalization toward an end that never fully takes it up, an end which it evades.
This instrumentality, a means without ends, is what Dolar aims for when he sets out in
pursuit of a voice not reducible to either its aesthetic qualities or its signifying function:
“We have to … make a descent from the height of meaning back to what appeared to be mere means.” Dolar, A Voice and Nothing More, 16. Such a “descent,” which is more precisely a tarrying or lingering with
the vocal materiality that has been understood to both deliver and obstruct meaning and
aesthetic form, is I think related to what Adorno described as a surrender to culinary
sound or enjoyment. It is, as we have seen, a specifically black and feminine tarrying.
To see the aperture from which the voice emerges does not resolve its acousmatic form.
This exposure shows us not the cause of the voice, but rather the unsettled “intimate
partition” or turning out that it enacts. Within the throat is another, more uncanny
mouth, formed by the glottis and vocal folds, as Wayne Koestenbaum has observed. Wayne Koestenbaum, The Queen’s Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993).

A 2007 performance and accompanying video by VALIE EXPORT exploits this internal
alienness. With a laryngoscopic camera threaded up her nose and down her throat,

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109 Dolar, A Voice and Nothing More, 16.
EXPORT delivers a text about the voice, her own speaking voice disturbingly choked and nasal as the live video of her glottal slit is projected on the walls around her. The movements of this alien aperture, framed by white, sinewy vertical bands and couched in an oddly geometric armature of glistening corrugated flesh, correspond unnervingly and somewhat comically to the sounds of EXPORT’s words, appearing to materialize Dolar’s account of a puppet or speaking machine.

Figure 5: VALIE EXPORT, *The Voice as Performance, Act, and Body* (2007)
As Dolar suggests and EXPORT demonstrates, it’s not the inadequacy of the mouth with respect to the voice, but its fullness or excess which presents a certain resistance to assigning the voice a cause, locating its origin. The mouth interests me as the site of both the self-evidence of the voice and the excess with which it confronts the evidentiary. Fatness and flavor, and their simultaneous susceptibility and resistance to regimes of evidence, likewise seem to center on the mouth.

The question of how or whether to think about matter and affect as yielding or resisting is at play in the feminist theoretical interest in these terms. But what is the substance of this resistance? In the 2007 version of “Slow Death,” Berlant responds, in a footnote, to an objection she says was repeatedly posed to her claims about the “obesity
epidemic,” an objection which asked whether fatness might be considered a “form of resistance” to normative gendered embodiment, whiteness, and valuation. One might ask whether debility, dependency, and disability, so entwined for Berlant with fatness, also offer material for such fantasy. Indeed, Berlant anticipates such an objection in the opening paragraph of the essay, where she cites David Harvey’s assertion that in capitalist terms, illness is understood as a refusal or inability to work, then suggests that she’d like to move beyond such a claim, taking exception to what she terms “the transformative fantasy that saturates the concept of resistance and protest.” In the case of epidemic fatness, Berlant argues, more or less, that because it cannot be explained, it cannot be understood as resistance:

Each time I gave the talk on which this essay is based sensible people have argued back that obesity and being overweight are forms of resistance to the hegemony of the productive/bourgeois body as well as to white, class-aspirational beauty culture. My counterargument is that while many forms of ordinary behavior can be phrased in terms of blockage, defense, or aggression, people are more vague and incoherent than that characterization would suggest. There is, in any case, a difference between eating and being fat, and both kinds of activity can be noncommunicative gestures, or ways of detaching from or merely interrupting a moment. Tracking this activity of the shifting subject requires quite a different imaginary in reference to what it means to do something other than the transformative fantasy that saturates the concept of resistance and protest. The case is an obstacle to our appetite for drama. So, maybe, and sometimes—but mainly not.111

Epidemic fatness is pathogenically communicable, but “noncommunicative.” Vague,

incoherent, it does not represent itself, and therefore cannot be said, Berlant argues, to
offer resistance to normative austerity, at least under a concept of protest that requires
and assumes a certain self-representation. For her, it is precisely the way that epidemic
fatness and pathological eating resist causal logics that bars them from a “transformative
fantasy” of resistance. The question of noncommunication is, however, one that
disability, debility and their apparent passivity have repeatedly posed to something like
“activism” as a framework for imagining resistance. Johanna Hedva, among others, has
developed this argument in the specific context of protest.\textsuperscript{112} Much more deeply, the
recent case of DMan Johnson and Anna Stubblefield has demonstrated the profound
challenge that what is deemed “noncommunication” has posed to both evidentiary
frameworks and to the consenting subject as the ground of politics.\textsuperscript{113}


\textsuperscript{113} Stubblefield, a white university professor, was convicted of raping Johnson, a younger disabled black
man. The conviction hinged not upon Johnson’s testimony – he was not invited to testify – but rather upon
the court’s determination that there was no juridically admissible way in which Johnson could render
consent as speech, and that he was therefore categorically incapable of sexual consent, and lawful sex.
Johnson, in collaboration with Stubblefield, had previously published an essay in \textit{Disability Studies Quarterly}
on “the role of communication in thought.” At the trial, while Johnson did not testify, his
“noncommunicative” presence was nonetheless demanded in the courtroom as an item of evidence – in this
case evidence of his own incapacity to communicate. There is much more to say about this case, which has
been a subject of discussion in disability community. See DMan Johnson, “The Role of Communication in
account – albeit profoundly problematic – of Johnson and Stubblefield’s relationship and trial, see Daniel
response to the trial from disabled observers, see Julie Equality, “Some of My Thoughts on the Anna
Student, But Was the Trial Fair?” November 12, 2015, \textit{Fusion}, <http://fusion.net/story/231772/anna-
1.7 Causality and Revolt: Silva and Foucault

Putting aside the flatness, unusual for Berlant, with which fantasy is here addressed, I would turn to some accounts that consider the question of causality and purposiveness not only with respect to “transformative fantasy,” but also in the specific context of revolt. A key resource here with respect to the problem of causality is Denise Ferreira da Silva’s essay, “To Be Announced,” which responds to the August 2011 rebellion in London, the police killing of Mark Duggan, and the media discourse of “cause of death” and “cause of revolt” that attended these events. Silva suggests that the juridical and scientific question of causality – of sequence and consequence – must be suspended and rethought within the affective world of such revolt.114

Of relevance to Berlant’s account of “slow death,” Silva proposes that causality, specifically the juridical and diagnostic determination of cause of death, must be suspended:

Everyone knows what has happened: A young black man was killed by a police officer. … Fires have broken out … Each time fires followed justice, its realization as/in its failure. Always a response to a resolution, these urban revolts are about justice. Yet they can’t be comprehended in ethical-political programs informed by … descriptions of subjugation.

For each of these descriptions presupposes the operation of causality, and by doing so each comprehends the event in explanations that always already resolve its transformative potential back into objectivity, into facts.

... Regarding the revolts, I do not return to what has happened, the ‘facts’ or their … representation, for I am not interested in the meaning(s) – the whys or becauses – of the event. Instead I consider the dissolution of that which is at the basis of any and every explanation of any event.\(^{115}\)

This chapter has responded, in a sense, to this call for suspension – the suspension of a juridical and diagnostic determination of causality, and the suspension of state justice as resolution. I pursue this suspension or delay where it occurs in the context of the aesthetics and reproductive sociality of flavor, the “lyrical emulsion”\(^{116}\) that is the medium of transfer, contagion, and reproduction.

What troubles Berlant about the “obesity epidemic” is the way it makes the inseparability of need and enjoyment – of dependency, debility, debt, life, “flourishing,” etc. – appear as a confounding and enigmatic form of social organization, social coordination. Social coordination is the enigma she lingers in – who is responsible for epidemic fatness, if not individual fat people or even a kind of capitalist or state coordination? And it, as well, the question she dismisses, when fatness is posed to her as a mode of materially resistant sociality. It is the sociality of the “obesity epidemic” that is provocatively noncommunicative, for Berlant. That social organization, social coordination?

\(^{115}\) Denise Ferreira da Silva, “To Be Announced,” 43-44.

\(^{116}\) Moten, “Amuse-Bouche.”
reproduction, would appear to both yield to and resist epidemiological determination is among the concerns Silva addresses in “To Be Announced.” Silva refuses a mode of critique that would attune itself to “resolving the conditions it exposes into a more effective measure, grid, or account,” but neither does she lament such epistemic irresolution, as Berlant does in “Slow Death.” Implicit in Silva’s argument is a question about the role of critique in relation to both causal determination and the “transformative fantasy” of “protest and resistance.”

In three short texts that address revolt and the problem of causal determination, Michel Foucault takes up the role of critique.117 Two of these -- “What is Critique?” and “What is Revolution?” – remark on Immanuel Kant’s short newspaper essay “Was ist Aufklärung? [What Is Enlightenment?],” originally published in 1784 in support of advancing republican revolutions in Europe. Kant’s essay concerns itself with the role of critique in producing freedom, formulated as a “release” from dependency and social entanglement and into independence. A week before he gave the lecture that would become “What Is Critique?” Foucault took part in a conversation about Discipline and Punish in which it was suggested – in what has since become a familiar criticism – that the book’s “implacable logic” had presented a totalizing view of the present. The interlocutor raised the example of social workers seeking prison reform, who, it was

claimed, the book had discouraged and “anaesthetized.” Foucault’s reply outlined a relationship between critique, revolt, and purposiveness:

It’s because of the need not to tie them [the prison social workers] down or immobilize them that there can be no question of trying to dictate “what is to be done.” … The necessity of reform mustn’t be allowed to become a form of blackmail serving to limit, reduce, or halt the exercise of criticism. Under no circumstances should one pay attention to those who tell one: “Don’t critique, since you’re not capable of carrying out a reform.” That’s ministerial cabinet talk. … It [critique] should be an instrument for those who fight, those who resist and refuse what is. Its use should be in processes of conflict and confrontation, essays in refusal. It doesn’t have to lay down the law for the law. It isn’t a stage in a programming. It is a challenge directed to what is. … If prisons and punitive mechanisms are transformed, it won’t be because a plan of reform has found its way into the heads of the social workers; it will be when those who have a stake in that reality … have come into collision with each other and with themselves, run into dead ends, problems, and impossibilities, been through conflicts and confrontations – when critique has been played out in the real.

At the same time as he dismisses any determination of the limits of critique – here with respect to its efficacy according to pragmatic “ministerial” determinations of concrete possibility – Foucault obliges critique to open up the indeterminate. This indeterminacy constitutes precisely the usefulness of critique. Here we can see the shifts in emphasis that condition the debut of a minor Kant one week later in “What Is Critique?” During the questions that follow the lecture, someone asks whether Foucault is describing a will not to be governed “thusly,” or a will not to be governed at all. The question of anarchism brings the lecture to a halt:

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I did not say it, but that does not mean that I absolutely exclude it. I think that my presentation stops at this point because I am wondering [pause] if one wants to explore this [absolute] dimension of critique which is so important because it both a part of, and not a part of, philosophy. If we were to explore this dimension of critique, would we not then find that it is supported by something akin to the historical practice of revolt ... ?^{119}

One year after he made these remarks, in a statement that appeared in *Le Monde* under the title “Useless to Revolt?”, Foucault considered the case of the Iranian revolution. Sketching out the question he later develops further in “What Is Revolution,” he asks whether the consequences of the Iranian Revolution are a sufficient measure for condemning revolt as a failure. As he will do in “What Is Revolution,” Foucault insists on the incommensurability between the “enthusiasm” of revolt and its supposed outcome. In its preference for “the risk of death over the certainty of having to obey,” revolt, he argues, is “finally inexplicable,” not subject to interpretation, and not determinable by a judgment of historical ends. Put differently, the empirical fact of revolt is what necessitates a questioning that would “grasp what is irreducible in such a movement.”^{120}

What, in fact, is irreducible in revolt? To return to Silva, and in a way, to Berlant’s remark about whether epidemic fatness constitutes “resistance,” we may ask: what is the relation between revolt, body, and flesh? Or, as Silva has put it, ”Do we want

^{119} Foucault, “What Is Critique?” 75.
^{120} Foucault, “Useless to Revolt?” 449-453.
to be somebody under the state, or no-body against it?” Silva’s question locates the “no-body” in subaltern apposition to subjection under racial capitalism. But it refers to more than an apparent failure to appear or be represented. Silva’s use of the term "no-body” also invites us to think specifically about the (some)body as a bounded anatomical form caught up in individuated subjection. To be no-body against the state -- to escape as well as to be denied the anatomical referent of the subject -- is to take up, as Silva does, Spillers’ distinction between "body" and "flesh." Such a question recognizes what is, or should be, at stake in the feminist turn toward matter and affect.

1.8 Conclusion: Soul

Emily Lordi’s work on soul as resistant to and constitutive of expression holds an interesting place beside the scope of writing on both affect and matter, terms which, like soul, mark a desire to draw on theological/theoretical resources that causality does not exhaust. In Lordi’s essay “Souls Intact: The Soul Performances of Aretha Franklin, Audre Lorde, and Nina Simone,” soul comes to name a non-dichotomous, appositional relationship between lack or limit and abundance. This entanglement of lack and generativity is given formally, musically, and in vocal and temporal gospel techniques:

the voice running out, running on empty, and then drawing a "power source" from that exhaustion.

The bond that Lordi explores between soul and survivorship, or soul and the accretion of experience -- both a wearing down or weariness and a building up – belies the purported tension that Berlant explores between “life building” and “attrition,” as well as her use of the term “lateral agency” to name what she describes as forms of lingering in the present when the future is foreclosed. In this nonopposition of exhaustion and power, weariness and generativity, debt and debility may appear more accurately as aesthetic and social resources.

That soul, in Lordi's account, is marked by both accretion and exhaustion also implies a temporal framework in which time may be understood as simultaneously adding up and running out, suggesting questions about musicality, debility, and history. In the chapter that follows, I draw on this way of thinking about (in)exhaustible resources in order to approach the image of the commons as both ecological imaginary and cipher for gendered social reproduction. Ecology has been another primary site of an overall shift in queer and feminist thought on affect and matter. If “the body” has been the illusory figure at the center of this shift, then “nature” has been its ground. I will argue that questions of sound, aurality, and music bear a privileged relation to both ideas of “natural law” and ideas of ecological resource around which queer and feminist criticism and aesthetics have moved. Chapter 1 has discussed the idea of (de)generation
in terms of a corporeal, social, and musical growth and decay. This question will extend, and be reworked, beyond the corporeal, into the domain of ecological and economic management that Angela Mitropoulos has termed oikos. Lordi’s account of soul as both exhaustion and generativity is likewise a question of resources; it implicitly requires a re-evaluation of the very terms of accumulation and surplus, because it asks after a form of surplus that may be accumulated only in being spent.
2. Field Recording: On Sound, Sex, and Ecology

2.1 Disturbing the Peace: Ultra-red in Griffith Park

On July 5, 1998, the Los Angeles Police Department swarmed Griffith Park, a rugged, sprawling city park abutting the Santa Monica Mountains. Arriving in squad cars, on horseback, and by helicopter, they arrested or expelled hundreds of mostly black and Latinx queers. Members of the “audio-activist” art group Ultra-red had been visiting Griffith Park for a while, making field recordings at cruising sites and conducting actions in response to raids and arrests. These commingled, sometimes muffled recordings of police activity, fuzzy megaphone yelling, didactic recitation, casual conversation, flirtation, “sighs and slurps,” insects, and swelling and receding music from passing boomboxes became the material for their 1999 album Second nature: an electro-acoustic pastoral.¹

The question of second nature in the title of Ultra-red’s album is the subject of this chapter. The term has two familiar senses, which Ultra-red submits to a perhaps equally familiar critique. Nature appears on the one hand as internal law or logic that directs form’s movement, growth, or unfolding; and, on the other hand, as spatialized living terrain that tends to give rise both to a set-theoretic problem of ecosystem, field, cosmology, or world, as well as to issues of ecological wealth or common resource, or in

¹ Ultra-red, Second nature: an electro-acoustic pastoral (Mille Plateaux, 1999, CD.), liner notes.
other words, of social reproduction and accumulation. Nature is the object of Ultra-red’s critique for reasons that are, again, perhaps initially obvious or familiar: the way it seems to bind law to ontology. More narrowly, it has seemed to suggest that how we are governed is a function of a determinative telos both cosmological and immanent to ourselves. This has been, speaking very broadly, a basis for critiques of nature developed within Marxism, black studies, critical race theory, feminist theory, and queer theory.

![Ultra-red](image)

"Ultra-red have been compelled to compose an ambient pastoral which retraces its steps from the given, back to the utopian."

**Figure 7: Ultra-red, Liner notes for Second nature (1998)**

In the 2000s, however, ecological nature emerged from this foreclosure, becoming an object of a different sort of inquiry. This development was of a piece with the broader turn toward materiality, affect, and sensation whose corporeal dimensions I discussed in Chapter 1. Once synonymous with a bogus overdetermination, nature, and
even biology, became a lush theoretical resource, a site of curiosity, textured abundance, and vitalism, its internal differentiation richly elaborated even in its ongoing critique. In 2007, when Elizabeth Grosz offered that “the future of feminist theory” was to be found in spiders (I am paraphrasing), and that feminism ought to analyze forces rather than structures, there was some protest; now such a suggestion no longer seems controversial. Since that time, critical thought has tended to approach nature not as overdetermining law, but as indeterminate capacity. This shift has pertained even and perhaps especially within the developing field of trans studies, which was and remains an important stakeholder in the critique of nature and biology. I don’t at all mean to suggest a clear break with anti-essentialist critiques of nature, but rather to observe, along with many others, an obvious general shift. Nor is this shift the subject of this chapter; it is, however, an important part of its background. In her book Contract and Contagion, Angela Mitropoulos uses the term oikos to describe the racial and gendered question of household management at the root of both ecology and economy. The questions this term invokes -- reproduction, capture, governance, exposure, and shelter -- are my concern here as well.

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3 See for example, Jeanne Vaccaro, ed., The Transbiological Body, a special issue of Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory 20, no. 3 (2010), whose contributors include Mel Chen, Jack Halberstam, Eva Hayward, and others.

By their own account, Ultra-red – a collective of shifting composition over the last two and a half decades – began “not as electronic musicians doing political music but as political activists accidentally acting as electronic musicians.” In 1993-1994, Ultra-red grew out of Clean Needles Now, a Los Angeles syringe exchange network. That winter, Reneé Edgington, the needle exchange’s program director and an artist, had sought to document its work along with two other participant organizers, Marco Larsen and Dont Rhine. Initial plans to shoot video of public, street-based exchange sites were understandably resisted by its participants. Their turn toward audio thus already begins to suggest how Ultra-red viewed sound recording and reproduction as a means of both evading and addressing the problem of representation, “community,” and “public space.” Sound recording was a way of preserving both a publicity, and a secrecy, that visual evidence would have compromised.

These themes persisted into Ultra-red’s Griffith Park recordings several years later, as did a general orientation toward the entanglement of enjoyment, need, and dependency that spans drug use and park sex. Such commingled need and enjoyment, and the particular threat and resource it offers to aesthetics, is an ongoing minor preoccupation of this dissertation project as well. When Edgington was included in a group show on William Burroughs, he submitted the CNN’s field recordings to

something like Burroughs’ cut-up method. Meanwhile, early members of Ultra-red were helping to start an electronic music venue and workshop, appropriately named Public Space, where needle exchange recordings were incorporated into live sets. The methodologies that would come to inform Ultra-red’s subsequent work, including *Second nature*, thus developed amidst a number of experiences and modalities: not only electronic music and its relation to sampling, hip hop, disco, and dance; but also contemporary (sonic) art and its protocols, including the cut-up, the *objet sonore*, and a certain critique of music; and lastly, an organizational need for both documentation and the evasion of representation.

Among the artworks this chapter discusses are those of another group temporarily gathered under the name 2nd Nature; they soon changed their name to TLC before the release of their first album, *Ooooooohhh... On the TLC Tip*, in 1992. Between *Second nature*, 2nd Nature, and TLC is where I hope this chapter takes place. Tender loving care, and its relation to sex and to ecological wealth, will I hope emerge as a question concerning dependency, where dependency describes both need and enjoyment, as well as their commingling.

My discussion of TLC helps me to assess and respond to an extensive discourse on social reproduction and ecology developed within Marxist feminism, which sought to remedy the exclusion of unwaged reproductive labor from Marxist accounts of accumulation. Dependency has been, I will argue, the disavowed critical object of
Marxist feminist accounts of reproduction, which critically evaluate the role of caring labor, and thereby also the universal dependency upon such labor. My response focuses on TLC’s “Ain’t 2 Proud 2 Beg,” which, I argue, imagines (sexual) need and enjoyment as the substance of an alternative kind of wealth and accumulation. As part of the elaboration of this wealth, Park McArthur’s video *A Soft Limp Key* (2011) and some related performance scores by McArthur and Zavitsanos help me to frame some questions about the aesthetics of dependency.

Indeed, much of the artwork, music, and writing under consideration in this chapter was produced in the 1990s, a decade before the turn or return to questions of nature and ecology that have suffused the broader critical interest in matter, sensation, and affect. More narrowly, over the course of writing this chapter, I have come to think that the queer and feminist interest in “public sex” in the 1990s was particularly central in mediating between these two moments -- the critique of nature, and its elaboration as a theoretical resource. Perhaps this is because “public sex” mediates between the two troubled senses of “nature”: the notion of immanent need and enjoyment that is clearly implied by the idea of sexual “nature,” and the spatialized sense of terrain, ecosystem, or unsheltered, undomestic publicity.

This mediation is apparent, for example, in Ultra-red’s *Second nature*, which is equally interested in the materiality and texture of parkland sex and terrain, and in the stringent critique of the park or garden as (policed) form. On TLC’s debut album, as
well, the critique of “naturalized” sexual codes takes place alongside commentary on sex as a quasi-ecological resource. Indeed, like some of the other queer and feminist work of that decade which I will discuss, the albums share an interest in sex and romance as a kind of troubled ecological wealth. This chapter undertakes to examine the form or shape of “public sex” and its two enigmatic and troublesome components, where “public” is kind of empty, and “sex” overfull. I will suggest that its shape has a lot to do with questions of volumetric and “environmental” sound, which, as on Ultra-red’s *Second nature*, augment and compromise the articulated speech on which protest and public address are grounded.

Such protest appears throughout the album – for example, a megaphone-amplified response to police raids, delivered pointedly at one of the park’s abandoned zoo enclosures, which apparently caused the park’s other revelers to scatter in fear. But *Second nature* also offers two versions of a track titled “Lewd Conduct,” on which, sandwiched between electronic blips and scraps of music and speech, are sounds made by bodies and undergrowth too close to see or parse, brushing together and occluding one another. Lingering in a resistance to representation offered up in this case by both sex and sociality, Ultra-red takes up this difficulty as an aesthetic resource. An overindulgence in music’s “sensory surface” cautioned against by Theodor Adorno is here demonstrated after a fashion, comprising the substance of a couple of tracks, as
skin, air, and fabric sweep across the microphone’s awkwardly sensitive surface, yielding crackling and rustling over dilated breathing and crickets’ steady throb.6

The sprawling park as geographic “erogenous zone” – terrain for barbeques, dalliances, and automotive as well as sexual cruising – invokes an understanding of enjoyment that comprises not only its aesthetic-erotic sense, but also its legal dimension, which refers to the exercise or fruition of a right of use, as in the use of land for cultivation or habitation. This is the substance of the struggle over land use that Ultra-red’s “electro-acoustic pastoral” records and partakes in. But why, in this context – that of the preservation of a specifically ecological resource for sexual and social gathering – are sound and musical form so fundamental?

The idea of the commons is, of course, rooted in the ongoing practice and historical fact of shared ecological resource prior to -- and under the pressure of -- propertization and enclosure. The specific enmeshment of music with governance, territory, and sex describes the scope of the pastoral mode that Ultra-red’s “electro-acoustic pastoral” seeks to engage and dismantle, and indeed informs the practice of holding and enjoying land in common. As J. Kameron Carter and Sarah Jane Cervenak have said of the notion of the field, it is both “wild and managed at the same time.”7 Its

productive and perhaps necessary entanglement with a pastoral imaginary has given shape to the commons as form and concept, imprinting it as well with a set of erotic, political, and musical concerns. The pastoral is a way of imagining sex and romance, whether human, plant, or animal, in tension with questions of territory, governance, and (natural) law. And it situates sex, reproduction, and romance in an aesthetic, and specifically musical, concern with organization, harmony, proportion, distribution, and order. The idea of the commons conceives of social reproduction in specifically ecological terms.

