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# Listening for Dissensus

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## Abstract

This essay offers a “soundbite ethnography” of a few key moments from the Women’s March on Washington. Attending to moments of acoustic rupture, density, and disorientation, Sonevytsky applies Rancière’s concept of dissensus and Mouffe’s notion of agonistic democracy to assess potent moments of sonic micro-occupation as they occurred throughout the day. The essay