In this chapter, I take up the commons as both imaginary and material history, asking after the enjoyment of and need for this reproductive resource. The gendered and sexual question of reproduction and recreation have cut across queer theory and feminist theory, of course, and have also been given shape within an ongoing feminist and queer preoccupation with “women’s land” and pastoral queer landscapes, which are often specifically dedicated to musical and sexual recreation.

On Second nature, amidst a series of tracks called eclogues -- the term referring to pastoral poetry -- the liner notes for “Cruise Control” recount the arrest, in April 1998, of two men engaged in “flirtatious behavior” -- “[t]he sort of discrete conduct enjoyed by millions of paramours who retreat to this, the world’s largest, urban public park” -- resulting in an eventual charge of disturbing the peace. They conclude: “Public sex is thus a transgression on the level of acoustics.” We might turn here to José Esteban
Muñoz’s elaboration of a noisy queer “punk rock commons” as a site of contrarian resistance both to musical harmony and to notions of public good with which the commons as a site of resource management, distribution, and (aesthetic) proportion is generally imbued.⁸

Interest in questions of sex, space, and governance among some artists during the 1990s may have arisen as a function of intensified pressure on these questions during a period when New York was subject to Giuliani-era broken windows policing and a program of planned gentrification directed at the “clean-up” of areas that had been refuges for sexual commerce and recreation, particularly for trans and queer people, such as the Christopher Street Pier and Times Square. The notion of “public sex” was under focus among queer organizers, artists, and academics during a period of heightened response to HIV/AIDS among groups such as ACT-UP, Dyke Action Machine, Dyke TV, Gran Fury, and others. Such efforts were inevitably intertwined with – and helped to foment – aesthetic legacies of performance art, political theater, and the graphic language of printmaking and photography essential to poster and flyer campaigns, as well as video art and television broadcast, which was still then available as a mode of distribution to many artists as part of New York’s arts-driven cable-access program.

⁸ José Esteban Muñoz, “‘Gimme Gimme This ... Gimme Gimme That’ Annihilation and Innovation in the Punk Rock Commons.” Social Text 31, no. 3 (2013): 98.
These tactics, though predominantly visual, may be retrospectively grouped under the heading of a slogan which imagined queer sociality and organizing as a specifically sound-based imaginary, a kind of noise pollution that would “disturb the peace” of state management. “Silence = Death,” with its inverted pink triangle referencing the Nazis and the interpenetration of forms of racial and sexual state control, came to stand for HIV/AIDS organizing, as well as for a notion of queer political speech. I would like to pursue the specific audiovisuality of this image, the idea of noise, or speech, that it implies.

Second nature was released into the context of a broader critical and aesthetic preoccupation with the pastoral as a site of troubled sexual entanglement. Some of these artworks include Lorraine O’Grady’s The Clearing and Ellen Cantor’s quasi-pornographic video practice. I also discuss Simon Leung’s performance Transcrypts: Some Notes Between Pricks (1991-2), which considers the occlusions and cuts afforded by glory holes, pin pricks, and other punctured architectures in relation to indoor and outdoor cityscapes, alongside Samuel Delany’s 1988 memoir The Motion of Light in Water, which covers similar ground.

Through readings of Ultra-red, as well as work by Delany, Leung, O’Grady, Cantor, and others, this chapter considers the sexual and racial dimensions of a pastoral understanding of the commons, and the specific arrangement of music, reproduction,
governance, and sex that the pastoral establishes. The conclusion moves towards to a notion of the commons as surround proposed by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney.

2.2 On Queer Pastoral Form: June Jordan, Adrienne Rich, and Ron Athey

This section takes an idiosyncratic tour through the recent critical history of the pastoral in order to sketch out some questions about the shifting status of nature within queer and feminist thought and aesthetics. I emphasize its tendency toward cosmology and the form of the bounded set. I rely upon Cervenak and Carter’s notion of the field, Britt Rusert’s account of the plantation, and black studies’ broader engagement with the concept of the world, and the world’s end. I go on to consider a pastoral assemblage of law, music, sex, and cultivated ecology. Within queer and feminist movements and poetics, this pastoral assemblage has been an object of both critique and utopian desire. I find this critique and desire within poems by Adrienne Rich and June Jordan, and in concurrent accounts of attempts to establish women’s land and queer land. I suggest that Rich and Jordan’s poems, far from disavowing nature, instead invoke organic fluids such as blood, milk, fruit juice, and seawater, which rupture “natural law” and “natural order” as modes of territorial containment. I trace this aesthetic of incontinence from Hélène Cixous’s notion of écriture feminine to Ron Athey’s notorious performance work with blood, pursuing the question of the leak, as well as the question of biohazard. The
section concludes by considering the biohazardous in the context of contagion as well as ecological wealth.

First, a brief note on the term “pastoral”: I use this expression here, albeit inconsistently, for several reasons. Partly it is for the sake of expediency in naming a particular constellation of things, and partly because term “pastoral” occurs in both Ultra-red’s album title, and in the liner notes’ luxuriously elliptical critique of the history and form of parkland and garden. Their use of the term in connection with environmental sound, music, and sex gave shape to some of the central concerns of this chapter. I use it the way I think they mean it: to describe garden or field as sites of both private enclosure and managed “public space,” a problematic component of “public sex.” I found that Ultra-red’s approach reflects a broader attention to the specific nexus of concerns it marks, especially among some artists interested in race, gender, sexuality, and spatial questions in the 1990s.

The pastoral perhaps rose to critical favor with Leo Marx’s once-influential *The Machine in the Garden*, which understood it as thematizing loss to industrial incursion. Speaking broadly, the rejection of Marx’s methods and arguments then came to stand for a shift within American studies.⁹ In the 1990s, Paul Alpers sought to narrow the word’s definition, commenting unfavorably on the breadth and variability of its use and

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the tendency for critics to seek it everywhere, which he and others have identified as an academic fashion of the 1980s and early 1990s.\textsuperscript{10}

Perhaps I am also now guilty of this too, although I am not concerned here with maintaining a precise definition of the term, or even with using it consistently throughout my argument. Rather, its very breadth and popularity offers an opening onto a certain set of preoccupations occurring within art and critical practice in the 1990s. In this context, contestation over the word is itself of some interest, especially in light of the general critique of nature as a site of both givenness and maintenance sustained within critical race theory, feminism, queer theory, and Marxism – a critical suspicion which, as I described above, has since given way to broad interest.

The critique of the pastoral, and of notions of “public space,” elaborated in \textit{Second nature} responds to the garden as an enclosed and managed space. The pastoral is always encircled, if not always enclosed, because it is a cosmology, a field, a managed site, as David Harvey in a way acknowledges, when he writes that “some sort of enclosure is often the best way to preserve certain kinds of valued commons,” for example fragile natural habitats.\textsuperscript{11} As Carter and Cervenak have suggested, a field must

\textsuperscript{10} Paul Alpers, \textit{What Is Pastoral?} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); see also, for example, Annabel Patterson, to whom Alpers responds: Patterson, \textit{Pastoral and Ideology, Virgil to Valery} (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987).

be “fielded.” In considering the notion of the garden or the field, we must examine its formation by contradicting forces: a queerly reproductive “wildness” and fabulation, to cite Tavia Nyong’o alongside Wu Tsang; a notion of “natural law” or “natural order”; and forms of management that encompass extraction, enjoyment or use, and preservation.

Grounding and undercutting the pastoral within American studies is the plantation, and its connection to the plant as a site of production, extraction, and experimentation. Britt Rusert connects enclosure to the plantation’s development as “a laboratory space, a space of experimentation, surveillance, and constant management by the planter class” in the Americas. For her,

The plantation has also served as an important site for the management and regulation of an unruly tropical “nature” understood to traverse both racialized subjects and a peculiar plantation environment. During the antebellum period, the plantation emerged as a laboratory for experimenting with and manipulating all kinds of biota on the plantation—including plants, animals, and enslaved persons. ... The plantation, in other words, has played a central role in the negotiation and management of race and ecology in Southern geographies.

Rusert suggests that narratives of sustainability and preservation that would become central to a certain ecological discourse arose in a colonial monocultural plantation

context where “the strategic refusal of sustenance to, or un-sustaining of, slave populations was, in fact, internal to the disciplinary logic of the experimental plantation from its very beginnings in the New World.”\(^{16}\)

In all of these instances, the notion of the pastoral is useful to me because it animates questions of capture, reproduction, and wildness in the context of a troubled conjoining of the aesthetic, the erotic, and territory. The pastoral implies a notion of the field as bounded, internally differentiating whole. Formal, conceptual, systemic and territorial encirclement -- determination by an outer frame or boundary -- is its definitive component; the pastoral is interested in (micro)cosmology. The pastoral is a set, it is a world. This question of the world, the New World, and, most pressing, the end of the world -- as telos, outer boundary, and transformative destruction -- has been given definitive shape within the project of black studies.\(^{17}\) Of special interest to me here is

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\(^{16}\) Rusert, “Plantation Ecologies,” 372. See also Sylvia Wynter, “Novel and History, Plot and Plantation,” Savacou 5 (1971), in which Wynter connects the territorial plot to the plot as narrative logic.

\(^{17}\) Black studies has remade the set-theoretic question of the world, establishing its ground in antiblackness. An extremely cursory tour of some key points in this discourse could include Frank Wilderson’s claim that, “They’re trying to build a better world. What are we trying to do? We’re trying to destroy the world. Two irreconcilable projects” (Frank B. Wilderson, III, “‘We are trying to destroy the world,’ An Interview with Frank B. Wilderson, III,” Ill Will Editions, 2014).

Jared Sexton, citing Lewis Gordon, outlines a world structured by “a political ontology dividing the Slave from the world of the Human in a constitutive way” (Jared Sexton, “The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism,” InTensions 5 (2011), 19). In extended conversation with Moten, he writes: “black life is not social life in the universe formed by the codes of state and civil society, of citizen and subject, of nation and culture, of people and place, of history and heritage, of all the things that colonial society has in common with the colonized, of all that capital has in common with labor—the modern world system. Black life is not lived in the world that the world lives in, but it is lived underground, in outer space. This is agreed” (Sexton, “The Social Life of Social Death,” 28).
Denise Ferreira da Silva’s prophetic call for the end of the world as we know it.\(^{18}\) This notion of the world as containment, as a set, which may be ruptured, opened to other dimensions, or internally differentiated within its outer bounds, is reflected in the pastoral interest in microcosm and miniature, in the bucolic scene of field, clearing, or garden both orderly and deviant.

The usefulness of the term pastoral is for me thus not only a question of subject matter (that is, ecology), but of shape, in other words a formal and conceptual question of how this subject matter is organized and laid out. Thus I will suggest that notion of the commons as an ecological imaginary of social reproduction is shaped by the pastoral mode, while the notion of the surround introduced by Moten and Harney is specifically not pastoral. Likewise, the idea and history of “women’s land” has been structured by a pastoral imaginary, while, for example, the Combahee River Collective -- gesturing toward rugged terrain in name if not location -- is not, because in naming itself after Harriet Tubman’s travels, it calls to flight, rather than settlement.

Within queer and feminist poetics, a pastoral entanglement of music, sex, and questions of governance has been an object of both ideality and critique. June Jordan’s

\[\text{Moten, responding to the question of the exclusion from or negation of political subjecthood that is sometimes referred to as social death, writes, “I also agree with Sexton insofar as I am inclined to call this burial ground “the world” ... I bear the hope that blackness bears or is the potential to end the world.... The promise of another world, or of the end of this one, is given in the general critique of world” (Fred Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh),” South Atlantic Quarterly 112, no. 4 (2013): 739, 752.}\]

1982 poem “From Sea to Shining Sea,” for example, aims to sever the link between nature and order. A categorical hierarchy aimed at the containment of living things and social life, “natural order” appears in the poem to be both rigid and precarious:

    Natural order is being restored
    Natural order means you take a pomegranate
    that encapsulated plastic looking orb complete
    with its little top/a childproof cap that you can neither twist nor turn
    and you keep the pomegranate stacked inside a wobbly pyramid composed by
    103 additional pomegranates next to a sign saying 89 cents
    each

Drawing on fruit as both managed agricultural commodity and sexualized abundance, Jordan opposes the fragile but violent “natural order” of pomegranates stacked in a supermarket to the fruit’s tendency toward juicy rupture, “Exploding like the seeds of a natural disorder.” Accumulation and calculability are inseparable from the imposition of a kind of violent metrical symmetry which appears in the imagery of stacks of wrapped and rubber-banded industrialized produce, interleaved with references to the enforcement of lethal racial and sexual ordering. This violent symmetry shows up as well in the poem’s own broken metrical rigor:

    This was not a good time to be a tree
    This was not a good time to be a river
    This was not a good time to be found with a gun
    This was not a good time to be found without one
    This was not a good time to be gay
    This was not a good time to be Black

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20 Jordan, “From Sea to Shining Sea,” 542.
This was not a good time to be a pomegranate
or an orange
This was not a good time to be against
the natural order

The management of sex, social life, and ecology are made to appear in the context of
martial meter, eventually broken, and pastoral “harmony,” which Jordan asserts to be at
odds with a kind of wild uncontainment:

Natural order does not mean a pomegranate
split open to the seeds sucked by the tongue and lips
while teeth release the succulent sounds
of its voluptuous disintegration
… I am turning under the trees
I am trailing blood into the rivers²¹

Order, not nature, is the object of Jordan’s critique. What appears at first to be perhaps
an anti-essentialist argument against naturalized racial and sexual hierarchies turns out
to offer up nature as an image of material and social ungovernability. “Naturalizing”
things -- especially categorical ideas about sex -- is the worst, but nature itself is cool,
even a site of immanent sexual resistance. This ambivalence suggests something about
the contradictory place of the pastoral within queer and feminist imaginaries. Adrienne
Rich’s “Waking in the Dark” describes a kind of exhaustion or depletion of sex,
imagined in terms of pastoral enclosure and poorly managed wealth:

The tragedy of sex
lies around us, a woodlot
the axes are sharpened for.

The old shelters and huts
stare through the clearing with a certain resolution
—the hermit’s cabin, the hunters’ shack—
scenes of masturbation
and dirty jokes.
A man’s world. But finished.
They themselves have sold it to the machines.²²

The poem appeared in Rich’s book *Diving into the Wreck*, which, along with its title
poem, was among the heavily circulated texts of the women’s movement. As its title
suggests, much of that book wanders in a slightly stunned, anaesthetic mode through an
implacable but ordinary ecological ruin. Something has been leached from the scene; the
poem describes the dissipation of a resource which is both discarded and overvalued:

They are dumping animal blood into the sea
to bring up the sharks. Sometimes every
aperture of my body
leaks blood. I don’t know whether
to pretend that this natural.

Is there a law about this, a law of nature?
You worship the blood
you call it hysterical bleeding
you want to drink it like milk
you dip your finger into it and write
you faint at the smell of it.²³

We might read Jordan and Rich’s poems, streaming with blood, milk, and fruit juice, as
part of a trajectory of feminist discourse about leakiness and secretion, leaks and secrets,

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²³ Rich, *Diving into the Wreck*, 16-7.
spanning Hélène Cixous and Chelsea Manning. In Jordan’s poem, or in Cixous’s essay - where écriture féminine is imagined as ocean waves, milk, and so on -- there is a question of being unable or unwilling to contain oneself. But the sexualized fluids lost in Rich’s poem are an effect less of unruly incontinence than of a kind of ruthless extraction and deflationary exhaustion.

As much as Rich and Jordan offer a critique of an idea of natural law and corresponding racial, sexual, and gendered hierarchies, such poetics seem connected as well to an ecological imaginary of queer collective life, from radical faerie gatherings to gay beaches to Ida, the queer land in rural Tennessee. In the United States, the pastoral has been a persistent cipher for the romance of a queer commons.

Figure 8: First Radical Faeries gathering, with flyer, 1979

In all of these instances, a queer pastoral imaginary that is primarily aesthetic has posed problems of property, communization, and how common resources may be developed or preserved. We might consider the notion of “women’s land,” in which music, sex, and small-scale agriculture are often irreducible components of a pastoral image of the commons. A pastoral imaginary informed a large network of these projects developed beginning in the 1970s, and cannot fully shed its entanglement with settlement and colonization.

![Figure 9: From Womanshare Collective, Country Lesbians (1976).](image)

One such project was WomanShare, begun in Grant’s Pass, Oregon, in 1974, by three women who made a land purchase together, contributing amounts from $500 to
$20,000. In 1976, they began writing a book about their experiences, which was published in 1980 as *Country Lesbians.*

In the book, accounts of building structures and farming the land mingle with life histories, poems, transcribed group discussions, and narratives of friendships and sexual relationships among a shifting group of residents. Perhaps the most well-known “women’s land” was the grounds on which the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival was held beginning in 1976. The festival was among many which joined an idea of a (privately owned) ecological commons to musical, social, and sexual recreation.

Starting in 1991, when Nancy Burkholder, a trans woman at the festival, was forcibly removed from the land, the festival formalized its policy excluding trans women. Only so-called “women-born women” were permitted to attend, suturing a

![Camp Trans](image)

**Figure 10:** Camp Trans, shown here in 1993-94. Camp Trans was an annual encampment near the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival in Oceana County, MI, protesting the festival’s policy of excluding trans women.

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narrowly genital notion of womanhood to the pastoral imaginary of women’s land. Although it was supported by a statistical minority of festival-goers, this policy nonetheless persisted and came to stand for the gathering itself, making it the object of protest until its eventual closure in 2015. Protest took the form of boycotts, shit-talking, letter-writing, and online arguments, but perhaps its most coherent and visible modality was, notably, an alternative pastoral site down the road named Camp Trans.

Rich’s elegiac 1970s image of a depleted sexual commons — a woodlot the axes are sharpened for — may perhaps thus apply to “women’s land” as well. The loss and depletion I refer to is not the ongoing closure of such spaces, but the enclosure that preceded it. This was a set-theoretic enclosure not only of land, but also, impossibly, of a certain categorical notion of womanhood as morphological corporeal boundary. In its rendering of affective entanglement as settlement and property, “women’s land” foreclosed the resource of that very entanglement. Lesbian feminism pushed away the romance it needed.
Although their approaches to it diverge, both Rich and Jordan address the power of an incontinent surplus that would challenge such corporeal boundaries. This incontinence bears on the containment of the world as set, or of the pastoral as its microcosmic snowglobe. And both describe a kind of biohazard, in the sense of both a hazard to life and a hazardous life. A question of corporeal fluid, particularly blood and semen as intensely racialized and sexualized substances, underlies the 1990s discourse of “public sex” which emerged in the context of increased attention to HIV/AIDS, which I discuss later in this chapter. In the last couple of years, I have been thinking a lot about the regulated and unregulated distribution of semen; the sharing of semen in a domestic space operates under the premise of consenting adult privacy. But other forms of
distribution are the domain of “banks” -- sperm banks, or blood banks -- with a legal monopoly on the accumulation and release of these fluids. If I put vials of my semen or blood out for anyone to share and do whatever they want with, it’s a biohazard and can be confiscated, as a student at the School of Visual Arts discovered when the university quarantined his MFA thesis work.\(^{26}\)

Unauthorized distribution was also the substance of the congressional uproar over Ron Athey’s performance work, in which blood came to stand for the incontinence of both queer desire and queer debility or disease. See, for example, Jesse Helms’s remarks before the Senate, in 1994, in which he discusses Athey’s performance *Washed in the Blood* (1994) at the Walker Museum, in Minneapolis:

> Here is how Mr. Athey’s performance went. He informed his audience that he has the AIDS virus. Then he begins his bloody performance, but he tells them nothing about the HIV status of the other performers whom he later slashes and slices on the stage. He keeps that a secret. Mr. Athey himself described the NEA-supported performance in the *Los Angeles Weekly* -- a homosexual newspaper. He described the three different sets of three parallel lines arranged in a stair-step fashion that he sliced onto, and into, another man’s back, and then he carved a triangle, which he called, appropriately, “The Symbol of Queerness.” Just so the Record will be complete about the artistic talents of Mr. Athey, I think I should quote his own description of his performance, which was subsidized, do not forget, by whom? The National Endowment for the Arts.\(^{27}\)  

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Helms then read aloud from an essay Athey had published in the *L.A. Weekly*, beginning with this passage:

Bleeding is always heavy at first, but it slows down. Paper towels are pressed against the wound, making an imprint, then they are alternately passed to two assistants, who clip prints to the line and send them out over the audience. The prints are not touching any heads. They only come close to a couple of people, mostly over the aisles or completely stage right.28

Helms’s commentary was offered in support of an amendment “To prohibit the use of National Endowment for the Arts funds to provide financial assistance for projects or works involving ...the drawing or letting of blood” or “invasive bodily procedures.”29

What is expropriated from the biohazardous is precisely its capacity to be uncontained and reproduced. Clipped to clotheslines that were hoisted over the audience and kept taut by three women stagehands Athey called “trained tech dykes,” the paper towels were hung out to dry.30

Athey’s performance specifically linked printmaking as a reproductive technique to the fear of viral replication, but we may also consider the reference to the reproductive labor of doing laundry, or the general tendency of a stain to spread.

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29 Congressional Record, Senate, 140.98
30 Athey, “Blood, Boots, and White Weddings.”
Indeed, this multivalent question of reproduction, elaborated by Marxist feminists, turns out to be central to the project of an ecological commons, as the next section explains.

2.3 Reproductive Labor and Romantic Dependency: TLC and Park McArthur

In the previous section, I considered the form and shape of the pastoral, defining it through a kind of set-theoretic containment and encirclement. I argued that queer and feminist poetics, art, and social movements have had a complex and ambivalent relation to a pastoral notion of the ecological commons and nature more broadly. On the one hand, a poetics of incontinence has challenged cosmologies of containment and order. On the other hand, however, the desire for a queer ecological commons – often conceived pastorally as sites for music, sex, bucolic recreation, and small-scale agriculture – has occasionally given way to an equally pastoral concern with settlement, territory, and border defense.

In this section, I examine feminist engagements with the ecological commons, approaching it from the perspective of reproduction. Specifically, I here consider the question of social reproduction and its relation to the ecological commons within Marxist feminism. Marxist feminists have demonstrated that during processes of enclosure, feminized reproductive labor is made to bear and make up for the burden of this loss, both as a source of wealth and as a site of social reproduction; feminine labor is thus historically connected to capital’s management of ecological nature, and such labor
has perhaps consequently been “naturalized” as an attribute of women. As part of a vigorous debate over value, reproduction, and the wage in the 1970s, Marxist feminists have argued that such labor must instead be recognized and valued as a primary source of surplus and its accumulation.\textsuperscript{31}

In this section, however, I suggest that value and wealth must themselves be rethought. I propose that not only caring labor and reproduction, but also the need for and dependency upon such care, must be considered as a form of (in)value and wealth. I read TLC’s “Ain’t Too Proud to Beg” as an extended elaboration of these questions in the context of sex, love, need, and wealth. In the first chapter, I took up the question of dependency in terms of both sociality and causality. Here, I extend that discussion, considering pendant, drooping, or sagging aesthetic forms.

\textsuperscript{31} This project permits only a cursory survey of the broad range of feminist arguments about reproduction and value. I am mostly guided here by the position of Wages for Housework and a coalition of feminists organizing around the demand for an impossible restitution for unwaged reproductive labor, in the belief that it would lead to the destruction of the wage as a tool of sexual and racial division, as well as an end to the state and capitalism. Such organizing persisted into the 1990s resistance to Clintonian welfare cuts, as Silvia Federici and Mariarosa Dalla Costa have suggested. The relation between the wage, unwaged reproductive labor, and surplus value was, however, hotly debated in the 1970s. There was also an interesting argument about the question of cooperation in reproductive worksites, as opposed to, for example, the factory. The apparent isolation of the home as domestic worksite perhaps helped to shape the women’s movement’s characteristic form of domestic cells, consciousness-raising groups, and so on, and continues to inform traditional labor organizing of waged home care and domestic workers. For an opposing view on these questions of surplus value and organization, see for example Wally Secombe, “The Housewife and Her Labor Under Capitalism,” \textit{New Left Review} 83 (1974): 3-24. In another vein, Kathi Weeks has also questioned whether work and value are always the best framework for Marxist feminist theory; my argument here is indebted to hers. Kathi Weeks, \textit{The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries} (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2011). For an account of the relationship between struggles over welfare and Wages for Housework, see Mariarosa Dalla Costa, \textit{Family, Welfare, and the State} (New York: Common Notions, 2015). On organizing strategies for atomized reproductive worksites, such as homes, see Domestic Workers United, “Organizing Model,” Organizing Model, http://www.domesticworkersunited.org/index.php/en/our-work/organizing-model.
In *Caliban and the Witch*, Silvia Federici argues that, as the European land enclosures of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries accelerated, the enjoyment of women came to replace the enjoyment of the commons as a necessary means of social reproduction:

proletarian women became for male workers the substitute for the land lost to the enclosures, their most basic means of reproduction, and a communal good anyone could appropriate at will. ... in the new capitalist regime, women themselves became the commons, as their work was defined as a natural resource, lying outside the sphere of market relations.\(^{32}\)

The common woman replaced the commons, as the very figure of reproduction shifted from a spatialized field – an area of land – to an apparently measureless temporality, that is, lifetimes of reproductive labor, imagined ecologically as a “natural resource” of love or personal service. Such feminized (in)exhaustibility, and its mensural rhythms and frequencies, are the subject of the third chapter.

Although the contractual and affective arrangements that govern this shift are, paradigmatically, at least, heterosexual, it is important to note that, within them, the primary relationship is not between women and men, but rather between feminine labor and capital, brokered by men as both managers and workers; the product of reproductive labor is labor power itself, that of both the wage worker and the child. In

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another essay from that time period that has remained influential, Selma James and Mariarosa della Costa write:

Capital, while it elevates heterosexuality to a religion, at the same time makes it impossible for men and women to be in touch with each other physically or emotionally – it undermines heterosexuality except as a sexual, economic, and social discipline.33

The marriage contract, understood in these terms, thus marks – to cite James and della Costa in their slant rhyme with the so-called “1970s Lacan” – the impossibility of a heterosexual relation. Despite or because of the necessary centrality of sexuality to Marxist feminist analyses, and its dual function in both social reproduction and the creation of surplus value, such accounts have sought to contest the erotic, with the understanding that love and nature have both operated to conceal labor and its antagonisms. Federici’s influential 1974 essay “Wages Against Housework” opens in this vein: “They say it is love. We say it is unwaged work. They call it frigidity. We call it absenteeism.”34

Such reasoning underpinned the 1970s struggles against housework, and it continues to inform the tactic of the “Smile Strike,” as well as the 2017 Women’s Strike,

which likewise proceeds from the inarguable observation that “women’s paid labor in the workplace and unpaid labor at home is the basis of wealth in our society.”

It is a specifically ecological understanding of love that is to be dismantled; in the critiques of the romanticizing and naturalizing of women’s work that Federici, James, dalla Costa, and others advance, romance and nature (and, indeed, femininity) are interchangeable. Yet romance is a fundamental condition of theories of the commons, as is evident from Michael Hardt’s work on love. What then of the old-school Marxist critical tool of demystification? Marx returns frequently to the occult and the mystical to access the nonliving, undead movement of capital. His passages on capitalism’s occult are always ironized, whether he’s talking about the magically animated commodity, or the secret door behind which labor is transformed into capital), aimed at a demystification or defrocking of the political economists.

The occult is indispensable to the theory of accumulation, but also cuts across and exceeds it. The supernatural is precisely a surplus – a surplus of the natural, a wealth of nature – defined in terms of what Angela Mitropoulos calls oikos, whose dual and interlocking character as economy and ecology describes the topology of sexual and racial differentiation.

The critique of love and romance also shapes broader attitudes toward affective work, as in formal and informal analyses of the role of the “man-child,” and the labor this figure solicits. Among the questions such critiques raise is the history of an apparent antagonism between caring labor and the need for, or dependency upon, such care. Although all life depends upon what Park McArthur and Constantina Zavitsanos have called “care as infrastructure,” the hypervisible disabled body is especially made to bear the image of this antagonism. It emerges in the apparent irreconcilability of a feminist critique of reproduction and a certain rights-based disability politics.

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38 Park McArthur and Constantina Zavitsanos, “Other forms of conviviality: The best and least of which is our daily care and the host of which is our collaborative work,” *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 23, no. 1: 126-132.
The capacity for care and the need for care – framed within feminist approaches (poorly, I would suggest) as skilled competence and unskilled dependency, respectively – appear opposed within both of these political formations. Another way of putting this is that within Marxist frameworks, the dependency of the manager or the capitalist upon labor is the site of labor’s leverage. The manager and the capitalist do not have the know-how or the labor power to conduct business on their own. This dialectic of dependency thus becomes the object of organizing, in which it is subject to ridicule and critique.

In the context of Marxist feminism, the figure of the husband is framed in the role of manager or employer with respect to unwaged feminine labor. A paradigmatic employer, this figure doesn’t know how to do the work that is required. For example, he does not, and perhaps cannot, cook for himself, do his own laundry, adequately service himself sexually, raise his children, and so on. In “Wages Against Housework” and a range of related discourses, his dependency as manager on such labor is collapsed with the dependency of the child, despite their different positions in the overall schema (a schema I have rendered extremely reductively, I should add). While the child’s dependency is socially recognized and visible, the man appears as an individuated subject only through the disavowal of the racialized and sexualized domestic work that reproduces him. In making this work visible, however, Marxist feminists disavow the power of dependency itself.
On the other hand, very briefly, within struggles for disability rights in the U.S., disabled people have had to represent themselves through this same problematic logic of individuated competence and independence. In order to resist the criminalization of their sexual and affective entanglements; in order to escape forced institutionalization, medical violence, and correction, as well as abusive domestic situations; in order to be paid for their work; in order to go to school; in order to travel; in order to gather; and in order to stay alive – for all of these reasons, disabled people have been made to frame their struggles within a discourse of independence, individuated subjecthood, and the capacity to consent. Thus, within rights-based models of disability, the disabled person often appears as a manager and consumer of care. Like the figure of the husband in Marxist feminist schemas, the disabled person thus appears as an individuated subject only through the disavowal of racialized and feminized labor on which they, like everyone else, depend.

Marxist feminist critiques of affective labor and the “care strikes” of the 1970s, which opposed the structural devaluation of unpaid reproductive labor as a source of surplus value, also implicitly or explicitly denigrated dependency upon such labor. On the right, we may observe an ongoing range of liberal discourses of salaried professionalization, from Betty Friedan to Sheryl Sandberg, which are equally critical of
gendered reproductive work. More colloquially, as I described above, continued indictments of the “man baby,” “immature” men, and so on, name and critique a masculine entitlement to and need for caring labor based on an idea of its similarity to socially marked forms of dependency such as that of disabled people or children.

But need, dependency, and the reliance on care and love are a common resource and power, and should not be the basis of such a critique. Moreover, in such arrangements, the antagonism derives not from the dependency or “immaturity” of the “man child,” but precisely from its disavowal as he assumes the role of manager or consumer, in a faint echo of the logic of disability rights. The dependency or need of the feminine worker is here also denied – both in the arrangement itself, and, sadder still, in its critique and proposed remedy. I would suggest that the problem both with a range of feminist critiques of reproductive labor, and to a lesser extent with rights-based disability discourses, is the profound disavowal of dependency that suffuses them.

That dependency is the disavowed object of some Marxist feminist analyses of both reproductive labor and romance also perhaps suggests something about the relationship between dependency and love. The critique of love is introduced as a first step to conceptualizing feminized labor as labor, and to struggling against it:

We will fail in the struggle for the free laundromats unless we first struggle against the fact that we cannot love except at the price of endless work, which

day after day cripples our bodies, our sexuality, our social relations, unless we first escape the blackmail whereby our need to give and receive affection is turned against us as a work duty for which we constantly feel resentful against our husbands, children and friends, and guilty for that resentment.40

There is much to say here about the question of crippled bodies, crippled sexuality, and crippled sociality—more directly, about the way that “crip” might signal a privileged relationship to the conditions that are the very ground of embodiment, sex, and social life, rather than a diminishment of those capacities.41 Notable here is the acknowledgement that not only labor power, but also need as a capacity or power—“our need to give and receive affection”—is the resource subject here to exploitation and extraction. This insight echoes Marx’s observation that, “when the limited bourgeois form is stripped away, what is wealth other than the universality of individual needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces etc., created through universal exchange?”42

How then is the wealth constituted by need preserved and multiplied? One response is offered by the apparent paradox in the bridge verse of TLC’s 1992 “Ain’t 2 Proud 2 Beg,” in which Chilli sings: “I need to feel loved / Why wait for so long? / Cause I ain’t 2 proud 2 beg / for something that I call my own.” The apparent contradiction of declaring a readiness to beg for something that one already has suggests that need,

41 On the notion of “crip” as a companion analytic to “queer,” see Robert McRuer, Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability (New York: NYU Press, 2006).
dependency, and (the need for) love are here imagined not as lack, but rather as surplus. TLC conceptualizes the plenitude of sexual need, and sexual care, as something that can be held only insofar as it is released; in the next verse, T-boz sings, “Got to let it go while you can.” Giving yourself away in order to receive something that you already have, but which nonetheless must always be given to you in order for you to have it, suggests an understanding of (sexual) dependency in which “giving” sex and “taking” it cannot be disentangled.43

Here, dependency offers a form of surplus and accumulation which neither the home as a marketplace of reproductive and sexual labor, nor the Marxist feminist critique of such exchange and extraction, can account for or exhaust. This is because TLC describes a form of wealth and accumulation not fully governed by a logic of exchange, however violently it has been plundered. In other words, again, dependency is not a lack to be filled, but a surplus accumulated in being spent. Nor can we even say that need is here exchanged for enjoyment, where enjoyment is understood in the dual sense of both aesthetic or sensory pleasure and the right of use, as in the enjoyment of

43 I draw here on Fred Moten’s account of ecological wealth in “An Ecology of (Eloquent) Things,” in which he proposes a “nonoppositional relation between wealth and poverty” that emerges through the work of artist Thornton Dial, liberation theology, and the passage from Marx’s Grundrisse that I cite above. Moten suggests an alternative concept of accumulation and maternity that I wish to emulate here: “to say that we have something, only insofar as we relinquish it, is to say that we come from somewhere, only insofar as we leave that place behind.” Fred Moten, “An Ecology of (Eloquent) Things” (paper presented at Hard Truths: A Forum on the Art and Politics of Difference, Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, IN, April 8, 2011), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1oRKOhlMmKQ.
land. Rather, need itself is that which is to be shared and enjoyed as wealth; need and its enjoyment are here inseparable.

Such irreducible commingling of need and enjoyment mounts a challenge to an account of aesthetic value grounded in the disinterested judgement of taste, because to be disinterested you cannot be in need of that which you enjoy and appraise. In the chorus, Left Eye’s flow is intercut with interjections by the rest of the group:

Yo if I need it in the morning or the middle of the night
(I ain’t proud 2 beg, no)
If the lovin’ is strong and he got it goin’ on and
(I ain’t proud 2 beg, no)
2 inches or a yard, rock hard, or if it’s saggin’
(I ain’t proud 2 beg, I ain’t 2 proud 2 beg)

It’s not that morning and night, or genital morphologies, are a matter of indifference, but rather that their variation is here accented as a way of also elaborating or augmenting what is being given away.

In the context established by TLC’s theorization of softness or sag, I want to consider Park McArthur’s A Soft Limp Key, subtitled “A Symphony Concerning Dependency” (2011). Comprising four sequential movements or chapters, spread out spatially across four channels of video, A Soft Limp Key moves through documentary footage of a range of different sites as different voices read texts over the audio track, intercut with passages from Beethoven’s Eroica.
Shooting from her lap, using her power wheelchair as a kind of dolly that both shakes and stabilizes the camera, McArthur moves through various sites: Manhattan sidewalks, domestic spaces where haircuts and dinners unfold, the grounds of what seems like a zoo or garden, and the Brooklyn Bridge, whose wooden boardwalk makes itself felt in the juddering of the image. In the first chapter or movement, McArthur’s voiceover repeats the phrase “…and this is a life, and this is a life,” sometimes singing it over the Beethoven, her frenetic recitation never quite managing to keep up with the crowds of people, plants, and animals it seems to be counting. Intertitles inform us of the video’s symphonic movements or chapters, which occur sequentially:

1. allegro: life!
2. adagio: intimacy
3. scherzo: power!
4. rondo, guide

We spend some time gazing up at a door over which a plaque reads, “Dudley Memorial Hospital: Stanley S. Lamm Institute for Developmental Disabilities” – perhaps pointedly, since it is up a double set of stairs – before continuing up the side of the building. On another channel, the camera peruses a vintage issue of The Journal of American Nursing, zooming in on grainy black and white photographs of white-capped nurses and white-coated doctors crying beneath a headline, as they “Learn About Death and Dying.” In voiceovers, McArthur, Sadia Shirazi, Latoya Ruby Frazier, Sofía Olascoaga, and Loretta Fahrenholz, all artists, curators, or filmmakers, read and sing
texts, mostly letters written by McArthur, which deal loosely and lyrically with questions of aesthetic form and disabled life.

**Figure 12: Park McArthur, A Soft Limp Key, 4-channel digital video, still (2011)**

Drawn to this work by the notion of a “soft limp key” as well as the promise of a symphony about dependency, and what it might have to do with the cityscape the camera traverses, as well as the question of music. I thought about how a soft limp key might challenge notions of form, utility, and sexual labor, as well as physical access to a space. In the video’s fourth movement, titled after the rondo, or musical round, we circle a classroom where McArthur leads a group in an exercise. Everyone is seated, and each person, in turn, picks up the leg of the person beside them, crossing it over their other leg at the knee. This gesture – crossing a partner’s leg over their knee – appears as a performance score in an essay written by McArthur with Constantina Zavitsanos, titled “Other forms of conviviality.” It describes the experience of a group known informally as “care collective,” which the authors define as follows:
Care collective is a group of 10 people who coordinate Park McArthur’s nightly care routine. The basic function of care collective is to assist in changing Park’s clothes and to lift Park in and out of the shower and into bed. This routine is often accompanied by other convivial activities, such as making dinner, drinking, talking, reading, watching YouTube videos, massaging limbs, drawing, videotaping, and sharing stories.44

I was, for a couple of years, part of this group, alongside Zavitsanos, and that experience has shaped some of my own ongoing preoccupation with questions of care, dependency, and intimacy. Zavitsanos and McArthur’s aim is close to my own; they seek, they write, “a queer materialist feminist approach to the entanglement of dependency and reproductive labor, disability, intimacy, and the impossibility of [exchange].”45

“Other forms of conviviality” includes a series of scores, called ‘scores for before,’ which are meant to direct not a future performance, but past and ongoing performances of care. They thus invoke the form of the ritornello or rondo, in which a refrain circles back again and again. McArthur and Zavitsanos – both disabled artists, and both caregivers and care recipients -- ask what it might mean to understand reproductive labor and dependency in the specific context of performance, and to approach intimate care outside of a logic of exchange. The score for crossing legs, interestingly, invokes the form of the field:

SCORE FOR CROSSING AN OPEN FIELD

Notice your partner’s lap has been the same shape for some time and ask if she’d

like it tight or open.
Wait for her response.
Bend over and pick up her leg from the mid calf.
Place her ankle over her opposite thigh.
Adjust as directed.⁴⁶

What is constructed and crossed here is a lap. A lap is an interesting structure. It appears through a corporeal folding that happens only in recline, when one is seated or lying down. On the one hand, the lap is an overdetermined figure of parental care, a protective armature on which children sit and are held. It is also the primary armature for McArthur’s camera in A Soft Limp Key, a visual perspective that arises from and is enriched by expediency.

In a more recent essay by McArthur and Zavitsanos, titled “The Guild of the Brave Poor Things” (after a nineteenth-century union for disabled children), they include a photograph by Peter Hujar of a man lying down in the sun on the edge of the water at the Christopher Street Pier, an important gay cruising ground which I discuss below. The photo is shot from the perspective of the man’s feet, and one leg is propped up on a folded knee, making a kind of loupe, frame, or lens through which his crotch, his face, and some distant buildings are visible. A corporeal field, and the spatialized field of the pier, here invite traversal. Perpendicular to the platform on which McArthur holds her camera, this lap is, perhaps, the visual and aesthetic “open field” that the score

⁴⁶McArthur and Zavitsanos, “Other forms of conviviality,” 130.
instructs us to “cross.” If the lap is a particularly maternal emblem of reproductive labor, it is also a site of dependency, of sex and toileting. The form of the lap emerges as a movable figure, a site where dependency and reproduction are not opposed. Rather, as in “Ain’t 2 Proud 2 Beg,” need and care are coextensive.

Figure 13: Peter Hujar, *Christopher Street Pier #2 (Crossed Legs)* (1976)

It’s hard not to think of Left Eye’s affirmation of softness or sag alongside TLC’s own rigorously coordinated style throughout the 1990s. In the music video for “Ain’t 2 Proud 2 Beg,” this is especially pronounced: loose jeans held up by bright suspenders, chubby oversize pacifiers swinging from long cords, Chilli’s fitted ball caps and Left Eye’s soft, extravagantly large vinyl newsboy caps in saturated colors. This chunky droop and swing is inseparable from TLC’s soft “female masculinity,” delineated on the same album in “Hat 2 Da Back.” The erotics of such droop and sag are visible in the work of
Senga Nengudi or Ernesto Neto. Nengudi’s work with fabric, in particular, negotiates a kind of nonopposition between the tension and constraint of her materials and the powerful inertia of their movement. Since the late 1970s, both her installation work and her performance practice have elaborated these questions, which I wish I had the space to explore further here.

The third segment of A Soft Limp Key is titled “scherzo: power,” the term referring to symphonic movement, usually in ¾ time, and deriving from the Italian scherzo, “I joke,” or “I play.” In this movement, Shirazi, in a voiceover, reads aloud a long series of phrases containing the word power – people power, AIDS power, manpower, rechargeable battery power, power yoga, etc. – before reciting a joke about a man in a wheelchair asking passing women to screw him; finally, one fulfills his request by pushing him off of a pier. What, indeed, does falling have to do with sex? In “The Guild of the Brave Poor Things,” McArthur and Zavitsanos pursue the etymology of dependency:

To be pending, waiting, wading, held up, stuck, is to depend. From this comes our erotic capacity to droop heavy and seize up, to be let down or let go. From it also comes the other sense of dependency as causality and derivation. We rely, we rally, we gather, to just hang on and to just hang out.47

What is cruising but hanging out and waiting for something that you need, a fundamental condition of disabled life? Whether leaning on peers or on piers, McArthur and Zavitsanos develop an analytic of dependency as power, specifically a recreational, reproductive power. If the lap, like the pier, is a love seat, a field constructed in being crossed, could it also be considered a site of (ecological) wealth and (in)value?

The section that follows remains on the pier where we found Hujar and his friend peering through a corporeal hole or frame. What kind of field does the pier offer for the forms of enjoyment, need, and gathering that Hujar pursues? Alongside Samuel Delany, Simon Leung, and others, I ask after the forms of shelter and exposure that condition “public sex.” The notion of the soundscape and of “environmental sound,” so central to sound studies, turns out to be deeply implicated in the question of public sex as well. A broader theoretical debate on spatialized sound offers some surprising resources for thinking about queer “public sex.” Queer sexual ecologies and morphologies here also help me to reframe some disagreements within sound studies over the status of space, experience, and nature.

2.4 Holes and Screens: Environmental Sound and “Public Sex”

The notion of public sex was developed in a kind of tension between, on the one hand, a certain notion of sex as speech, and, on the other, a sensitivity to the ambiguity of environmental sound. The centrality of this tension to the question of public sex is demonstrated in the scene that opens Simon Leung’s performance text TRANSCRYPSTS
(1991-1992), from which I quote here at length. In the passage below, I am interested in how the long-range vision of a cruising site, its sudden and total apprehension from a distance, gives way to a more occluded and uneasy proximity. Leung is in Paris with some straight friends, walking near the Seine, when, on the water’s edge, a sightline gives onto

a pattern of movement which I immediately recognized. I suggested that we take a walk along the embankment under the bridges and closer to the water. My friends agreed. After seconds of walking on the embankment, it became unmistakable — this was a gay cruising spot. Solitary men strode up and down the narrow strip with penetrating gazes made all the more penetrating by the darkening skies.

‘This is a total cruise scene,’ I quietly whispered. My friends, neither of whom were gay, did not notice this. That is, they were oblivious to what was to me an obvious scenario until the scenario was named.

As the terrain narrows, its traffic denser, the sightlines diminished, the possibility of vocal speech -- its volume, accent, and extralinguistic registers -- becomes more fraught:

It began to rain heavily and we took cover under a bridge, where many men who were cruising also sought shelter. There arose a sense of uneasiness in me because although we were all enclosed in a relatively small space, some of us were there for sexual encounters and some of us were not. Our foreignness — we were obviously not French — augmented this awkward feeling. One of my friends awkwardly posed a question to me in English about the “scene” we were in and I quickly cut him off and asked him to not talk about this topic in such a compromising enclosure, where both “spectators” and “participants” are forced to seek common shelter from the rain. My extra-sensitivity produced a mildly indignant response from my friend: “Why not? After all, this is a public space.”

For Leung’s friends, the frame of “public space” is irreducibly connected to speech, audibility, and naming, which turn out to be dependent upon a degree of distance, both physical and social. That distance persists for his friends as they crowd under the bridge. But in those close quarters, Leung becomes extra sensitive to a certain friction – haptic, atmospheric, and auditory – that marks the “scene.” An atmosphere of mingled threat and shelter compromises both “private” speech and “public space.”

Brandon LaBelle notes sound’s subarchitectural tendency, the way in which sound can constitute moving inhabitable zones that expand, escape, “misplace and displace” their points of origin. For Mladen Dolar, the voice is among “the very operators of the division into an exterior and an interior, while … not [belonging] to either;” the voice is “the zone of overlapping, the crossing, the extimate.”

On the one hand, as Dolar writes, “[w]e are social beings by the voice and through the voice,” and “it seems that the voice stands at the axis of our social bonds, and that voices are the very texture of the social, as well as the intimate kernel of subjectivity.” But on the other hand, for Leung under the bridge, this connective axis is a disturbing and productive disjuncture, since sound moves through and by way of a body without exactly being either of that body or not of it. Leung’s performance is concerned with

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49 Dolar, A Voice and Nothing More, 81.
51 This interiority of the radically exterior is what makes the voice, for Lacan, one of the objects a – the object voice is a loss and a surplus, passing through the body, but not of it. On a prosaic level, the voice that one hears through material of one’s own body, one’s cranial “bone conduction,” becomes, once exteriorized, a
the puncture and the screen as Lacanian audiovisual figures. Here, the voice is both partition and hole, both a divider and its permeability. This inside-outness of the Lacanian object voice, its paradoxical and inescapable spatiality, puts it in unlikely affinity with questions of ecology, intimacy, speech and noise developed in 1990s accounts of “public sex.”

Leung describes a mingling of expansive vision and occlusive proximity, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, vocal speech and ambiguous environmental noise. This particular audiovisual arrangement appears in a number of accounts of “public sex.” In Ultra-red’s *Second nature*, noisy friction, speech, and atmospheric volumes of electronic music, often layered on the same track, give the scene shape. Samuel Delany’s account of cruising in 1950s and 1960s Lower Manhattan, which I discuss below, offers, in its own way, a similar audiovisuality. Opacity and shelter, and occasional stunning exposure, are the conditions Delany documents, sustained through the development, maintenance, and pedagogical transmission of an extensive infrastructure, an informal architecture. His 1988 memoir, *The Motion of Light in Water*, returns again and again to a kind of groundwork of movable partitions that section and shelter gay social and sexual

different and foreign sound, a “deboned voice,” a fact which is familiar to anyone who has had the disconcerting experience of listening to her own voice on an answering machine, as Douglas Kahn notes (*Noise Water Meat*, 7). It’s important to remember, however, that for Lacan, the object voice, like the other objects a, is radically dematerialized. As Dolar writes, “What language and the body have in common is the voice, but the voice is part neither of language nor of the body” (*Dolar A Voice and Nothing More*, 73). In other words, it is, rather the lack of the voice that language and the body have in common.
life: the “van-walled alleys” between trucks on Manhattan piers; bathroom stall dividers; the translucent polyethylene panels subdividing Allan Kaprow’s *Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts* (1959), of which Delany wrote that “no two groups had seen the same [performances],” and the general anticipation and inscrutability surrounding live performance in general; the near-contiguity of the St. Mark’s Baths and the St. Mark’s Theater, and the interior structure of the baths, which for Delany occasions the kind of instantaneous apprehension of apparent totality that Gotthold Lessing ascribed to successful history painting:

It was lit only in blue, the distant-bulbs appearing to have red centers.

In the gym-sized room were sixteen rows of beds, four to a rank, or sixty-four altogether. I couldn’t see any of the beds themselves, though, because there were three times that many people (maybe a hundred twenty-five) in the room… an undulating mass of naked male bodies, spread wall to wall.

My first response was a kind of heart-thudding astonishment, very close to fear.

I have written of a space at a certain libidinal saturation before. That was not what frightened me. It was rather that the saturation was not only kinesthetic but visible. You could see what was going on throughout the dorm.

The only time I’d come close to feeling the fear before was once, one night, when I had been approaching the trucks, and a sudden group of policemen, up half a block, had marched across the street, blowing their whistles.

It had been some kind of raid. What frightened was, oddly, not the raid itself, but rather the sheer number of men who suddenly began to appear, most of them running, here and there from between the vans.

That night at the docks policemen arrested maybe eight or nine men. The number, however, who fled across the street to be absorbed into the city was
ninety, a hundred and fifty, perhaps as many as two hundred.\textsuperscript{52}

It is the sheer scale of such infrastructures that renders sublime these visions of a kind of totality. Cited by feminist theorist and historian Joan Scott in her influential 1991 essay “The Evidence of Experience” as an example, in Scott’s view at the time, of a certain suspect account of the historical emergence of gay visibility, these passages of Delany’s have unexpected sonic implications. They face, on one side, the unacknowledged 1990s-feminist ground of recent objections, within sound studies, to a certain notion of (sonic) experience as a “naturalized” and therefore insufficiently historical object, to paraphrase Jonathan Sterne and Seth Kim-Cohen. And on the other side, these passages open onto the improvisatory subarchitectures that condition and make queer sound.

While Scott uses Delany’s memoir to exemplify unwarranted optimism about experience as a historiographic resource, Fred Moten reads Delany’s invocation of these visions as “a mark of the totality of the discursive, the total range of the possible, the implicit deconstruction of any singularist and set-theoretic conceptions of the total.”\textsuperscript{53} For Moten, Delany’s memoir, indeed his memories – like his science fiction – performs totality as speculative collectivity.

The problem of the world as container, set, or singular cosmology resembles the form of the enclosure or garden critiqued by Ultra-red. Such a form corresponds to an


\textsuperscript{53} Moten, \textit{In the Break}, 157.
understanding of historical time, public space, and declarative speech shared, perhaps, by Leung’s straight friends who request a name and visual evidence for the scene under the bridge. In a way, Scott is correct, insofar as experience here does something other than serve an evidentiary purpose.

In her essay “Troubling Ecology: Wangechi Mutu, Octavia Butler, and Black Feminist Interventions in Environmentalism,” Chelsea Frazier discusses how the science fictional aesthetics of Butler and Mutu engage and complicate the kind of nonhuman vitalism that appears in arguments about materiality by theorists such as Jane Bennett. Connecting what we might call a set-theoretic notion of the contained ecosystem to the categorical distinction between the human and nonhuman, Frazier, drawing on Sylvia Wynter, suggests that such categories should be neither affirmed nor denied.⁵⁴ Frazier proceeds in part by way of Butler’s science fictional Parable of the Sower, which takes place in a postapocalyptic California. Butler’s main character, Lauren, has a condition called “hyperempathy syndrome” in which she takes on the feelings and physical experiences of others, including nonhuman others. Frazier draws on Alexander Weheliye’s critique of animal studies in Habeus Viscus and its simultaneous reinforcement and neglect of the association of blackness and the nonhuman. But she suggests that another animal studies, another environmentalism – perhaps imagined

through science fictional aesthetics – should be grounded in black studies. Frazier’s argument suggests, against the idea of the world or ecosystem as a set, and the maintenance of the garden as enclosure that Ultra-red critiques, another notion of the outdoors or outside.

The outdoors as an ecological and social condition of “public sex” is both affirmed and belied by the infrastructure Delany discovers:

When newspapers would report, every tenth time it occurred, “Eight men were arrested last night for indecent behavior at the Christopher Street docks,” with no mention of the hundreds who’d escaped, it reassured the city fathers, it reassured the policemen who’d made the arrests, and it reassured the men arrested as well as the ones who had escaped that the image of the homosexual as outside society … was somehow, despite the arrests, intact.55

A problem of accounting reveals layered worlds or sets: those arrested and numbered, and those uncounted escapes; those enfolded in a certain atmospheric shift as they take shelter under a bridge, and those for whom this terrain is just more “public space.” In “Untitled and Outdoors: Thinking with Saidiya Hartman,” Sarah Jane Cervenak and J. Kameron Carter read Hartman’s Scenes of Subjection for its cartography of capture. While conceding that “Scenes’ dominant register is to unfold the logics of containment – freedom’s imbrications with slavery and vice versa – with which the slave and the post-slavery subject had to contend,” they read it nonetheless as “tak[ing] up blackness as

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55 Delany, The Motion of Light on Water, 293-4.
un/housed being.” Citing Moten and Harney’s invocation in *Undercommons* of an “unsettled feeling,” their reading suggests something about the ecology of improvised shelter on the water’s edge, or Delany’s seemingly endless peripatetic search for sex. Outness or the outdoors emerges in apposite relation to the contained and containerized *oikos* of white settler plantation and domestic space that Hartman’s *Scenes* maps, and from which the notion of parkland descends.

The notion of “public sex,” or more precisely the publicity which it upends and on which it depends, has a complex relationship to the outdoors in this sense. Its compromised relation to publicity, domesticity, and shelter emerges in some of the discourse of public sex that I hope to chart here. In 1982, Patrick Califia published an essay in *The Advocate* titled “Public Sex” that would come to influence 1990s discourse on the topic. Califia, co-founder with Gayle Rubin of the San Francisco-based lesbian-feminist BDSM group Samois in the late 1970s, was at that time, a highly visible figure both within lesbian communities and within a broader feminist context. “Public Sex” was written partly in response to an essay by Eric Jay in the gay paper *The Washington Blade*, in which Jay exhorted gay men to curtail cruising and other non-domestic sexual practices as relics of an earlier and more homophobic era, which, at the ostensibly less...
violent time of his writing, compromise the aspirational respectability of the gay rights
movement. Califia’s retort elaborates the history and value of sexual cultures
understood under the heading of “public sex.” What emerges, however, is not a
valorization of publicity as exposure or as the terrain of a subject of politics qua
representation. Rather, what “public sex” as a cultural value means to Califia in this
early articulation is something like the right to opacity, shelter, and occlusion,
inextricable from a desire not to be governed:

There is almost always some kind of physical barrier — some bushes, a
bathroom door, or a car — between the participants in public sex and the outside
world. This barrier screens out the uninitiated. If more than two people are
present, one of them usually acts as a lookout. Thus, this behavior is more
properly called ‘quasi-public sex.’ … If people are going to see what is going on
in these places, they must intrude. They must actively look for the things that
will offend them, either by penetrating physical barriers, by setting up covert
surveillance, or by posing as potential participants.57

In 1994 Califia’s essay was reissued in an anthology of the same name. In the 1996
volume Policing Public Sex: Queer Politics and the Future of AIDS Activism, which marked
the historical moment this chapter attempts in part to understand, the relation between
terrain and architecture, as much as representation or speech, are the pervasive
concern.58 Nearly every essay lingers on this question. By 1998, when Lauren Berlant and

58 Dangerous Bedfellows Collective [Ephen Glenn Colter, Wayne Hoffman, Eva Pendleton, Alison Redick,
and David Serlin], Policing Public Sex: Queer Politics and the Future of AIDS Activism (Boston, MA: South End
Michael Warner’s influential essay was published, the emphasis on sex’s architectural and environmental conditions, its terrain or floorplan, had become so pronounced that the authors were compelled to mark their digression from it. They aimed, they wrote, at:

not just a safe zone for queer sex but the changed possibilities of identity, intelligibility, publics, culture, and sex that appear when the heterosexual couple is no longer the referent or the privileged example of sexual culture.59

Perhaps this emphasis was in part a function of a focus on New York City, whose cultures of sexual gathering and commerce were at that time beginning to undergo planned, top-down destruction by Rudolph Giuliani’s mayoral administration. In 1994, the year of the reissue of “Public Sex,” Giuliani took office and began the multi-pronged campaign to reshape the city’s sexual oikos, its economy and ecology, that I referenced above. His administration pursued a series of tactics: the vast expansion of the city’s police force and the introduction of “broken windows” policing; the reduction of mental health and homelessness services; and partnerships with corporations, in tandem with rezoning, in order to push sexual and social traffic out of areas like Times Square and the Christopher Street Pier. In Policing Public Sex, it is clearly infrastructure and architecture that are being defended from what the anthology’s contributors understand as systematic attack by the state.

Exemplifying some of these concerns is a roundtable discussion in which Kendall Thomas interviews two party producers, Liddell Jackson and Jocelyn Taylor. Jackson developed the monthly gathering Jacks of Color to offer men of color an alternative both to the older New York Jacks party, which hosted safer sex practices, particularly group masturbation, but was white-dominated, and to the sexual terrain of the piers, which was more welcoming but less safe from police raids and less encouraging of safer sex. Jocelyn Taylor, with artist Julie Tolentino, created the long-running party Clit Club, which initially primarily served queer women of color. In addition to being a dance party and social space, Clit Club aimed to give a more permanent home to the experiments in lesbian “public sex” begun by Califia and others in the late 1970s, and in this sense its priorities were shaped by the logic of the feminist “sex wars” over pornography, sex work, and S/M.

In the headnotes, Thomas writes that they are conversing “with a special urgency” in December 1995, “in the midst of a successful effort by New York’s public officials to dismantle the city’s sexual public sphere” and “public sexual institutions.” The discussion oscillates between an understanding of “public sex” that emphasizes speech and representation, and one that insists, conversely, on an architecture of opacity and noise. Thomas begins by asking Taylor and Jackson about Califia’s 1982 “Public

\[60\] Dangerous Bedfellows Collective, *Policing Public Sex*, 53.
Sex” essay. Jocelyn Taylor responds, “Calling a club ‘The Clit Club’ is an example of public sex because that level of visibility, that level of sexualized visibility, was highly political. Using word ‘clit’ was key.”61 Later, however, Taylor discusses her and Tolentino’s attempts to start a backroom modeled loosely after those at gay male bars. She speculates about why the space was hardly ever used, wondering if it was the “vertical surfaces” and absence of mattresses, the lighting, or the pressure to “represent” lesbian sex:

it didn’t take off. It’s not that people weren’t having sex in the space-- girls were having sex in the bathroom and behind the bar -- they just weren’t doing it in what I would call a performative arena. It wasn’t the kind of situation like a lot of gay male backrooms, where it might be completely dark or where you’re just sort of feeling your way around.62

Clit Club and its backroom are particularly interesting because they move between occlusion and a certain imperative toward representation. Photography was rarely permitted even in the main area of the party. On the other hand, Clit Club, even in its name, partook of a kind of remedial politics of representation, meant to “reclaim” sexual expression in the aftermath of feminist debate about pornography and sex work, and in a context in which lesbians were viewed as less sexual than gay men. The party hosted strippers as well as performance art of various kinds, and porn was screened. This was a space of aesthetic and atmospheric experimentation, but it also had a job to do. Perhaps

61 Dangerous Bedfellows Collective, Policing Public Sex, 55.
62 Dangerous Bedfellows Collective Policing Public Sex, 62-3.
this representational pressure rendered the prospect of sex in the back room too laborious and burdensome, given all it would have to mean. Maybe it lacked the richness of a certain obscurity and ambiguity. Or maybe that atmospheric saturation, that sense of feeling each other (out) that Delany and Leung discuss, was already present in women’s interactions outside of what might be represented, remediably, as sex. Nonetheless, the backroom held a charge whether or not it was in use, unfolding throughout the party. It was open, but also closed, a recreational interior that remained generative despite its underuse.

Lidell Jackson responds to Taylor’s description of the difficulties confronting Clit Club’s backroom by making a legal and structural distinction. “There’s a difference,” he says, “between sex clubs and backrooms in the gay male community.” A backroom is a space to hide from raids as well as to have sex, a place to “sneak into and sneak out of.” Their function is concealed in order not to imperil the bar’s liquor license, he says, so they often don’t have “condoms, lube, and information,” and are part of a culture in which condom use is not expected. Sex clubs, on the other hand, Jackson suggests, are usually alcohol free or BYOB, and their layout encourages certain modes of visual and vocal transparency:

There's no space for dancing, there's minimal space for socializing, and there's very little darkness. There's a corner here or a corner there, but there's a lot of
light around, and a lot of honesty about what you want.\textsuperscript{63}

The backroom, like the tearoom, hosts sexual communion, communication, and communicability conducted in near-darkness through an acoustical environment that requires heightened sensitivity to environmental sound. The implication, although Jackson does not say it, is that Clit Club’s notion of “public sex” was subject to these conflicting formats and priorities.

Jackson and Taylor’s discussion in general, and the generative problem of Clit Club’s backroom in particular, reveal something of the odd ideality with which the notion of queer public sex seems to have been suffused. This ideality is, I think, related to the divergent temporalities and affects that people invoked when they referred to it, a divergence that makes itself felt in their different understandings of what a backroom was, or could be. What I mean by this is that, in accounts of gay male subcultures, and in narratives of AIDS organizing, public sex was a thing in the process of being lost and defended against that loss and encroachment. It became an object of both nostalgia and militancy. On the other hand, lesbian public sex never took on this institutional consistency; a code or culture in which such encounters might be embedded and shared remained and remains in the future, despite the vigor with which this dream was pursued by some. The feminist “sex wars,” combined with the lingering utopianism of

\textsuperscript{63} Dangerous Bedfellows Collective, \textit{Policing Public Sex}, 63.
the 1970s and the involvement of many lesbians in AIDS-related sex education efforts, had helped to generate interest in fomenting specifically lesbian sexual institutions, and Tolentino and Taylor set up and maintained Clit Club’s backroom in hopes its future occupants would find it. The party, however, ended in the early 2000s, and, as Taylor said, the name, and a kind of anachival future, is most of what remains of it.

By contrast, in Delany’s memoir, he recalls being shaken, as far back as the late 1950s, by a sudden, sublime apprehension “not of hundreds, not of thousands, but rather of millions of gay men” that both preceded and surrounded him, and the concomitant awareness “that history had, actively and already, created for us whole galleries of institutions, good and bad, to accommodate our sex.” It may be too flat to juxtapose Clit Club’s backroom and the spaces that Jackson, Leung, and Delany document, and to conclude from their diverging temporalities that “public sex” took place mainly in the past and in the future. Nonetheless, the preoccupation with it was sustained by romantic temporalities of both loss and promise. In this, as well as in the way it occasioned a struggle over land and space, public sex was imagined as a commons.

There is a broader question here as well about spatialized sound and its relation to music and contemporary art. Sound has, of course, historically been associated with

64 Delany, The Motion of Light on Water, 293.
time (timekeeping, and the temporal displacements of live and recorded sound) and vision with spatialized perception. “What the eye sees at a glance, [the poet] counts out to us gradually, with a perceptible slowness.”65 This question arises in the context of formalist “sound art” of the 1970s; Max Neuhaus, here paraphrased by Christoph Cox, understood his own transition from musician-composer to artist as “a shift from the time of music to the space of sound,” spatiality being understood as an attribute of the visual arts broadly, but also, at that moment, marking a move away from movable musical objects and toward site specificity.66 Although he began his career as a percussionist, Neuhaus is known for his departure from metrical beat, his work characterized by continuous, sometimes hardly perceptible ambient tones that give a volumetric consistency to the surrounding environmental noise, exposing and attending to its environment not by reducing intentional sound (as in the best-known works of John Cage), but rather by saturating an existing soundscape. Of Times Square (1974-77, 2002-ongoing), located underneath a subway grate where Seventh Avenue peels off of Broadway, between 45th and 46th Street, Neuhaus said:

I think the easiest way to think about it is to think of the air confined by the walls of the complex chamber as a block of material which the speaker is vibrating. The vibration of that block of air is exposed through the opening of the grating in the

sidewalk, as the work’s sound.\textsuperscript{67}

This block of sonic material is patently spatial. But according to Cox, what is framed by Neuhaus and many other practitioners and writers as spatialized sound is better understood as durational. As the counterterm to quantitatively metrical time – musical time, work time, clock time – duration is qualitative. And although, for Cox, all sound is strictly and “irreducibly temporal,”\textsuperscript{68} he suggests that it is actually rhythmic or properly musical sound which may be conceptualized spatially, because such sound divides durational flux into “discrete, discontinuous,” bounded units – as, he offers, on the face of a clock.\textsuperscript{69}

Cox’s mapping of an indivisible duration onto this mode of sound art implies that, while sound may constitute its own inhabitable zone, its edge or limit cannot be strictly speaking immanent, but must be externally imposed, either by metrical division, or by a spatialized container. That is, for Cox, sound cannot be architectural; he points to the work’s title – \textit{Time[’]s Square} – in order to suggest that space must be secondary to temporality in our reading of the work. I would point here, however, not only to Neuhaus’s own emphasis on sound as volumetric, containing and conditioning

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{68} “Sound is irreducibly temporal; and, in my view, sound art powerfully manifests time—not the pulsed time of music but the deeper time of duration, temporal flow itself. Hence sound art’s coincidence and connection with Minimalism, Earthworks, installation, and other forms that, as Michael Fried famously complained, substitute infinite duration for transcendent presentness.” Christoph Cox, “About Time: On Sound Art,” \textit{Artforum}, November 2007, http://artforum.com/new.php?id=18807&pn=inprint.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{69} Cox, “Installing Duration,” 115.}
spatialized sociality. Even in the context of music, we may also consider forms of acoustical or spatialized audition, or the history of recordings assembled from spatially stacked and layered tracks. That is, the point here for me is not the impossible and useless task of disentangling space and time in order to declare the primacy of one or another in a particular aesthetic context. Rather, I seek here to examine the ways in which spatialized sound became a concern for artists, critics, and queer organizing under the rubric of “public sex” at a particular moment.

Indeed, although the interest in space by Neuhaus and others in the 1970s was associated with the move away from metrical music, a parallel impulse was at work within arguably one of the most rigorously and rhythmically metrical sound cultures of all: disco. In his research into 1970s New York sound – dance music, on the one hand, and “sound art” on the other – the artist Kabir Carter has shown how dance music began to incorporate “environmental” or spatialized sonic elements.70

For Carter, the 1973 track “Yellow Train” by the French group Resonance, which was frequently played and remixed at David Mancuso’s mixed gay disco party The Loft, is among several which exemplify the spatial tendencies more widely attributed to sonic art of this period. “Yellow Train” opens with the sound of an approaching train which

70 Kabir Carter, “Space and Body” (presentation as part of the class Disorganizing Sound: Twentieth Century Improvised Music and the Beyond, at the Public School, Brooklyn, NY, October 24, 2010).
merges into a crescendo of driving percussive rhythm without ever quite dissolving into that percussion as it seems to pass us by. The sounds of a couple of echoic steam whistles, vibrating alarm bells, and some more chugging wheels are the only other figural and atmospheric touches on the otherwise spare, but almost melodic, drum sequence that comprises the entirety of the track.

From these limited elements – the drums’ undulating rise and dip, and the equally percussive railroad sounds – a kind of volumetric space is developed. If disco is widely seen as a lavishly ornamental form, here it is shown to be not only quite formally constrained, but also engaged with the same perceptual and formalist concerns about the relation between sound and space that also preoccupied sound artists working at that time, such as Max Neuhaus. The dance floor is here shown not to be merely a surface, but rather a spatialized volume, as Douglas Crimp has also suggested.

Crimp’s essay on the subject implies that disco was a highly durational, if not endurance-based, form. He describes the morning after a night out:

On the way up Bedford Street to Seventh Avenue, two guys overtook and passed us. When one was right next to him, Steven drew out under his breath in a reverent whisper, “Disss-co.” He gave it the same whooshing, electronic sound as the feedback drone that lingered in our ears, muting the sounds of the early Sunday morning. The two men smiled knowingly. There was no question where all of us were coming from. 71

A certain stretched phonic substance, a disco accent, encompasses the distended temporality of staying out all night, the long play of the extended remix,\(^72\) and the immersive drone attributed so easily to nothing other than sonic art at that historical moment. This musical duration was also architectural; Crimp writes of the raised platforms at the club Twelve West and the balconies at the disco the Saint that they furnished “options”: either “you could immerse yourself in the thick of dancing bodies, or you could stand slightly above and apart and take in the beauty of the multitude…”\(^73\)

The club’s volumetric space is at once sublimely translucent, made for audiovisual saturation, and yielding vistas of dancing flesh, and, on the other hand, rendered opaque by virtue of the density of that same flesh. This simultaneous exposure and occlusion offers up an experience of shelter and disclosure that comes close to what it seems people meant when they talked about “public sex.”

In Delany’s memoir of the preceding decade, he, like Crimp, and with a similar tension between taking part and taking in, notes the architectural conditioning of sexual

\(^72\) Dance music historian Tim Lawrence notes that in the 1970s disco tracks were lengthened until they filled 12-inch records to meet the needs of DJs who would otherwise have to buy two copies of the same record in order to extend certain passages in a dance track. Tim Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture, 1970–1979* (Durham, NC: and London Duke University Press, 2004).

\(^73\) “It was a square inscribed in another square, with triangular, stepped, carpeted platforms on three sides of the dance floor (the fourth triangle that would have completed the square was only implied by the other three; it was actually a continuation of the dance floor that gave onto the entrance lobby in one direction and a juice bar and lounge area in the other). You could stand and dance in place on the platforms and look out over the dance floor at its sea of moving bodies, spotting friends or the attractive stranger you’d noticed earlier dancing next to you. …The platforms at 12 West gave you options. You could fully immerse yourself in the thick of dancing bodies, or you could stand slightly above and apart and take in the beauty of the multitude moving as one while dancing in place to the same beat” (Crimp, “Disss-co;”14).
practices: on the one hand, “the subway johns or the trucks, [which,] while they accommodated sex, cut it, visibly, up into tiny portions”\textsuperscript{74} And on the other, the baths, where Delany first remarks on what he imagines as a mass homoerotic body. The encounter that Carter’s research has staged between the language of gay disco and the “spatialized” sonic art of the same period finds its echo in Delany’s observation of “space at certain libidinal saturation.”\textsuperscript{75}

2.5 Incompletion: The ‘X-Plicit,’ the Love Scene, and the Surround

Ultra-red’s \textit{Second nature} and its critique of the pastoral emerged in the context of other works in the 1990s which took up questions of sex and space. Most notable among these is Lorraine O’Grady’s photomontage diptych \textit{The Clearing} (1991), which depicts a palimpsestic, unending rape and an outdoor “love scene,” both ringed by trees. Below, I also consider Ellen Cantor’s quasi-pornographic 1990s videos, which develop the fairytale forest as a site of horror and romance. I read the problematic but compelling preoccupation with the form of the “love scene” in her work, which I will argue takes the form of a cosmology.

I put Cantor and O’Grady in conversation here because between them lies a conceptually and historically generative interval. O’Grady’s \textit{The Clearing} appeared in an

\textsuperscript{74} “It was like Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts. No one ever got to see its whole.” Delany, \textit{The Motion of Light in Water}, 174.

\textsuperscript{75} Samuel Delany, \textit{The Motion of Light in Water}, 173.
influential 1993 exhibition that Cantor organized at the then-fledgling commercial
gallery David Zwirner. This was “Coming to Power: 25 Years of Sexually X-Plicit Art by
Women,” which gathered together artists who had already been widely known for
decades alongside a cohort of then-emerging artists. “Coming to Power” raises some
questions about the archive it names, and about the “x-plicit” and its troubled
relationship to visuality. O’Grady and Cantor, I argue, mediate these questions through
a specifically pastoral mode, offering context and texture for some of my concerns in this
chapter. I reflect on the status of the X in “x-plicit,” and its potential relation to ecology,
occlusion, and representation. Finally, I conclude by considering revisions proposed by
José Muñoz, Fred Moten, and Stefano Harney to the form and shape of the commons.

“Coming to Power” had, I believe, a number of consequences. For one thing, it
marked a definitive shift in the work of both Cantor and O’Grady. Each of them, in
exceedingly different ways, went on to pursue a specifically pastoral imaginary in order
to address questions of corporeality and difference. But more importantly, “Coming to
Power” yielded a critical art historical archive of the formation known as “feminist art.”
It was from this exhibition that a particular assemblage of feminist art began to be
consolidated under the aegis of Liz Kotz and other art historians and critics. The archival
formation of “feminist art” emerged, in other words, from the specific range of styles
and figures included in “Coming to Power.” These styles and figures still tend to
represent the idea of feminist art and its history on syllabi and anthologies, and in
subsequent shows such as WACK! (2007). To give some sense of this legacy, some of the artists included were Yoko Ono, Carolee Schneemann, Peggy Ahwesh, Lynda Benglis, Holly Hughes, Louise Bourgeois, Cicciolina, Mary Beth Edelson, Barbara Hammer, and Cindy Sherman, Annie Sprinkle, Hannah Wilke, and Alice Neel, among others.

Perusing this partial list, one is struck by how much these names have continued to stand for “feminist art,” and, then, secondarily, by the sheer heterogeneity of their practices, which makes it all the weirder that they have been grouped together so often. That the very notion of “feminist art” has a kind of 1990s feel to it (at least to me), despite many of its key works being dated much earlier, suggests to me that the show was influential in shaping this formation. “Coming to Power” also included some then-emerging artists, who have since become well-known: Nan Goldin, Zoe Leonard, Nicole Eisenman, and others.

O’Grady was the only black artist included in the show, outside of the performance art and video programming, which was not archived. (Incidentally, as part of this programming, Clit Club’s monthly party was held one night at the gallery.) This division between performance and object-based work has often fallen and continues to fall along racial lines. Performance is cheaper by several orders of magnitude for

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institutions to acquire or host, offering the institution the appearance of “diversity” without the investment of money, or in this case, square footage. This was a reason O’Grady cites for shifting the focus of her own practice from performance to 2-D work. In the early 1990s, after having taken a long hiatus, she “went to the wall,” she says, in order to try to make a living from selling artwork. O’Grady was thus also among the show’s “younger” cohort, having had her first solo exhibition in the photomontage style she became known for just two years earlier. But she was in actuality older than most of them, and, in an untimely way, challenged what she found to be a generational, predominantly white feminist sex radicalism whose enthusiasms and provocations she found flat.

The two confounding questions of “Coming to Power” remain, for me, first the enigma of the “x-plicit” in the show’s title. And second, the question of those now-doubled 25 years: from 1968 to 1993, and from 1993 to the fall of 2016, when the show was remounted in its entirety at Maccarone Gallery. These two moments of retrospection yielded different formations of power, sex, time, and aesthetics, and gender. The latter timeframe -- from 1993 to 2016 -- also spans the period of profound

transition within queer and feminist approaches to nature with which this chapter has been, in part, concerned.

Two years after curating “Coming to Power,” Ellen Cantor began making videos, a practice she pursued and developed for the rest of her life. Cantor’s first video, *Madame Bovary’s Revenge* (1995), intercuts scenes from Louis Malle’s 1958 film *The Lovers* with pornographic sex scenes. In an interview conducted three years later, Cantor describes the specific function of these pornographic intercuts, which she introduced in order to “complete” the “unfinished” love scenes of Louis Malle’s *The Lovers*. She describes how the actors in the non-pornographic Malle film had “real sex,” but that those scenes were later cut. In describing the making of her video, Cantor says, “the idea was to complete the love scenes”:

[Interviewer] And you’re not afraid to take away the freedom of imagination?

[Cantor] No, I like it. Personally, I like to see things as they are. I’m always curious. There are so many things you don’t see -- you don’t know what it’s like when other people are in bed, what it’s like in their relationships, what goes on in their heads and what they talk about. All those things you can only guess at, or see on TV, in movies, or read in novels. But is it real?78

The question of realness, and specifically the question of “real sex,” is one that Cantor’s work remained fixated on. But what is “real sex,” and what is its relation to fantasy, film photography, and aesthetics? What is its relation to visual evidence? It’s the blurred

graininess of Cantor’s videos to which their “heightened realism,” the realism of homemade porn and bootleg copies, has been attributed.\textsuperscript{79} Maybe for Cantor the x-plicit was not about realism, but just the realness of fantasy, crossed with the fantasy of realness. In the breathlessly, enthusiastically narrated \textit{Club Vanessa}, made a year later, Cantor speaks hopefully to the camera about ‘real love’: “[E]verywhere we go, we’ll have lovers, people who we’re really in love with, and they really love us too, and we’ll make love with them and it will be like real love.” In the supposedly spelled out or splayed out, an idea of sexual “facts” and an idea of sexual fantasy are laminated together, in hallucinatory realness.

“They were really making love,” Cantor said of the lead actors in \textit{The Lovers}.

“Then,” she said, Louis Malle “cut out all the explicit sex.” Cantor reopens and redoubles those cuts in \textit{Madame Bovary’s Revenge}, “complet[ing] the love scenes” with hardcore porn.\textsuperscript{80} The love scene is cut and soothed with an ongoing, unfinished dream of completeness. In that blur, comprehensiveness and comprehension give way to one another. In its completeness, Cantor’s idea of the love scene is a cosmology, a contained but endless pastoral, a mode to which she returned repeatedly. In references to fairy tales and forests, and in videos such as \textit{Bambi’s Beastly Buddies} (1999) and \textit{Within Heaven and Hell} (1996), the pastoral appears as a site of inseparable horror and romance,

\textsuperscript{79} Mathew Yokobosky, “Filling the Ellipsis...The Public Videotapes of the Private Ellen Cantor,” in \textit{My Perversion is the Belief in True Love}.
\textsuperscript{80} Cantor, Interview with Gerald Matt, in \textit{My Perversion Is the Belief in True Love}.
governed by a natural law of inevitable, reproductive seriality, about which more in the third chapter.

Thinking about Cantor’s pastoral, and what exceeds and recedes from such a measure of completion or consummation, we may turn to Lorraine O’Grady’s diptych *The Clearing* (1991). *The Clearing* quite expressly offers a pastoral vision of romance and horror. The two black and white photomontages of *The Clearing* are set in identical pastoral landscapes: an unmarked field, ringed by trees. In the right panel, a nude black woman lies on the ground, gazing blankly off into space or time, as a white, skull-headed figure in torn chainmail grasps her breast with one hand. The left photomontage shows the same black female figure floating in the sky, in recumbent embrace with a white man, also nude. He has a human head, not a skull, and the chainmail is gone, but the proximity of the images suggests that the white male figures are perhaps the same. Below the apparently blissful couple, two black children chase a ball near a pile of clothes. Close by, a gun lies in the cropped grass.

The ex- or X- of “Sexually X-Plicit Art” seems to denote an outwardness, a bareness without shadow. In *The Clearing*, on the other hand, we enter the x-plicit by way of its parts: X- and -plicit, which, like the word *ply*, suggests folds, plaits, or palimpsestic layers. Here, the form of photomontage affords a compression of layers. This pertains not only to the form and subject matter of the work, but also, and inseparably, to the particular history of its exhibition and reception.
In her essay published for the show’s catalogue, O’Grady describes a studio visit with a white curator who liked the left panel, but not the right, in which sexual violence is foregrounded by the skull-faced figure in chainmail. She describes this white curator asking her whether the two panels were meant to depict a kind of “before and after.” No, she says,

they’re Both/And. … Later, when he has left the studio, I can see that “The Clearing” has collapsed many of my love affairs, which I have only recently begun to see in historic and cultural terms, and has combined them into a single event in which beginning and end occur simultaneously. Looking at this couple… I realize there is a palimpsest that may go beyond _____ and ______ and me. Perhaps it is Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. Or Cortez and La Malinche.81

In her catalog essay, O’Grady describes her understanding of art-historical nudity as a stripping away of historical layers, a position which she has counterposed to a sexualized understanding of nudity that she felt prevailed in much of the other works in “Coming to Power.” This notion of stripping away recalls Spillers’ remark, in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” about “stripping down”:

In that regard, the names by which I am called in the public place render an example of signifying property plus. In order for me to speak a truer word concerning myself, I must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made in excess over time, assigned by a particular historical order, and there await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness.82

Both O’Grady and Spillers extend the possibility of stripping away layers in the specific context of a palimpsestic overabundance of names and namelessness. The overdetermined names of Jefferson, Hemings, Cortez, and La Malinche cover an unnamed collectivity whose anonymity is equally overdetermined. Alongside these overstuffed figures, the specific anonymity of O’Grady’s lovers designated by “____ and _____ and me” feels uneasy, as if the consequences of naming them have been precariously and temporarily suspended.

Lest Spillers’ reader imagine that what might remain after this process of stripping away is something like a rediscovered individuated self, she follows the passage by noting, “The personal pronouns are offered in the service of a collective

function." What would it even be to complete a love scene, in the face of this terrible palimpsestic surplus? More than and less than complete, The Clearing offers up romance as horror in compressed time. Its collapsed seriality, “a single event in which beginning and end occur simultaneously,” arrives through O’Grady’s cuts, (photo)montagically, cinematically. Meanwhile, she writes, the gun in the grass “threatens the scene,” prompting a cinematic narrativity both suspended and overfilled.

The question of this simultaneous overfullness and incompleteness of the love scene may be traced through the history of the work’s production and exhibition, as well. O’Grady has written that The Clearing was originally intended to be a triptych. The third panel was to include a black male model, but that image was never made. Reduced to two panels, the work was then made to suffer a further abridgement in its exhibition. O’Grady arrived at the opening of “Coming to Power” to find only half of the diptych hanging on the wall. Cantor handed the other panel of the work back to O’Grady at the opening, to her shock.83

Cantor passed away in 2013, so I was not able to ask her how this decision was made, and she did not, to my knowledge, comment publically on it. O’Grady, however,

has written and spoken publically about the removal of the work, without receiving a
clear public response from Cantor or David Zwirner, the gallery’s proprietor. At the time,
O’Grady was told that it was a question of “space.” Interestingly, it was the right panel,
depicting sexual violence -- the same one that drew the objection of the “white male
curator” -- that was pulled.

Both panels of the diptych were on display when I visited “Coming to Power” in the fall of 2016. In an erasure of the prior erasure, the original removal of half of the work, and its subsequent restoration in the recent show, was not addressed in the exhibition’s materials. Perhaps this was because “Coming to Power” was remounted as part of a series of retrospectives, screenings, and discussions of Cantor’s work in New York, San Francisco, and London, and thus had something of the character of a memorial.

The ongoing series of curtailments to which The Clearing was subjected makes the title of O’Grady’s 1993 catalogue essay for “Coming to Power” all the keener: “On Being the Presence that Signals an Absence.” The essay addresses O’Grady’s status as the only black artist in the show; in it, the artist herself impossibly embodies “the presence that signals an absence.” While she was writing, O’Grady did not yet know about the removal of the diptych’s right panel, but her account of black presence and absence nonetheless presciently gestured toward it.
What does the work’s multivalent incompletion offer to Cantor’s pastoral vision of “completing the love scene,” or to the very idea of the x-plicit? It’s as if what The Clearing offered was not too little but too much for a show convening “sexually x-plicit art.” The incompletion it extended, which is inseparable from its palimpsestic density and overfullness, had to be reduced by half in order to “fit” in the show’s archive of “feminist art.”

The same year as “Coming to Power,” O’Grady was invited to speak on a CAA panel, where she would be, again, the only black woman. She reflects on how her participation always seems to disturb the scene that her “inclusion” is meant to harmoniously complete.84 Recalling “Coming to Power” in a 2010 radio interview, O’Grady sees The Clearing as offering a similar uncontainment or interruption to a notion of ‘sexuality,’ “a moment of sexual exuberance” within what she saw as a predominantly white sex radicalism that had occasioned the look back to 1968.85 Perhaps what seeps across that “moment” is the kind of sexual temporality that O’Grady’s work invokes: not an archive, but a palimpsest.

In an essay titled “Living in the Absence of a Body: The (Sus)Stain of Black Female (W)holeness,” Rizvana Bradley takes up Toni Morrison’s account of the 1991 Senate confirmation hearings for Clarence Thomas, in which Morrison suggests that the

85 O’Grady and Gosin, “Lorraine O’Grady’s Natures.”
sexual “staining” of Thomas was displaced onto the figure of Anita Hill. Expanding on the material capacity of the stain to seep across text and image and erode the figure itself, Bradley writes:

The black woman, imagined as the material event of the stain, signals the stakes of a specifically violent embodied history – the black woman bleeds over and thereby violates and contaminates the edge or boundary between the contemporary moment and a persistent history of black subjection.86

In The Clearing, that edge -- the edge of the cut, the join of the montage -- is a contaminated one, in which the time of the “sex scene,” and the time of the photographic scene, can’t be contained in a before or after. O’Grady had written in advance of the show that she worried the piece was not “representative.” But the impossibility of a single figural representation is the condition that cuts open the archival function of “Coming to Power” as a whole. The doubled figures of The Clearing are not a couple; they bar, cover, and mark the substrate of a crowd. We might think about the X of “X-plicit Art” as variable, as cover, as mark or stain, as kiss, signature, and crossing.87 What is the known unknown, the supposedly carnal “knowledge,”

87 For a black feminist reading of “the figure of an X” in the context of racial patriarchy, see Denise Ferreira da Silva, “Black Feminism, Refusal, and the Limits of Critique” (presentation at Barnard Center for Research on Women, November 24, 2015), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T3B5Gh2JSQg. Silva takes up Spillers on slavery’s ungendering effects, as well as Nahum Chandler’s X: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), alongside questions of value and (in)value embedded in the X as a figure that is mathematical, chromosomal, and sexual.
designated by an X? An X rating promises something will be exposed, while barring or covering the bareness it avows.

The X rating is applied to both romance and horror, sex and violence (and sometimes graphic language too). Unlike the NC-17 rating, introduced in 1990 by the Motion Picture Association of America, the X rating was never fully formalized, and never trademarked. Anyone could apply an X to any film; the rating thus became not only a warning and a mark of exclusion from mainstream theaters, but also an awning of sorts for pornographic works to gather under and advertise themselves. To be seen and simultaneously unseen is the realm of the X.

The X and its layers thus return us, in a way, to the cruising ground at Griffith Park. What if we imagine exposure as not only that of the photographic image or the surveilled terrain, but in the sense as well of contagion, and as the feel of surfaces pressed together, covering each other? This is the sound of a certain occlusive intimacy that Ultra-red documents without representing.

Ultra-red’s critique of the public garden, developed in the liner notes of Second nature, is also, I think, the basis of a shift in emphasis advanced by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney. Instead of the image of a commons encroached upon by enclosure, they elaborate a common surround, that which encircles and runs above and beneath

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enclosure itself: “The fort really was surrounded, is besieged by what still surrounds it, the common beyond and beneath -- before and before -- enclosure.” Such an account challenges not only privatization, but as in Second nature, notions of public civility as well as politics and the subject on which it is grounded.

The notion of the surround also suggests, alongside José Muñoz’s account of a “queer punk commons,” something about sex, romance, and music. What kind of resource and (or as) expenditure is sex, and what in queer romance remains apposite to notions of public good? Does an ecological imaginary extend to the mosh pit or the Canterbury Apartments, L.A.’s legendary punk flophouse, discussed by Muñoz, or to the suppressed, inscrutable sexual noise enlivening the park grounds on Second nature? I ask not in order to make punk’s specific (anti)musicality an exemplar, but because Muñoz’s elaboration of a queer commons points less toward a contained pastoral fullness, than toward radical, and ragged, incompletion. Such incompletion may be the resource a queer commons affords.

We might understand this question of incompletion the love scene alongside a certain exhaustion that rises from O’Grady’s palimpsest. This exhaustion is about tiredness, but also about an ecological (in)exhaustibility. The commons has been understood as a site for the management of exhaustible or inexhaustible enjoyment, at

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89 Moten and Harney, The Undercommons, 17.
least since Garrett Hardin’s influential 1968 essay “The Tragedy of the Commons” both popularized the term and defined it as a finite set, a limited set of resources. Though Hardin’s essay was almost immediately critiqued for its fatalistic skepticism about collectivized resources, the question of exhaustion remains, attending reproductive labor as well as love scenes of all kinds. Inexhaustibility would, in any case, perhaps be more horrific. If the horror and romance of the pastoral derive from a certain unremitting seriality, the next chapter takes up this notion as a specifically gendered question.
3. Chatter and Frequency: Sexual Difference and the Ontology of Vibration

noise ... has a peculiarly female quality, from typing pools to sewing factories to switchboard operators. In a sense, we have always been secretly aware of the privileged relationship between women, technology and noise: that most fantastically energetic and machinic of data, conversation, has always been regarded, for better or worse, as the preserve of women

Nina Power, “Woman Machines”

3.1 Wave-Forms: Feminine Chatter and Vocal Consent

Chat, and its necessarily feminized, necessarily aural onomatopoeis – the word derives from birdsong— are the subject of this chapter. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche describes a natural disaster of feminine noise:

*Women and Their Effect in the Distance*

Have I still ears? Am I only ear, and nothing else besides? Here I stand in the midst of the surging of the breakers, whose white flames fork up to my feet; from all sides there is howling, threatening, crying, and screaming at me, while in the lowest depths the old earth shaker sings his aria hollow like a roaring bull; he beats such an earth shaker’s measure thereto, that even the hearts of these weathered rock monsters tremble at the sound. Then, suddenly, as if born out of nothingness, there appears before the portal of this hellish labyrinth, only a few fathoms distant, a great sailing ship gliding silently along like a ghost. Oh, this ghostly beauty! With what enchantment it seizes me! What? Has all the repose and silence in the world embarked here? Does my happiness itself sit in this quiet place, my happier ego, my second immortalized self? Still not dead, but also no longer living? As a ghostlike, calm, gazing, gliding, sweeping, neutral being? Similar to the ship, which, with its white sails, like an immense butterfly,

\[\text{References:}\]

passes over the dark sea! Yes! Passing over existence! That is it! That would be it! It seems that the noise here has made me a visionary? All great noise causes one to place happiness in the calm and the distance. When a man is in the midst of his hubbub, in the midst of the breakers of his plots and plans, he there sees perhaps calm, enchanting beings glide past him, for whose happiness and retirement he longs: they are women. He almost thinks that there with the women dwells his better self; that in these calm places even the loudest breakers become still as death, and life itself a dream of life. But still! but still! my noble enthusiast, there is also in the most beautiful sailing ship so much noise and bustling, and alas, so much petty, pitiable bustling! The enchantment and the most powerful effect of women is, to use the language of philosophers, an effect at a distance, an actio in distans; there belongs thereto, however, primarily and above all, distance!²

From an optical distance, the feminine as sexual difference appears to be primarily visual; however, as we approach, Nietzsche suggests, the ideality of the feminine, like a trap, yields to terrible noise. This chapter takes up the feminine surplus marked by “so much noise and bustling—so much petty, pitiable bustling.”

This bustling is, in this case, the noise of labor and sociality, which is for Nietzsche joined to the overwhelming din of the sea itself, “the surging of the breakers,” and their “howling, threatening, crying, and screaming.” I am concerned here with the gendering of both of these kinds of noise: not only the wave-form or frequency that marks sexual difference as noise, but also the bustle of feminine labor and prattle, what Avital Ronell, writing about Valerie Solanas, called “an ensemble of subaltern feints: the complaints, the nagging, the picking the chatter, the nonsense... the moaning and

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“bitching” associated with women’s speech. In this chapter, I argue that these two kinds of sexually marked noise – chat and vibratory frequency – turn out to be irreducibly formally and conceptually entangled.

My aim is twofold. First, I open sonic ontologies of frequency, vibration, and seriality to the question of sexual difference, which I believe to be their ground. Second, I propose that feminist approaches to the voice ought to maintain an emphasis on chatter and noise. Chatter and noise, I suggest, suspend and complicate questions of representation, to which the voice as a figure for the subject is susceptible. Moreover, I argue that chatter and noise offer better purchase on the materiality, form, and sociality of sexual difference.

In referring to vibration and frequency, I invoke a theoretical discourse on vibration and sound’s ontology that is given its most coherent shape in Steve Goodman’s book Sonic Warfare. I will take up the question of vibration, asking how vibe and vibration became a colloquial shorthand for affective feel, expressed in (sub)auditory terms. The trajectory of the notion of vibe turns out to involve both modern dance and property law, as I will show. I consider as well the related terms waver and waiver, and the tremulous movement that they describe. This chapter also considers questions of gendered seriality. Feminine seriality was at one time central to

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feminist readings of horror film, and in particular Carol Clover’s account of the slasher genre, which offered, she argued, wave after wave of feminine victims. I take up this question of inexhaustible gendered seriality and its relation to sound and frequency in a reading of David Lynch’s 2006 horror film *Inland Empire*, a film which claims to be based on “the longest-running radio play in history.”

The chapter thus progresses through the question of chat and chatter, before taking up frequency, seriality, vibration, and the waver. All of these are a way of imagining perpetual motion, or the relation between matter and movement, and all of them, I argue, are inflected by questions of gendered sound.

In the chapter’s conclusion, I return to chat and to gendered vernacular speech, specifically the common feminine practice of word elongation. Such speech is quite often transcribed and scored informally within text messages and emails that add extra letters to words like *heyyyyy* and *sooooo*. I suggest that the practice of phonetically scoring these feminized vocal affects should be understood within the broader context of the musical and performance score. This practice of scoring vocal extensity in emails and texts has been understood as a form of affective labor. Indeed, such expressive lengthening, and the omission of final punctuation, especially periods, tends to soften the crisp edges of words and sentences in anticipation of how they might be received. It’s as if an expressive ambiguity is introduced, which suggests that the writer or speaker is
modulating her tone in anticipated response to her addressee’s reception. I understand this scoring of phonic materiality as part of the manifold, multivocal noise of chat.

Chat thus seems interestingly apposite to liberal feminist tropes around the individual voice: “having” or “using” a voice, making one’s voice heard, speaking for oneself, and so on. In these figures of speech, the idea of “voice” metonymically binds together representation, or “speaking for oneself”; intellectual or creative authorship, or “finding one’s own voice”; and the individuated subject. The voice comes to refer to an irreducible “signature” of contractual consent.

It must be acknowledged that the material and social topology of the voice, its extimacy, does not permit such singularization, as Fred Moten and Mladen Dolar have each demonstrated in different ways. Nevertheless, the voice has been made to stand for individuated consent, a function which it undoes and resists. Vocal capacity is a legal matter; the extent to which the law’s understanding of consent is founded on a notion of individual vocal capacity is made evident by a recent consumer advisory from the Federal Communications Commission, warning against so-called “Can You Hear Me?” scams:

WASHINGTON, March 27, 2017 - The Federal Communications Commission is alerting consumers to be on the lookout for scam callers seeking to get victims to say the word “yes” during a call and later use a recording of the response to authorize unwanted charges on the victim’s utility or credit card account.

... The scam begins when a consumer answers a call and the person at the end of the line asks, “Can you hear me?” The caller then records the consumer’s “Yes” response and thus obtains a voice signature. This signature can later be used by
the scammers to pretend to be the consumer and authorize fraudulent charges via telephone.4

The scam works because saying the word “yes” aloud sufficiently approximates the function of a signature on a contract. This is not just any “yes,” but a particular person’s “yes.” It not only assents, but also nominates a singular individual whose self-identity it contains and compresses.

The juridical dimensions of vocal consent appear as well in the profoundly disturbing rape trial of Anna Stubblefield discussed in Chapter 1, in which the court deemed DMan Johnson, a disabled man, incapable of sexual consent, and therefore of lawful sexual entanglement, because of his incapacity for vocal speech; Johnson was therefore not invited to testify at the trial of his alleged rapist.

This case, and the juridical framing of lawful sex and vocal consent, opens onto feminism’s troubled and ambivalent relationship with the form of the contract. On the one hand, feminist critique of the marriage contract and its vocal performative “I do” has been an essential component of resistance to patriarchal regimes of property, sexual violence, and labor. On the other hand, the critique of the contract has often been launched from an insistence on consent as a feminist value, which does little to dislodge the social contract and other contractual forms, nor does it deal with the singularized

subject of consent, whose position we are legally made to occupy. Thus many feminist campaigns against sexual assault have retained the notion of contractual consent as a site from which to both resist such violence as the founding condition of patriarchy and to mobilize state and juridical intervention. (This latter despite the obvious historical and ongoing reality that the state does not merely fail to protect people from sexual violence, but also systematically practices sexual violence as a tactic for social control, including as an indispensable element of border control and incarceration.5)

Despite its material and social resistance to such inscription, the voice is thus still sutured to a specifically contractual notion of sexual consent, as is apparent from institutional awareness campaigns that frame sexual violence as a breach of contract: “Yes Means Yes” has largely replaced “No Means No” as the institutional byword of sexual labor and leisure. This rephrasing was intended, I think, to shift an impossible evidentiary burden off of those who might not be able to say no, perhaps because of unconsciousness, or intoxication, or fear. “Yes Means Yes” therefore recognizes the narrow limits of the consenting subject. These limits are crossed all the time as part of recreational and medical intoxication, sleep, mental illness, disability, and a host of more vaguely defined circumstances. However, the recognition of the law’s limited

5 For accounts of queer and feminist organizing against sexual violence that do not see the state as the primary site of address or redress, see the essays collected in Jennifer Patterson, ed., Queering Sexual Violence: Radical Voices from within the Anti-Violence Movement (New York: Magnus Imprints, 2016); and Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, eds., The Color of Violence: The Incite! Anthology (Boston, MA: South End Press, 2006).
application to questions of sexual violence is here folded right back into the framework of institutional and legal liability. “Yes Means Yes,” with its perhaps unintentional whiff of contractual obligation, is a bit scarier than “No Means No.” I wonder, seeing these posters in university bathrooms and hallways, whether they are meant not only to reframe sexual entanglement for those who might be understood to violate it, but also to offer a warning to those who would seek institutional redress.

![Figure 15: "Sexual consent is a voluntary active agreement," Columbia University poster](image-url)
Beyond the framework of the contract, we can trace this problematic of the voice not only through liberal feminist discourse, but also through the critique of such discourse, as in perhaps most paradigmatically, Gayatri Spivak’s 1985 “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and her 1993 essay “Echo,” which suspend the question of subaltern subjects ‘speaking for themselves” as the impossible ground of politics.

I close this section with an anecdote that I hope illustrates the productive difference between the voice as a site of political representation and feminine chatter as an alternative modality for feminist thought. In 1987, a group called the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective published a collective autobiography of sorts under the title “Don’t Believe You Have Rights: The Production of Female Freedom in the Thought and Contingencies of a Women’s Group.” An English translation came out in 1990 under the title *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*, with an introductory essay by Teresa de Lauretis. It met with mixed reviews, and is now out of print.

The book’s authorial first person reflects different groups, who are named only occasionally in terms like, “The women writing this chapter are lawyers, and they think…” (70) or “I who am writing this chapter…” This ambiguous polyvocality reflects the fact that different versions of the collective had been meeting since the mid-1960s, in different configurations. First pursuing an Italian variant on consciousness-raising, or *autocoscienza*, they soon became interested in the psychoanalytic feminism then in vogue in France. In the 1970s, the group developed a stringent critique of the
mainstream women’s liberation movement, which was then seeking revisions to Italian law that would have more strictly criminalized rape and formally recognized (and regulated) abortion; the MWBC objected to these aims on the grounds that seeking redress from the state would only make things worse. In 1973, they began publishing these critiques in a magazine, Sottosopra (“Upside-down”), and in 1975, some of the women opened a bookstore which retroactively gave the group its name.

By the mid-1970s, the MWBC had distanced itself from protest politics altogether; they were frustrated with the rights-based discourse of the mainstream women’s movement, and sick of being treated like “clowns” by largely masculinist autonomist groups. Instead, they decided to investigate what a non-programmatic feminist movement politics might look like. In the spring of 1976, they were given access to a massive empty hall which had been a factory, called the Col di Lana center. Its size and acoustics lent themselves to a massive gathering, and the MWBC put up flyers around the inviting women to come to a meeting with an undetermined agenda. What resulted was, in their words, a “memorable disaster” characterized primarily by unrelenting chatter:

When the House was put in order, women came in great numbers. The main hall was full on Wednesday evenings, when the big meetings took place. And it was soon quite clear that the bigger, more open place did not make for a wider political confrontation either. Its dimensions did nothing but magnify the phenomenon of the passivity of the many vis-à-vis the few. Every time the hall filled up with 150-200 women, they began to chat pleasantly about this and that like a classroom full of girls waiting for the teacher. That state of half-waiting ceased when one woman or another (but they were always the same ones) asked
to begin the political work for which they were gathered together. The work then went on with the intervention of one woman or another, always the same ones, about ten of them, while the others listened.

There was no way to change this ritual. If none of the ten started the work, the others went on chatting with immutable vivacity. If, the debate once begun, no one of the ten spoke up again, perfect silence would reign in the big hall. No matter what topics were debated, the situation did not change. In the long run, as is easily imaginable, there was no reason to discuss any topic other than the very situation which had arisen, to try to understand it. Not even this topic had the effect of changing anything. The usual ten speakers brought it up and discussed it in the presence of the implacably silent other women.

...Most bewildering of all, the 150-200 women returned every Wednesday to fill up the hall.⁶

Although the MWBC considered this project a “total failure,” it illustrates for me a set of questions about chatter. By December 1976, despairing of their project, they had dissolved the large meeting and formed twelve groups of 10-15 women, each assigned to develop an analysis of this “memorable disaster,” to be published by the collective’s press. Group 4 develops the idea of the "silent women’s objection," or “the objection of the woman who does not want to be described, represented, or defended by anyone. … that objection was every woman’s objection.”⁷ The 200 women “desire something,” Group 4 concludes, because they continued to show up each week, but the women could not formulate this desire as political speech. To Group 4, this apparent failure indicated the lack of a “female Symbolic,” in other words, the lack of a kind of institutional,

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conceptual, linguistic and cultural consistency for feminism which would allow women’s political desire to be spoken, transmitted, and remembered. The rest of the book is devoted to trying to develop such a structure.

For my purposes here, however, something more interesting emerges, both from the 200 women “chatting with immutable vivacity” each Wednesday, and from their near-unanimous refusal to speak in a properly political mode. Firstly, their chatter cannot properly be said to be a silent objection. Indeed, “like a classroom full of girls waiting for the teacher,” it is quite noisy, although, like a classroom full of girls refusing to speak when the teacher asks them to, it is undeniably an objection. What the MWBC terms the “passivity of the many vis-à-vis the few” is a palpable demonstration of power, specifically the power of chatter to refuse the summons of political speech. I am interested here in the sound of their surplus and their animation – their immutable, easily muted vivacity – questions that I will pursue into a discussion of the chatbot in the following section.

3.2 Jiggle and Noise: Chatbots, Gifs, and Perpetual Motion

What do machines think about having to work all the time?

Angela Mitropoulos, “‘Do Androids Dream of Sleeping?’”

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In 2012, Doriana Silva sued her former employer, dating website Ashley Madison, claiming to have developed repetitive strain injury while writing fake profiles for women seeking men on the site. The company denied using fake profiles, and supplied photos to the media of Silva on vacation, doing athletic activities that it suggested were incompatible with her injuries. Initially reported by local media in Toronto, the story of Doriana Silva’s injured wrists resurfaced in 2015, when Ashley Madison was hacked and its user data made available for analysis. Once the data from the breach was dumped, it was first reported that something like 99% of women’s profiles on the site did not represent individual human women. This claim was based on a breakdown of the data showing that only a very small percentage of users designated as women had ever checked their Ashley Madison inboxes. Silva’s claims about repetitive strain injury and writing fake profiles began to invite additional attention.

Here, I draw connections between the accumulation of gestures that strained Silva’s wrists and the gendered frequencies of perpetual motion related to chatter. These frequencies comprise the automated ideality of the gif and the chatbot, as well as forms of more exhaustible motion such as dance, typing, and masturbation, which will here be

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read together. Ashley Madison’s hacked data reveals an array of figures enmeshed in
the pursuit and maintenance of these forms of gendered movement. I will then turn to
Drake’s “Hotline Bling,” which came out two weeks after the 2015 Ashley Madison hack
and thematizes some questions about the hotline as a site of chat. The video for “Hotline
Bling” – featuring Drake’s awkward dancing as well as a brief scene of pink collar sexual
labor at a call center – immediately became source material for the ongoing production
of memes and gifs, which extend some of these questions about feminine replication.
Taking up the jiggly form of the gif, I discuss Still Life, a video work by artist Umber
Majeed which develops some questions about ornament and animation. I conclude this
section with an examination of a recent project by artist Jessica Vaughn, which uses the
anachronistic form of the phone chain as a specifically sculptural material.

Ashley Madison was an extramarital dating website, meaning that it advertised
itself as a network helping married or coupled people to coordinate affairs with others
also seeking to date outside of their primary relationships, presumably thus avoiding
the taboo on extramural affairs that might compromise their efforts on other online
dating platforms. Its business model was based on charging users a range of fees; among
these, there were charges for chat credits, and charges to remove and delete one’s profile
data from the site.

This latter fee, aimed at users desperate to have their profiles scrubbed lest they
be discovered by spouses, friends, or coworkers, led to frustration and, eventually, to the
hack, which proved disastrous for the company. The data dump made users' information, including names and financial information, available for extortion and eventually for publication. It also initially appeared to show that of 5.5 million women’s profiles, only about twelve thousand, or two-tenths of a percent, represented human women actively using the site.

The question – what if, proportionally speaking, there were hardly any human women seeking men on the site at all? -- sums images of an Irigarayan hall of mirrors, devoid of sexual difference, in which men supposedly seeking women had spent upwards of $100 million on clickbait and bots in order to pretend that they were hoping to cheat on their partners – since of course none of the women pictured in the fake profiles was available to physically consummate an affair. But I think the question is more complex than that. Rather than concluding that Ashley Madison’s male membership was either engaged in a series of self-deceptive feints, or simply duped by its fembot interlocutors, I think we must more closely examine the form of chat both sexual and banal, which, after all, both drove membership and was the source of tremendous profit.
Figure 16: Leaked internal Ashley Madison memo, comparing the revenue value of human female users vs. chatbot "engagers"

The unchecked inboxes appeared to correspond to an army of approximately 70,000 bots, termed “engagers” in the company’s leaked internal documents. These “engagers” cycled through fake profiles, known as “skins.” They incessantly messaged human men to generate revenue through paid chat credits, and it appeared to have worked.

After more analysis by Annalee Newitz of the tech blog Gizmodo, it became clear that while the hack exposed evidence of very few women members of the site at all, it also did not show that women were not using the site – just that their presence was mostly unverifiable, because human women were not really part of Ashley Madison’s
business model. Incidentally, the data also revealed that the relatively few human
women seeking men on the site were also constantly receiving messages, but from
human men; the company did not send bots of any gender to “engage” its human
female members.

Figure 17: Leaked Ashley Madison "engager" scripts

In other words, Newitz concluded, it was not so much that women were
definitively *not* using the site to establish extramarital contacts with people of various
genders, but rather that facilitating physical intimacy was not Ashley Madison’s main
source of revenue. If an affair moved into what used to be termed “meatspace,” the
company could not maintain its monopoly on the amorous couple’s chat, and that chat
could no longer be effectively monetized.\(^\text{10}\) The business plan therefore relied, to a large

\(^{10}\) Tech journalist Annalee Newitz seems to have been primary media analyst of the Ashley Madison data
dump. See, Newitz, “How Ashley Madison Hid Its Fembot Con From Users and Investigators,” *Gizmodo*,
1728410265.; “Almost None of the Women in the Ashley Madison Database Ever Used the Site,” *Gizmodo*,
extent, upon its members’ pursuit of online, rather than physical intimacy, and in this context, chat with a fembot was preferable: it would continue generating income, whereas humans might wander off-site. The financial dimensions of these possibilities are neatly quantified in the pie chart above, taken from an internal report. The company’s much-advertised “satisfaction guarantee,” available to members paying a higher class of premium fees, thus seems to depend to some extent on masturbation, a suggestion that I think is borne out by some of the chatbot scripts revealed in the hack.

The question, then, of what the site’s members were doing while they were either pretending to cheat or being duped into believing they were cheating perhaps begins to develop more complexity. Into this interval between the unverifiable presence of human women and the overexposure of human men’s data, a fembot army was mobilized, along with the maintenance workers required for its upkeep, Doriana Silva among them.

The fembot workforce demanded a continuous influx of sufficiently captivating new profiles to serve as the “skin” which it animated. Despite its automation, the bots’ labor power had to be reproduced, and this required the services of a much smaller force of human pink collar workers who were hired to maintain and refresh this unremitting

feminine effervescence. Silva was keeping up with this demand, writing new profiles
and furnishing them with found images, when her wrists incurred the repetitive strain
injury that was the subject of her lawsuit.

Figure 18: Leaked Ashley Madison "engager" scripts

Two forms of repetitive movement of the wrists, hands, and fingers present
themselves here: Silva’s typing in a Toronto office, and, in a thousand other locales, the
speculative relationship of this typing to Ashley Madison “chat credits,” and
presumably therefore to a more masturbatory jiggle of the wrist. These repetitive
frequencies seem to me to mirror each other.

To be clear, I linger on the homology of these wrist movements not in order to
muster an image of symmetry, of an economy in which repetitive feminine labor is sold
for masculine pleasure. Rather, I am interested in the way that this perpetual motion
traverses multiple sites as a kind of frequency, its movement animating gendered terrain
of labor and recreation. The work that the bots performed at Ashley Madison was the
automated maintenance of sexual or affective potential as a feed or stream of variations of chat.

An antecedent to the chatbot, the talking doll is an older practitioner of banal and often slightly menacing feminine conversation. For a few months in 1890, Thomas Edison opened a factory to produce the first talking doll, with which he thought he could find a market for wax cylinder sound recording technology. In a kind of data entry, women working in the factory recorded each doll’s speech one at a time onto wax cylinders. This work calls up the dual sense of performance as both expressive movement and the execution of a task, in the sense for example of a performance evaluation.

Carolyn Evans writes,

Thus in the most up to date modern factory we witness the young woman robotically speaking each individual utterance, five hundred times a day, onto the wax cylinders in order to produce the living, or, at least, talking simulacrum of the human female. The animated doll acquires some of the lifelike qualities of the living girl, while the girl trades semblances with the doll in her mechanical and repetitive utterances.11

Evans’s description invokes Marx’s satirical account, in Capital, of the commodity fetish, in which the commodity, like a talking doll, begins to speak of the source of its exchange

11 Carolyn Evans, Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity, and Deathliness (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 171.
value, becoming more animated as the human worker is deadened. The commodity’s impossible speech is the sign of what Evans calls its “uncanny vitality.”

In a series of performance and video works gathered under the title The “Feminism? Project” (2005-2006), Amber Hawk Swanson takes up this dual sense of performance, as well as the “uncanny vitality” to which Evans refers. Having been made to leave her sorority after being discovered to be in a romantic relationship with one of her sorority sisters, Hawk Swanson later interviewed former sorority members about what they thought about feminism. She then produced a series of short videos that closely mimic the aesthetic tropes of pornography, in each of which she repeatedly recites a line or passage from her interviewees’ responses, until the conclusion of the scene. Her recitation, offered in the lilting up-speak that is sometimes referred to as “valley girl” intonation, invariably frays alongside the concomitant repetitive movement which accompanies it.

I would like to consider Hawk Swanson’s engagement with a kind of revenge porn in relation to the questions of injury, animation, and labor that motivate this chapter. I take her work up here because I am interested in the way that Hawk Swanson’s videos collapse the distance between the repetitive labor of, for example, data entry, the scripted recitations of the feminine chatbot, and the perpetual motion of pornographic performance.
A few years after this series concluded, Hawk Swanson began to work with dolls. She became, and remains, involved with an online message board for “doll husbands,” collectors of life-size silicone sex dolls who treat their dolls not as instrumentalized sex toys, but as partners who they care for. This body of Hawk Swanson’s work is immensely convoluted and involuted, a richly nuanced and collaborative endeavor that has extended for almost ten years, to the present date. But it began when Hawk Swanson commissioned a RealDoll in her own likeness. This doll, named Amber Doll, was custom-made from a scan of Hawk Swanson’s face, and remained her performance and romantic partner for several years, before her silicone body disintegrated and was repurposed by Hawk Swanson into another sculptural form, a secondary project too complex to address here. In documentation of Hawk Swanson’s life and performance work with Amber Doll, the doll’s undeniable animation, her liveliness, her uncanny buoyancy, is not really separable from her pendulousness, floppiness, and heaviness, her profound material reluctance, a lolling about which can be affecting or disturbing to watch. David Getsy has written about what he calls the “passive resistance” of the figurative statue, whose “obdurate co-presence” with the viewer seems paradoxically to solicit from them a kind of excitation,

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12 For more on this project and its aftermath, see Hawk Swanson’s letters to Amber Doll’s remains: Amber Hawk Swanson, “All That is Left of You / Everything You Are Now,” Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory, 23, no. 3: 374-413.
for example, the impulse to touch or rub a statue. This excitation is clearly apparent in video reels of Amber Doll, who seems an object almost irresistible to passers-by, with often violent-looking effects.

A couple of weeks after the August 2015 hack, Drake released the song “Hotline Bling.” The song’s narrator speculates somewhat petulantly about the suspended question of an ex-lover who used to call him late at night, but may or may not be reaching out to him again any time soon:

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Ever since I left the city,
You got a reputation for yourself now
Everybody knows and I feel left out
Girl you got me down, you got me stressed out
’Cause ever since I left the city,
you started wearing less and goin’ out more
Glasses of champagne out on the dance floor
Hangin’ with some girls I’ve never seen before
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Drake’s cell phone – the “hotline” – is a generalized figure for his faintly aggrieved sexual availability, for being on-call. The song’s slightly muffled synth percussion and prominent sampling of Timmy Thomas’s 1972 soul track “Why Can’t We All Live Together” gives it a muted but intensely catchy cha-cha feel. (Drake discussed drawing inspiration from D.R.A.M.‘s 2014 song “Cha-Cha.”)

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Hotline Bling’s speculation moves between the dimming possibility of a late-night phone call and disapproving conjectures about what in the ex-lover’s new social life might have eclipsed her affection for the narrator. If Drake’s phone is the hotline, then this social life takes on the feminine plenitude of a call center, where a whole room of headset-mediated chatter transpires softly behind the personal service of the one-on-one.

The video, which came out in October of 2015, has Drake dancing a sort of extra-slow bachata in an abstract cube saturated by different colors, occasionally accompanied by silhouetted dancers. Before the track starts, however, the video opens with a twenty-second scene – set, it seems, in a call center. Over the low murmur of multiple muted voices and the amplified burble of a water cooler releasing a series of fat air bubbles, a woman bends to fill her cup before ambling down a row of padded cubicles. The camera follows her, revealing a staff comprised of headset-wearing women in matching outfits, apparently engaged in customer service. It’s difficult to catch what any one of them is saying, but the few phrases in English and Spanish that surface over the general soft buzz suggest that they might be working at a phone sex call center. The mood is not at all frenetic, however. Rather, there is a general sense of enjoyable boredom.

The video was, from its release, instantly turned into a bunch of gifs of Drake dancing, as well as memes. Aria Dean, writing about memes, suggests that the over-reproduced quality of what Hito Steyerl calls the “poor image,” both faded and blurred
from replication and, at the same time, overfull, partakes of blackness, formally understood. Dean refers not only to the language and imagery of memes, and to the way in which they follow a legacy of black creative labor given to appropriation, but also to their form. “The blackness of memes,” she writes, “goes deeper than their contents, which is why they can’t be seen individually.” Thus, Dean suggests,

actresses like Skai Jackson have become vessels for affects extending beyond their own individual capabilities. It’s likely that many of us know Jackson not as a star on the Disney Channel but as the blue-dress girl, her picture used, with changeable yet ever familiar text, to signify levels of pettiness that exceed language.¹⁴

Dean’s argument, ought, I think, to shape the way in which a whole discourse on virality, from Steve Goodman on the earworm to Luciana Parisi on the notion of “abstract sex,” proceeds. The question of, in her words, “#relatability” describes more than identification, just as the replication of the meme encompasses more than appropriation. Rather, she suggests, “Recent meme history keeps the concept alive through the ongoing presence of such formats and language tropes such as “it me” and “that feeling when” (TFW),” producing the effect of a loose cohesion or constellation which cannot be surveyed from above because, as Dean writes, “one can never zoom out enough to see it in its entirety.” This is also, I would venture, a characteristic of chat.

As of this writing, in early 2017, “Hotline Bling” memes still crop up regularly on social media, although the song is no longer in heavy radio rotation. Eighteen months is an exceedingly long lifespan for a meme, but this one seems not quite exhausted. Before this second life, the video was, itself, already aimed at and destined for such replication, caught up in the audiovisuality of animation, of the meme, the gif, and the bot. Perhaps a lot of forms of dance and chat are already gifs, a site of jiggliness and giggliness, iterated frequencies of sound and motion. The internet commentary on the thickness of the video’s dancers also suggests something about the way in which a butt, in particular,
is already also a gif, both jiggly and mechanical, a site of choreographic, which is to say racial and sexual, discipline and improvisation.

**Figure 20: Hotline Bling meme (2016)**

In media coverage of the video, some articles described the opening scene as a phone sex hotline office, others as a group of women working at a “dating site.” But this is a fantasy not of phone sex, but of the call center as worksite, a fantasy not of excitement, but of luxurious boredom. It imagines what the hotline would sound like if only you worked there, if you could listen to it not as one-on-one chat, but as group chatter dampened by soft wall to wall carpeting.

The office scene’s visuality is patterned, rhythmic, auditory, from the careful palette of pastel pink, baby blue, and taupe, which could be described in acoustical terms as “muted,” to the partitioned sequence of cubicles, whose quilted fabric surfaces contribute to the effect of a slightly anechoic murmur as the camera pans from one
chatting girl to the next. Indeed, that palette – rigorously coordinated to Pantone’s “colors of the year” for 2015 – extends to the office itself, the women’s matching clothing, and their skin and hair. It gently invokes the kind of stock image portraiture that tends to show up on the upper left corner of commercial websites, beside the button for initiating live chat with a customer service representative. As in the imaginary of the promotional brochure, in the vocabulary of such stock imagery, affective service is signified by the aesthetic of a contained racial and sexual array.

Figure 21: Drake, "Hotline Bling" video (2015)

Stock images are routinely used as raw material for memes, and the more obviously generic they are, the better. “Hotline Bling” references this aesthetic, in gesturing toward a scene of feminine plenitude and feminized labor that could be understood as “stock.” Chat, here, appears as resolutely ornamental and decorative, a kind of augmented feminine visual and aural array.
I turn now to *Still Life*, a 2014 video by Umber Majeed which specifically invokes some of these questions of rhythm and ornament. A composite image comprised of a dense field of tiny feminine figures, flowers, and fabrics, *Still Life* barely moves. Yet its figures are clearly working, fidgeting, and straining to compose a resolutely decorative portrait. The video is shot in vertical “portrait” orientation, as well, which, given its central, frontal figure and the lush texture of its surface, seems to invoke painted portraits. At the same time, however, the video’s orientation reminds one of nothing so much as an amateur cell phone video shot by someone who forgot to turn their device sideways for a more cinematic effect. On closer inspection, all of the forms in the video are comprised of bodies. The central figure – Majeed herself – seems to struggle to hold a giant bouquet above her head. The stems and blossoms are made of other feminine figures (also Majeed) in green and rose, as is the surface on which she stands. Behind Majeed, the background consists of a shallow field of what appear to be figures in prayer, wearing white.

The “still” of *Still Life* seems to refer both to persistence and to a stillness whose tension is rendered all the more striking by the subtle movement of the figures who comprise its surface. I am interested in how this video, like “Hotline Bling,” approaches the form of an animated gif or even a vibratory still image. As Sadia Shirazi writes in a catalog essay for a recent show at the Queens Museum in which this work was included,
Majeed “challenges the hierarchical relationship between form and ornament.”  This historically racialized and gendered problematic is rendered most vividly, perhaps, in Adolf Loos’s foundational text of architectural modernism, “Ornament and Crime,” which understands decorative aesthetics as a sign of simultaneous civilizational prematurity and decay. In Still Life, the extreme shallowness of the scene, the way all of

Figure 22: Umber Majeed, Still Life, digital video still (2013)

Sadia Shirazi, welcome to what we took from is the state (NY: Queens Museum, 2016)
the imagery occupies the same plane, pressed against the foreground, makes the screen appear as a heavily ornamented and inscribed architectural surface.

*Still Life* slowly renders the relationship between feminine figuration and abstract animation, which here appears in the form of the fidgety labor here required to hold them in tension. This, as well, is a tension that the figure of the chatbot also holds. This vista of feminized labor as ornament might be said to extend back to the form of the chorus line, which in turn was famously linked by both Siegfried Kracauer and Lucille Ball to the assembly line.\(^\text{17}\) But there’s also a kind of slowing and thickening that happens between the assembly line, the chorus line, the hotline, and the still life.

In its relation to choreography and labor, the animated gif straddles the multiple valences of performance as, on the one hand, art, and, on the other, the instrumental execution of a task (as in a performance evaluation). This dual question emerges in Angela Mitropoulos’ discussion of the 1892 contract law case of Fuller vs. Beamis, widely considered a pivotal event in the development of modern dance, which I discuss below. If, as Sianne Ngai writes, “animatedness” describes the particular condition of “being moved” by another -- a condition which, as Moten and Mitropoulos demonstrate,

poses questions for both performance and property – how might such instrumentalized movement inform our understanding of (feminist) performance?18

Beneath the figure of the chatbot is not only that of the talking doll, but also that of the phone chain. In this context, I will conclude this section with a discussion of the practice of Chicago-born artist Jessica Vaughn. I examine a series of sculptural work that Vaughn began in 2015. Here, Vaughn makes use of discarded, worn-out seats from Chicago city buses, vinyl seat covers from school buses, and surplus bus upholstery scraps from companies contracted by the city. Seat Configurations #001 and #002 are constructed with used seat inserts from public transportation. Scuffed, shiny, soft, abraded, familiar, the material yokes the feel of public transit to patterns of movement and containment in the racial and economic landscape of the city. The work, presented as abstract sculpture, tugs between the recognizable ubiquity of this soft, worn material, so familiar that it can almost be smelled, and its striking displacement as abstract form. The public resource of the worn bus seat, which is lush specifically as a function of its use and apparent depletion, becomes surplus at the moment that it is discarded.

A major component of the work, and the reason it interests me, is another kind of necessary surplus: the phone chain by which Vaughn acquires these scuffed seats, the cracked vinyl skin of the school bus upholstery, and the remaindered scraps. Obtaining

this material from the city and its contractors is a task of labyrinthine and apparently enjoyable complexity. Beginning with cold calls placed to city agencies, Vaughn follows branching channels of formal and informal requests, chatting, asking questions, seeking contacts, and describing her work. This conversation doesn’t appear visually in the finished sculpture, but is its necessary condition.

Figure 23: Jessica Vaughn, from the series Seat Configurations (2015-2016)

Vaughn, who also holds an administrative job, has said that she is interested in the pursuit of this phone chain, which operates as a form of black accumulation and spending (time). Vaughn describes the process of requesting access to her materials, often from other black women working as office managers, receptionists, or administrators. These serial discussions are “parallel sites for the artwork, as well as the
material condition of its production.”19 Across these parallel sites, a roundabout game is played.

At Sculpture Center in Queens, where part of this project was recently exhibited, the phone calls were not made evident; they did not appear at all, except implicitly, in the sculptures on display. Yet the gallery is not the only site for the work’s exhibition. I am interested in how the conversations that are required to access materials are themselves a site of entwined exhibition, production, and reproduction of the artwork. If, in the gallery, the phone calls do not appear, so likewise, in the parallel exhibition site of Vaughn’s conversation with city administrators, the sculptures do not appear. In the parallel context of the phone chat, the project must be described, explained, and imagined, a task which is hardly ever straightforward.

As a parallel site for exhibiting sculpture, the phone chain intervenes in the very idea of the exhibit as a display. It introduces a hapticity, an instrumentality, to the idea of accessing the artwork, which is fully available neither in the gallery nor on the telephone.20 Through this mutually occluding involvement of sculpture with poetry, an economy emerges. All of the discarded or remaindered material Vaughn seeks is surplus, both ancillary and essential to the racial and geographic operation of public

19 Conversation with Jessica Vaughn, March 26, 2016.
transit. The chatting that Vaughn must do along the way is also a kind of essential surplus, excessive both to the gallery space and to the governmental work day. City government and its controlled distribution of resources, such as public transportation and public information, gives way to a game of withholding and disclosure played on the underside of what might be considered “public.” The work thus sculpturally suggests the form of an involution of “public” and “private” elaborated in Undercommons: “We went to the public hospital but it was private, but we went through the door marked ‘private’ to the nurses’ coffee room, and it was public.”

3.3 Frequency and Seriality: Inland Empire

Girls never end and that’s their beauty; shoot one down and one even younger pops up in her place.

-Laurie Weeks

In Chapter 2, I discussed Marxist feminist critiques of reproduction as an ecology of inexhaustible and supposedly undifferentiated feminine renewability. In Leopoldina Fortunati’s analysis, housework without a wage is also without temporal limit; the wage divides time metrically, as it is also a tool of racial and sexual division. Feminine labor

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22 Moten and Harney, The Undercommons, 65.
appears simultaneously without value and “priceless.” There is always more where it came from; its durational and “undifferentiated” temporality corresponds to its figuration as an endlessly self-regenerative ecological resource. This fantasy of endless reproducibility that I have suggested is associated with the feminine is also a nightmare of unruly reproduction.

Take the thoroughly theorized example of the serial victims in a horror movie, and the seriality of the genre itself: there are always more feminine bodies in the pipeline. A truer figure for the temporality of the feminine as frequency is actually not the victims but the killer or monster, a role which, while often represented diegetically as a scary white man, is always feminized, often explicitly transfeminine, always racialized as dark or shadowy, often represented as ”disfigured” or disabled, as well as queer or sexually perverse. Of interest to me here is the way in which these basic ingredients of monstrosity are inevitably linked to the monster’s “near-indestructibility.”25 The monster is an image of temporal surplus, an image of the capacity to work forever. As Carol Clover notes in her classic analysis of the slasher genre, the monster is constantly renewing their homicidal desire and power, repeatedly nearly dying only to come back to life.

The notion of feminine noise which I have been developing here describes this reproducibility as a frequency. Despite its hypersaturated visuality, which has been exhaustively analyzed, the seriality of the slasher genre, its frequency, ought also to be understood in specifically audiovisual terms. This much is clear from Spivak’s “Echo,” which I discussed in Chapter 1. Like a horror movie monster or victim, Echo returns again and again as a kind of frequency. I quote here again from Spivak’s citation of Samuel Weber’s *The Legend of Freud*:

>a recurrent fatality [is] linked to the female ... nothing is more difficult to do away with than this persistent female: you kill her once, and her soul returns, "imprisoned in a tree"; you "slash with (your) sword at (the) tall tree," and a voice comes to accuse you.

The “voice that comes to accuse you” is here the culminating moment of horror, precisely because its reproducibility has exceeded its lifespan. This is the resonant ecology that Echo figures.

The supposedly undifferentiated time of reproductive labor corresponds to the psychoanalytic ascription of “mere indifference” to the feminine, as the paradoxical mark of its sexual difference. In her 1987 essay “Woman’s Stake: Filming the Female Body,” Mary Ann Doane writes that, within psychoanalysis, “the female body is constituted as ‘noise,’ an undifferentiated presence which always threatens to disrupt representation.” In this account, the feminine as sexual difference is paradoxically
figured as “undifferentiated” and therefore obstructing meaning, signal, or representation.26

This notion of undifferentiated noise is another version of the formula in which the feminine is marked by difference as lack – a lack which is, crucially, a horrible plentitude or surplus, the lack of the lack called the phallus. Lacan has a picture that illustrates this beautifully, in his 1968-69 seminar, a course which was occasionally interrupted by student demonstrators. There’s a video on the internet of one such student coming up to the front of the classroom and pouring a glass of water over Lacan’s notes. In any case, here, as throughout that semester, he sounds exasperated, although in this case he says he is frustrated not by demonstrators but by his students, by having to explain things to “people one had to treat gently, psychoanalysts. They had to be told things cruelly, like that, so that they would understand”:

The desire of the mother is not something that is bearable just like that, that you are indifferent to. It will always wreak havoc. A huge crocodile in whose jaws you are – that’s the mother. One never knows what might suddenly come over her and make her shut her trap. That’s what the desire of the mother is.

Thus, I have tried to explain that there was something that was reassuring. I am telling you simple things, I am improvising, I have to say. There is a roller, made out of stone of course, which is there, potentially, at the level of her trap, and it

26 “For it is clear that what is being suggested is that the boy’s body provides an access to the processes of representation while the girl’s body does not. From this perspective, a certain slippage can then take place by means of which the female body becomes an absolute tabula rasa of sorts: anything and everything can be written on it. Or more accurately, perhaps, the male body comes fully equipped with a binary opposition – penis/no penis, presence/absence, phonemic opposition – while the female body is constituted as “noise,” an undifferentiated presence which always threatens to disrupt representation.” Mary Ann Doane, “Woman’s Stake: Filming the Female Body,” October 17 (1981): 28.
acts as a restraint, as a wedge. It’s what is called the phallus. It’s the roller that shelters you, if, all of a sudden, she closes it.27

The phallus is that breath of fresh air, that negative space, that props open the jaws of the maternal crocodile and opens up a “safe space” of lack for the child within maternal desire, where such lack was lacking. Lack is here posited as the condition of difference and form only insofar as matter is understood as is not already richly internally differentiating and autonomously forming through the invaginative movement of its folding. Surplus is, in this account, paradoxically the very thing which must be figured as both lack and in need of lack, where lack stands in for both aesthetic form and regulation.

In relation to this question of frequency and seriality, I like David Lynch’s 2006 film Inland Empire because of its folded temporality, its particular maintenance of the feminine as a ruptured, invaginating frequency, which Alanna Thain describes as “a vibratory world.”28 Like all of his films that I’ve seen, it is pervaded by an ominous modulating drone, a soundtrack that seems almost to be the agent of the terrible folding it enacts.

Inland Empire concerns itself, formally and diegetically, with the fucked up temporality of the contract. The film takes up the dual sense of a contract on one’s life
and the contract for life that marks the wedding. The film’s main character, Nikki Grace, played by Laura Dern, is a Hollywood actress. The day before she goes in to audition for the role of “Susan Blue” in a new film, Nikki is visited by a creepy neighbor, a witch who tells her a fairy tale. The witch asks her if the film she is auditioning for will be about marriage and murder, and says that “if today were tomorrow,” Nikki would already have won the role. The film Nikki has been hired onto is a cursed remake of a cursed film from the 1940s which was never completed, on which her menacing husband exerts an ambiguous influence. The film invokes the form of the curse as a contract, and of the feminine as both the susceptibility to this temporality and its occult power. The contract she has entered will simultaneously curtail and nightmarishly extend Nikki’s career.

A contract has been taken out on Nikki’s life that both forecloses and extends it. As the character “Sue” in the cursed film project, Nikki joins a group of apparently possessed time-traveling female sex workers who mill around in living rooms, snowy streets, backyards, film sets, and other reproductive worksites, repeatedly asking “if you’ve known me before.” The women teach Sue/Nikki to time-travel by pouring herself through a hole burned with a cigarette into a folded piece of silk. These ruptures, initiated by a character asking, “Do you want to see?” always cut back through a series of scary architectural logics and passages. In the cursed film, cinematic cuts are not understood as gestures of aesthetic or narrative expedience; rather, as Alanna Thain
observes, they are experienced directly by the film’s characters, “lived... in their shocking and disrupting immediacy.” Thain suggests that when the film time travels – when we enter the cigarette burn wormholes, or when Dern covers and uncovers her eyes, Dern, as Nikki Grace or Susan Blue, “embodies the cinematic cut (the black frame) of temporal and spatial displacement.”

In the cursed film, “Sue” is conducting an extramarital affair; the man’s wife, a woman named Doris, has herself been cursed/possessed/contracted to kill Nikki, and she carries a screwdriver seemingly embedded in the skin of her abdomen. Doris is also a member of the time-traveling sex worker cohort, and it is in this capacity that she finally catches up to Nikki, stalking and stabbing to death with the screwdriver as she runs down Hollywood Boulevard. Afterwards, like a horror movie monster, Nikki must get up and go back to work; she is still on set. She stumbles into a palatial theater and watches as her reproduced image continues working, before continuing on her way.

Bracketing and interrupting all of this are scenes in which a character known as the Lost Girl -- apparently trapped in a hotel room -- weeps as she watches it all on a television, in between episodes of a scary sitcom involving a family of mouthless rabbits with human bodies. These scenes are intercut with images of a needle riding a record in

29 Thain, “Rabbit Ears,” 87.
close-up. Along with the wormholes burned into folded silk, these images seem to initiate passages of time travel for Nikki and the other women.

![Image of characters from Inland Empire](image.jpg)

**Figure 24: David Lynch, *Inland Empire*, still (2006)**

These ruptured looping passageways continually cut back until Nikki finds the weeping TV-watching woman in the hotel room and frees her, as in a fairy tale, with a kiss. After that exchange, the weeping woman joyfully reunites with a man and child in one of the scary monadic houses we have been in before. Nikki reappears with the witch on her couch, and the camera pans over to a bunch of people partying as Nina Simone’s “Sinnerman” plays out the rest of the film and the credits.

*Inland Empire* invaginates the horrific post-mortem duration of “happily ever after” that conditions the contract, continually reopening itself to reproduction as a frequency – a serial, maladaptive, machinic feminine life. Nikki, the reproductive worker, keeps recurring as this frequency, confused every time, running over and over down the passageways and corridors opened by the film’s temporal folding, its
continuous nauseating vibration. She is looping back, and running away from whatever is back there. This folding is, again, transmitted by the image of the needle vibrating on the surface of the record, cut and spliced into recurring segments. The film opens by calling itself “the longest radio play in history.”

*Inland Empire* derives its form from the feminine as monstrous reproducibility, but what I consider to be its feminist formalism consists in its refusal to reduce the ominous droning of this reproductive time to a lack of differentiation.

**3.4 Waver/Waiver: Vibration, Property Law, and Modern Dance**

Recent scholarship has posited vibration as the condition of matter, both the ground (or rather the quake) from which matter emerges, and the motion which constitutes its excess. In other words, vibration is a way in which matter is movement and vice versa, an ontology of blur that irresolves the relationship between figure and ground. I am interested in the indeterminacy or irresolvability of the relationship between matter and movement that the ontology of vibration posits; that is, matter and movement’s incomplete process of differentiation from one another, as each other’s precondition.

I became interested in the longer trajectory of the conceptual contiguity of matter and affect at work here, a contiguity which seems to operate consistently across the critical shifts in feminist and queer thought that this dissertation has followed. Within critical theory and philosophy, that trajectory – the history of that contiguity of matter
and affect – may be found in the work of Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and others. Here, in conversation with the question of frequency, I pursue this trajectory within the notion of vibe and vibration, as terms that span music, philosophy, and physics. I trace the development of vibration as a concept through the work of Inayat Khan, the musician and writer who arguably introduced this usage of the term, and vibration’s entanglement with the history of modern dance and of property law. I will consider as well the etymologically and conceptually related terms waver and waiver, and the tremble or vacillation that they invoke.

I began Chapter 1 with Kemi Adeyemi’s writing on lean because it moves, via her account of chemistry, joy, and depression, towards something other than a certain kind of argument about sonic distension in hip hop, and particularly in chopped and screwed music, that situates its time warp with respect to a dystopian imaginary. Such an imaginary emerges in Steve Goodman’s book Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear. It’s not the ascription of underworldiness to hip hop that bothers me in this approach to intoxicated temporal distension, but the way in which the idea of an underworld is sometimes mapped– so that underworldliness and its sonic ontology, the bass Goodman likes, what he calls an “ontology of vibrational force which delves below a
philosophy of sound,” is thus resolved, contained, or explained, belatedly given cause, by a certain sociology.30

Vibration, however, is a force of transfer, of affectability. Recent scholarship, including Goodman’s “ontology of vibrational force,” has posited vibration as the condition of matter, both the ground, or rather the quake, from which matter emerges, and the motion which constitutes its excess. I am interested in how vibration offers an ontology of blur that irresolves the relationship between matter and movement, figure and ground. Vibration’s obscurity, its blur, may also be described in terms of the “zone of indetermination, of indiscernability” that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari ascribe to becoming, and, in the same passage, to affect.31

In Goodman’s ontology of vibrational force, the physics of vibration is almost seamlessly contiguous with vibration as affect – in his case, with dread and “the ecology of fear.” More broadly, as I hope I have showed in Chapters 1 and 2, the conceptual proximity of materiality and affect has also been at stake in feminist theory since the mid-2000s. What might be the longer trajectory of this conceptual contiguity of

31 "becoming is … not the transformation of one into the other … but something passing from one to the other. This something can be specified only as sensation. It is a zone of indetermination, of indiscernibility, as if things, beasts, and persons … endlessly reach that point that immediately precedes their natural differentiation. This is what is called an affect.” Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, What Is Philosophy?, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchill, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 173.
materiality and affect? One thread in the history of this contiguity is the popular notion of *vibe* and its entanglement of feeling with music and the physics of sound.

I became curious about the notion of vibe and vibration because of its proximity to frequency, and its simultaneous appearance in several contexts that I am interested in. Vibration crops up in philosophies of sound as a way of approaching sound’s ontology, as well as questions of frequency, resonance, and temporality. Vibe and vibing come up in an erotic, musical, and social context. And the notion of vibration is a mainstay of esoteric and New Age cosmologies, for example in references to “higher” or “lower” vibrations.

Across these contexts, vibration seems to introduce a certain blur or slur, a dissolution or irresolution, a sometimes homeostatic movement in place. Reading Goodman’s *Sonic Warfare*, I am struck by the way the ontology of vibrational force relies upon an imaginary of a post-apocalyptic, decaying black musical landscape. Meanwhile, Goodman’s “ecology of fear” is based, like any ecology, on an account of reproduction, and therefore gender. I became curious about how vibration may have emerged with respect to these fields and environments.

Marcus Boon suggests that the use of vibe to describe sympathetic or unsympathetic atmosphere may have originated with the work of North Indian classical musician Inayat Khan, whose influential presentations in the U.S. and Europe in the
1910s and 1920s helped to found Western Sufism. From 1910 until shortly before his death in 1927, Khan toured first as a musician, primarily on the veena, and later as a popular lecturer. Gathered in dozens of books, including *The Mysticism of Sound* (1923), Khan’s writings deal extensively with the question of audible and inaudible vibration. Under titles such as “The Spiritual Significance of Color and Sound,” “Vibrations,” “Abstract Sound,” “The Manifestation of Sound in the Physical Sphere,” “The Effect of Sound on the Physical Body,” and “The Influence of Music upon the Character of Man,” among many others, Khan outlines an ontology and metaphysics of vibration that spans color, sound, and feeling, atomic matter and spiritual or affective atmosphere.

The esoteric feel of vibration emerged against a background of antiblackness and Islamophobia. During a period of growing pan-Islamic self-organization in British colonial India, Khan explicitly separated his interpretation of Sufi esoteric thought from Islam, both theologically and institutionally, and Western Sufi orders did not require adherents to identify with or convert to Islam. Khan saw both anticolonial struggle and its backlash as endangering the mission of the Sufi Order in the West, and he specifically cited Gandhi and the pan-Islamic Khilafat Movement as reasons to move Western Sufi headquarters to Geneva. In the United States, the stripping of Islam from Sufism took

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place in the context of an antiblackness that Khan understood as an underlying condition of the racism he encountered, writing,

There is still to be found in America a prejudice against colour which is particularly shown to the Negroes ... An ordinary man in America confuses an Indian with brown skin with the Negro. Even if he does not think that he is a Negro, still he is accustomed to look with contempt at a dark skin, in spite of the many most unclean, ignorant, and illmannered specimens of white people who are to be found there on the spot.\(^{34}\)

In January, 1923 the Supreme Court heard arguments in *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, ruling that Indians were racially ineligible for the rights of citizenship under the Naturalization Act of 1906, which extended naturalized citizenship only to “free white persons,” “aliens of African nativity,” and “persons of African descent.” The court’s unanimous decision followed a similar decision a few months prior in *Takao Ozawa v. United States*. Together, these rulings resulted in the revocation of citizenship rights from Indians and other Asians, and marked the escalation of ongoing anti-Asian racism in the US, including the extension of anti-miscegenation laws.\(^{35}\) Following that ruling, in the same year, Khan was detained and interrogated at Ellis Island, because he was told “the

\(^{34}\) Khan, quoted in GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America*, 129.

quota of Indians was completed for that month.”

The entanglement of antiblackness and Islamophobia extends back to the figure of the blackamoor and forward to the present, and it was in this context that the ontology of vibration took on a shape that was simultaneously occult and deracinated.

Khan noted ambivalently that he found his warmest reception among white bourgeois women interested in spiritualism and metaphysics, movements where they took leadership roles. Khan’s representative in the U.S. became Rab’ia al-Adawiyya (née Ada Martin), and he eventually married Ora Ray Baker, later known as Amina Begum, a cousin of Christian Science founder Mary Baker Eddy. Sufism thus gained popularity in Europe and North America as both Orientalized mysticism and universal, de-Islamicized spirituality, reflecting a contemporaneous North American interest in a universalizing Protestant metaphysics.

This combination of universalizing metaphysics and Orientalism is embedded in the history of modern dance, in particular. Present at Columbia University in the fall of 1910, at one of Khan’s first North American veena performances, was Ruth St. Denis, who, along with earlier dancers Loie Fuller and Isadora Duncan, is widely recognized as one of the founding figures of modern dance. Known for spiraling, erotic, and explicitly Orientalizing choreography, narrative, and costuming, St. Denis frequently described a

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36 Khan, quoted in Ghaneabassiri, A History of Islam in America, 129.
1904 glimpse of an image of Isis printed on a cigarette ad as the inspiration for the
Orientalist turn that would define her career and modern dance itself. The story of the
Egyptian Deities cigarette poster has been almost invariably repeated in histories of
modern dance since the publication of St. Denis’s autobiography in 1939. For example:

Every student of dance history knows the story: on a spring day in 1904, Ruth St.
Denis, on tour with [David] Belasco’s Madame Dubarry, is sipping a soda in a
Buffalo drugstore with a friend, when she sees above the counter a vision that is
to change her life. It is a poster advertising Egyptian Deities cigarettes. Flanked
by pillars, foregrounded by growing lotuses, the bare-breasted goddess Isis sits
in serene meditation. What matter if above the dark niche holding her throne are
written the words ‘No better Turkish cigarette can be made?’ For St. Denis, Isis
became an icon of her imagined other self – the emblem and pattern on which to
build a career. … [an] image… that had earlier been given literary identity by
theosophist Helena Blavatsky in her two-volume study Isis Unveiled (1877).
Rhapsodized St. Denis years later in her autobiography, ‘I knew that my destiny
as a dancer had sprung alive in that moment. I would become a rhythmic and
impersonal instrument of spiritual revelation, rather than a personal actress of
comedy of tragedy.’

More likely, however, as Priya Srinivasan argues, St. Denis had been influenced by
seeing Indian women dancing at Coney Island in the summer of 1904, in a pageant
called the Durbar of Delhi. The dance modality they performed in had been appearing

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other accounts that repeat this narrative are Jane Desmond, “Dancing out the Difference: Cultural
Discourses: Rethinking the History of the ‘Oriental Dance,’” in Gay Morris, Ed., Moving Words: Re-writing
Dance (London: Routledge, 1996), 252-266; and Shelton, Divine Dancer: A Biography of Ruth St. Denis (New
York: Doubleday, 1981). Jowitt has St. Denis seated at the counter; Shelton, her biographer, has her spot the
poster in a window.
40 Priya Srinivasan, Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor (Philadelphia: Temple University
intermittently in New York since the early 1880s, and had already shaped the style of St. Denis’s American predecessors, particularly Loie Fuller, about whom more later. Indian dancers had come to be grouped under the British name “Nautch,” derived from the nachwalis of northern India. Srinivasan situates this transnational feminine labor in the context of an overall transformation of the status of dance in India. Within Indian nationalist opposition to colonial governance, an anti-nautch movement had been growing since the 1890s, as part of notions of gendered and class propriety and “modernization.” Only once it was “modernized, classicized, and reconstructed on the bodies of upper-caste and middle-class Indian women by the mid-twentieth century” did these dances come to gain value within nationalist discourse.

In a growing anti-immigrant climate, nautch dancers came to the United States under a contract that compelled them to perform. During St. Denis’s 1911 tour, an Indian dancer attempted to escape: “[O]ne of the Indian boys tried to run away,” St. Denis notes in her autobiography. He was forced to return to the company with the aid of the Indian consulate, then controlled by the British. Within the first decade of her

\[41 \text{“Nachwalis were traditional or hereditary dancers (as they are now known) from northern India. They lived in matrilineal societies and often inherited dance practices, economic capital, and land from their mothers. The British mistakenly called these dancers ‘Nautch,’ not differentiating between dancers dedicated to temples, courts, or streets. Devadasis from South India had a very different history from maharis of Orissa (East India) and the nachwalis from the north.” Srinivasan, 177. She notes that the dancers who performed in Coney Island that summer were a Bombay troupe, most of whom were North Indian, but some of whom were Sri Lankan.}
\[42 \text{Srinivasan, } Sweating Saris, 70.
\[43 \text{Ruth St. Denis, } An Unfinished Life, 137.
\[44 \text{Srinivasan, } Sweating Saris, 93.\]
practice, most of the Indian men St. Denis recruited had left the troupe or been expelled from an increasingly anti-Asian United States. Even Mogul Khan, a dancer in the troupe who became a US citizen after marrying a woman who worked for St. Denis as a housekeeper, was eventually deported. His marriage was annulled under a 1917 anti-miscegenation law, and his citizenship revoked. Racial and gendered labor and immigration law in the early twentieth-century U.S. provides the context for modern dance’s foundational preoccupation with Indian dance and culture.

In 1904, troupes of nautch dancers had been contracted not only at Coney Island, but by P.T. Barnum and at the St. Louis World Exposition as well. In her autobiography, St. Denis mentions the Coney Island dancers in passing, noting that she “was determined to create one or two Nautch dances in imitation of these whirling skirted damsels.”

These fabrics, and their movement, are of particular interest with respect to the intertwined histories of performance and the notion of vibration. Vibration shares an etymology with “waver,” through a common root which refers to a waving or fluttering fabric scrap. A fascination with the mutable forms produced by loose fabric is the most consistent and constitutive element of modern dance’s relation to South Asian dance, and it is from this encounter that both modern dance itself and the popular notion of...

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45 Srinivasan, Sweating Saris, 98-100.
46 St. Denis, An Unfinished Life, 55.
vibe and vibration emerged. Since the first recorded nachwali performances in New York in 1880, the dancers’ reception consistently revolved around the fluttering of their clothing. A short New York Times item about nautch dancers performing interludes in Augustin Daly’s 1880 production *Zanina*, quoted by Srinivasan, exemplifies this preoccupation with fabric:

Each wears a satin vest, tied behind, which covers the bosom entirely, but leaves the waist, which is not cramped by the corsets of civilization, uncovered. A pair of satin breeches, extending from the hips to the ankles, completes the toilet proper. Over all is worn a light gauze shawl, or scarf, wound around the body in numerous coils, which lends a light and airy appearance which is very attractive, especially when the wearer is circling around in the graceful ‘Nautch dance.’

This interest in the shine, looseness, and above all the repetitive, trembling movement of the dancers’ costumes was to linger into the following decades, where Loie Fuller, Ruth St. Denis, and others would take it up. A concern with the racialized mutability of fabric, and its ambiguous relation to aesthetics, law, and nationalism, may perhaps persist even into the legal construction of the “ununiformed combatant” as a condition of extralegal torture by generals and lawyers during the second Bush administration. We can consider as well a specifically black aesthetic unworking of figuration through fabric and drape, for example in Rizvana Bradley’s writing on “edgework,” and also

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developed through the drooping, draped, or overstuffed artwork of Shinique Smith, Eric Mack, and Kevin Beasley.49

The legal invention of the ununiformed combatant might thus be thought alongside a history of antiblack criminalization of draped silhouettes, as in nationalist denunciations of the zoot suit, or the local “saggy pants” ordinances of the 1990s. Eighty-odd years after the item in the Times, Malcolm X recalled the trousers of his zoot suit as “Punjab pants,” and Kathy Peiss remarks that zoot suits’ drape was so intensely styled that sometimes dancers stood still in vibratory anticipation of the fabric’s excessive movement, not wanting to mess up the potential energy of their clothes.50 This indistinguishability of fabric and movement is what seemed to have struck St. Denis. I will suggest that vibration – imagined as the inseparability of matter and movement – came to shape the legal status of choreography as intellectual property.

In her book Territories of the Soul, Nadia Ellis introduces “an effect that [she] call[s] the waver … a vocal, aesthetic, and epistemological distortion that is both surplus and deficiency.” Reading Nathaniel Mackey alongside reggae artist Burning Spear, who appears at a pivotal moment in Mackey’s Bedouin Hornbook, Ellis considers their shared

“possessive effects” and what she describes as the “forms of recursion and seriality” that mark their work.51 Moving in that seriality, Ellis proposes that they share the spatiotemporality of the waver: “The spirit’s passing through the air,” Ellis writes, “bends [matter] in barely perceptible increments,” increments that Pauline Oliveros has, in another context, described as “fluctuations through the pitch center.”52 I am interested here in the relation between possession, property, dance, and the waver.

The terms waver, waiver, and vibration share a common root that describes the wild shivering or shuddering of a flag or abandoned scrap of fabric in the wind. In its primarily legal dimension, the waiver denotes the subtraction of the law’s protection, an ambiguity with respect to the condition of legal majority. So, for example, from Wharton’s Law Lexicon of 1867:

If the defendant be a woman, the proceeding is called a waiver; for as women were not sworn to the law by taking the oath of allegiance… they could not properly be outlawed, but were said rather to be waived, left out, or not regarded.53

Not having taken the oath, not being capable of consent, of entering the contract or of properly being outlawed, those who are “said rather to be waived” might relate

51 Nadia Ellis, Territories of the Soul, 149.
52 Ellis, 149. Oliveros, To Valerie Solanas and Marilyn Monroe, in Recognition of Their Desperation (Roaratario – roar21, 1970), Vinyl.
themselves etymologically to *waifs*, a term which once referred to "unclaimed property, flotsam, a stray animal, something lost or abandoned." ‘Waiver’ and ‘waif’ both turn back etymologically to the movement that animates these terms, the waver; “waving thing, flag… to turn, vacillate, tremble ecstatically (see vibrate).”

After her encounter with nautch dancers at Coney Island, nearly all of the dances St. Denis made for the rest of her life were perceptibly influenced in both movement and costuming by nautch “turns and whirls.” St. Denis practiced, taught, and was known for this style of dance throughout her career, which extended through several comebacks until her death in 1968. Its key features were in place by the third such dance, *Radha* (1906), which made St Denis famous. *Radha* was a “solo with extras,” a cast of Indian men who sat on stage, but no nachwali women; it featured St. Denis in eroticized swirling fabric, which floated rhythmically around her. In 1909, the *Times* reported that St. Denis was being sued under intellectual property law:

Mohamed Ismail [sic] is suing Ruth St. Denis, the dancer, in the City Court for $1250 for services rendered. Mohamed Ismail asserts he originated an Oriental dance which Miss St. Denis is performing at a local theatre, and taught her the steps. Miss St. Denis enters a denial.

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In a fascinating account of the legal construction of contractual performance, dramatic performance, and property, Angela Mitropoulos discusses a similar intellectual property suit filed in 1892 by a predecessor of St. Denis, Loie Fuller. Like Radha, Fuller’s Serpentine Dance famously relied upon the voluminous abstraction of scarves and shawls kept aloft by vigorous movement, and was likewise explicitly derived from nautch dance. In the lawsuit, Fuller attempted to prevent another dancer, Minnie Bemis, from performing the Serpentine Dance and replacing her in contractual appearances. As Mitropoulos explains, the case of Fuller vs. Bemis turned on the question of whether Fuller was the author and owner of the dance, or whether she was merely a contracted performer whom managers could replace with others as they chose. Mitropoulos writes:

In bringing the suit, Fuller had contended that the Serpentine Dance was a “dramatic composition” and was therefore subject to copyright. Yet the judge dismissed the claim on the grounds that the suit described “merely mechanical movements by which effects are produced on the stage.”

In accounts of modern dance history, this decision is understood to turn upon the absence of written choreographic notation which would serve as proof of authorial rights. The nautch dancers’ status as migrant labor, which Srinivasan emphasizes, seems in light of property, labor, and immigration law to imply a categorical resistance to possessive authorial figuration, a resistance which then came to mark the modern

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dances they had influenced. Their collective dispossession was the backdrop against which Fuller and St. Denis emerged as artists, authors, and “solo” figures. The legacy of this dispospossessive collectivity was perhaps borne out in the legal status of choreography, would not be legally ruled intellectual property until 1972.57

I would suggest in addition that this dispospossessive collectivity also bears a privileged relation to the waver of fabric. What is the relationship between the “signature” movements of swirling fabric and the choreographic writing which the law deemed to be missing? The judge’s reference to “merely mechanical movements” and to staged “effects” implicates the dance’s manifest reliance on animated inanimate fabric, seen to move, not on its own, but certainly in a “loose” relation to any authorial figure. The swirling movement of the dancers’ scarves, shawls, and costumes was modern dance’s “signature” during this period in its development, and closely associated with the “trademark style” of its central white authorial protagonists. Fabric’s writing, the cursive it cut in the air, preempted and displaced the written score that property law required.

When she met Inayat Khan in the fall of 1910, St. Denis was already well known for Radha. She invited his group to accompany her cast on tour – the same one from which one of the dancers attempted to escape. At the tour’s end in San Francisco in 1911,

57 Mitropoulos, “Contractual Performance.”
Khan met Ada Martin, who would take a leadership role in the development of western Sufism. By 1913, St. Denis was telling a Utah newspaper, “I send out what might be called vibrations, which are felt by the audience.”

3.5 Conclusion: Heyyyyyyy

In a blog post titled “Why Drag It Out,” Jen Doll describes the vocal and written phenomenon of “word extension” among young women, in which extra letters are added to words to mimic the affect of phonic elongation, a vocal habit associated with queer and feminine people more broadly. The subject of a computational sociolinguistics study released in October 2012, word elongation triggered a flurry of commentary, nearly all of it cross-linked with similar posts on the equally feminine and queer habit of “vocal fry,” that drawling extension of the exhaled breath towards its gravelly exhaustion. The study claimed to be able to identify Twitter users’ gender by analyzing their use of a number of textual markers. The statistical markers of a feminine user were directly related to sound. Women, the study claimed, transcribe extralinguistic sounds; they add expressive “extra letters” to existing words in order to musicalize them and “drag them out”; and they manipulate punctuation in order to adjust textual “volume.”

Letter repetition and word extensity, like vocal fry, are made to represent a feminized futurity in these accounts— young women being “like, way ahead of the

58 "Dances Without Wiggling Her Feet," Ogden Standard, December 27, 1913.
linguistic currrrvrve,” as a New York Times headline had it – but also, of course, linguistic degradation and speech impediment.

![Image of heyyyyyy text](maleminded.tumblr)

**Figure 25: maleminded.tumblr, “heyyyyyy” (2012)**

My aim here, however, is not to address the predictable discourse on these forms of gendered vocal extensity as lazy, insecure, impure, pathological, etc. Rather, I would like to attend to echoic repetition and extensity in the figuration of these vocal habits, in which the voice inserts itself, in the form of extralinguistic, echoic, repetitious marks, into the written word, distending and inflating it.

Drawing on the computational linguistics study, another article entitled “How to Tweet Like a Girl” includes among feminine textual markers not only “tweeting your feelings” and “emoting with punctuation,” but, notably, trying to transcribe the sounds you’re making, and especially the sounds of vocal fry. As these instructions in a way acknowledge, feminine chat is already engaged in a formalist and materialist practice with a particular art and performance history: the writing of scores.
One might compare this kind of informal scoring of gendered vocal performance -- the adding of extra letters or sounds -- with more explicitly aesthetic musical and performance scores. For example, we might consider feminist artist and composer Pauline Oliveros, who, in 1970, wrote a score titled To Valerie Solanas and Marilyn Monroe, in Recognition of Their Desperation----. Intended to explore the form of a consciousness-raising group, the score was to be performed by a circle of women playing whatever instruments they wished (including voice). The performers are instructed to produce long, sustained tones of their choosing, perhaps in a tongue-in-cheek reference to the common observation about the boringness of feminist meetings. Here, however, the tones are not at all boring; rather, their sustained hums and open vowels, and the way they resonate against one another, opens up an environmental space of subtle modulations. The drawn-outness of the sounds and the endurance required to maintain them renders them strangely vulnerable and tremulous.

Oliveros developed the score in the context of an ensemble – the “Fem Ensemble” – that was intended to take the form of a consciousness-raising group, but without the exchange of words. She was, throughout her work in the 1970s, interested in nonverbal forms of communication, even telepathy, as a mode of conducting a group. The score, like such groups themselves, has a certain orientation toward the future. Likewise, the vocal habits associated with young women also tend to be understood in terms of the future, albeit a decayed or compromised future in some accounts.
Yet despite the fact that such practices are all about the score, the discourse on these forms of chat are almost invariably diagnostic, treating them as a kind of speech pathology endemic to young women. Emphasizing this pathologizing tendency, one of the posts I discuss above is illustrated with a screen cap from the Dr. Phil show. Without any commentary, the image shows Ronaiah Tuiasosopo, who at the time had been accused of the practice known as catfishing. Specifically Tuiasosopo had “impersonated” a woman in order to enter an online relationship with the football player Manti Te’o. The two pursued their relationship for months. Here, Tuiasosopo, in the image of a transfeminine chatbot, is subjected to diagnostic protocols which would aim to realign his gendered sound and neutralize the threat it poses.

Yet another article on word extension relates it to affective labor: “elongated words are a sign of politeness and added care; ‘when asking a favor or making a demand [for example in a work email], extra letters soften the blow.’” This softening or ambiguous rendering ambiguous functions as a kind of feedback drone, preemptively echoing and evading the imagined expectations of the addressee, as if a kind of anticipatory penumbra halos and holds the unstable coordination of mutual respondents. In acoustical terms this affective blur around a word might be referred to as a spectral envelope, or, as Oliveros’s score would put it, “fluctuations through the pitch center,” or “a very soft or long attack and release.” A queer feminine speech
impediment here answers to and evades the regulative demands of communication even as it extends and reproduces the voice as anticommmunicative communal substance.
4. Conclusion: Extended Play

In his introduction to *The Audible Past*, Jonathan Sterne goes through a long list of assessments made by other writers about the specific capacities of hearing, which try to claim for hearing the status of a special modality, methodology, or object. In this list – Sterne calls it “the audiovisual litany” – hearing is, for example, “immersive… physical… about affect,” and so on; while vision, in each case, represents the negative counter-term. The procession of these binary pairs aim to gather a wide range of theoretical frameworks under its heading. Whether the writers in question are interested in the physics of sound, the phenomenology of hearing, or other approaches, by upholding the specificity of sound, Sterne argues, they are all engaged in a kind of sonic exceptionalism.

Sterne uses the word “litany” not just to indicate the sheer quantity of evidence he elaborates in support of his critique. Curiously, he specifies that he intends the word in its most denotative sense, as bearing “theological overtones.” He writes, “The audiovisual litany is ideological in the oldest sense of the word: it is derived from religious dogma. … Spirit and letter have sensory analogues: hearing leads a soul to spirit.”59 That both litanies, and overtones, are already aural forms does not draw his comment. Having reached the conceptual cause or telos of sonic exceptionalism what he

deems to be an illegitimate “religious” ideality, Sterne decisively cuts it loose and moves on.

For me, however, this unfastening of sound’s ontology from strictly secularist critique does not settle the question; quite the contrary. Indeed, it seems to open a whole other set of questions and possibilities which have become an unavoidable minor theme of this dissertation. For one thing, the otherworldliness here ascribed to sound’s ontology already begins to suggest a way of thinking about the unremitting conceptual contiguity of matter and affect in general, and about the case of sound in particular. Why do these critical terms always seem to move in tandem? Isn’t the proximity or entanglement of matter and affect something like soul? In my first chapter, I argued that the critical preoccupation with matter and affect seems to both pivot and flounder on their power of causal determination. And yet both terms are haloed with indeterminacy, where causal explanation exhausts itself.

This question of unsettled musical cause or origin is at stake in the 1970s scores of composer Pauline Oliveros, some of which require impossible practices of conduction, such as telepathy, or extended spatial distances between performers. Through these forms of what we might call “extended play,” Oliveros, who passed away last year, posed questions that, while formally rigorous, also seem otherworldly. Although she pursued this particular set of formal, social and aesthetic priorities for only a few years in the mid-1970s, this time period consolidated a shift in emphasis in her practice that
would shape the rest of her life’s work, and lead to the notion of “deep listening” for which she became most widely known.

In 1974 Oliveros wrote *Sonic Meditations*, which marked a change in emphasis toward listening, practiced through extreme extensities – durational, spatialized, and affective. Section III of *Sonic Meditations* includes instructions for telepathic conduction, and Section IV for telepathic communication with extraterrestrials, while another section disperses performers in rowboats across a lake. Here is “Pacific Tell,” a score from *Sonic Meditations*:

Find your place in a darkened indoor space or a deserted out-of-doors area. Mentally form a sound image. Assume that the magnitude of your concentration on, or the vividness of this sound image will cause one or more of the group to receive this sound image by telepathic transmission. Visualize the person to whom you are sending. Rest after your attempted telepathic transmission by becoming mentally blank. When or if a sound image different from your own forms in your mind, assume that you are receiving from someone else, then make that sound image audible. Rest again by becoming mentally blank or return to your own mental sound image. Continue as long as possible or until all others are quiet.\(^6\)

In the following variation, called “Telepathic Improvisation,” the musicians try to receive sound images sent from the audience and then play them, as “members of the audience who have successfully ‘hit the target’ raise their hands as feedback to the musician.” In a third variation, groups separate across great distances before conducting this experiment, making recordings to compare later. In these scores, Oliveros pursues

formal experimentation and feedback, while also entangling sound’s materiality and affects with its otherworldliness. All of these extreme extensities – forms of extended play which I would argue echo (at least retrospectively) both the seriousness and the silliness of new age and lesbian feminist aesthetics – are nonetheless governed by the more limited tempo and capacities of the breath, an enduring rhythm which Oliveros instructs performers to establish at the outset of each section.

*Sonic Meditations* also marked the period in which Oliveros identified most intensely with feminist practice, and specifically with a feminist formalism. The work is dedicated to a group called the ♀ Ensemble, pronounced “Fem Ensemble.” Invoking the form of a consciousness-raising group that would operate without “political speech,” but with a kind of nonverbal gendered sonic materiality, Oliveros writes,

Sonic Meditations are intended for group work over a long period of time with regular meetings. No special skills are necessary. Any persons who are willing to commit themselves can participate. The ♀ Ensemble to whom these meditations are dedicated has found that non-verbal meetings intensify the results of these meditations and help provide an atmosphere which is conducive to such activity.

She then outlines a set of “changes in physiology and psychology” that may result from these exercises, concluding that “Music is a welcome by-product of this activity.”

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61 Pauline Oliveros, *Sonic Meditations* [no page number].
In 1970, Oliveros published the score for *To Valerie Solanas and Marilyn Monroe, in Recognition of Their Desperation* ----, which calls for performers to select five tones that they will sustain and repeat over the entire course of the performance, lasting from thirty minutes to an hour. In interviews, Oliveros has said, somewhat enigmatically, that she derived her formal and philosophical directives as a composer – not only for this work, but also for subsequent major works, including *Sonic Meditations* – from Valerie Solanas’ *SCUM Manifesto*. What does such a practice of endurance and extensity have to do with its dedication to Solanas and Monroe?

If Solanas’s text, aimed from and for a Society for Cutting Up Men, gestures toward any formal operation, it would seem to be that of the cut, a historically rich gesture for many sound practitioners from Pierre Schaeffer to Yoko Ono. Yet Oliveros’s formal program derives not from the Cut, but rather from the first initial of SCUM – the *Society* for Cutting Up Men – and its implicit reference, for her, to a kind of feminist sociality:

What I articulated out of *SCUM Manifesto* was the deep structure of the piece: everybody had the same part. … within the limitations of the material they had which they selected for themselves, in terms of the pitches, and the way they used the pitches … . If anyone became dominant, then the rest of the group would come up and absorb that dominance back into the texture of the piece. So that was me expressing at the deep structure what the *SCUM Manifesto* meant. From there, you know, I went on to do *Sonic Meditations* and many other pieces, but it was really out of that understanding of both community and the individual — which was in her manifesto—that became the principle, or the philosophy, of
the music that I began to write.\textsuperscript{62}

In the context of Oliveros’s work, this Society for Cutting Up Men takes the form of an ensemble or study group for the internal exploration of the extended tone and antiphonic arrangement, a sociality described less by Oliveros’s claim that “everybody had the same part” than by the formal structure of the antiphony as an echoic, circular musical structure and spatial arrangement.

The circular shape of the antiphony is a kind of armature for the circularity of address and audition, sound and listening, described by the title-as-dedication. If the first half of the title \textit{To Valerie Solanas and Marilyn Monroe, in Recognition of Their Desperation}---- delivers a formal address to Solanas and Monroe (one imagines the phrase engraved on a medal), then the second half seems to dedicate to these two figures not a performance, but instead an audience, assembled “in recognition of their desperation.” Indeed, in an eerie 2012 performance of \textit{To Valerie Solanas and Marilyn Monroe} in London, the extension and exhaustion of the performers’ tones begin to constitute less an emission of sound than a receptive environment, a tuning in or listening. Suspended between broadcast and reception, much like a séance or a study group, it’s as if it is the performed sound itself that is this listening audience.

\textsuperscript{62} Interview in Martha Mockus, \textit{Sounding Out: Pauline Oliveros and Lesbian Musicality} (New York: Routledge, 2008), 155.
To circle back to Sterne’s critique, for me, the appeal of sonic materiality and affect, and its corporeal and ecological sites, is not an error to be corrected. Nor is a certain critical susceptibility something I seek to remove from my approach to sound. Rather, susceptibility – with its suggestion of desire, dependency, lowered immunity, and general affectability – is something I hope this project is given to.
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Biography

Amalle Dublon was born in New York, New York in 1982. She received a Bachelor of Arts with Highest Honors in English from Swarthmore College in 2004. In 2010-2011 she was a Helena Rubinstein Critical Studies Fellow at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Dublon has taught at the New School, New York University, Temple University, and at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College. Since 2012, she has served in the editorial collective, and later on the editorial board, of *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*. 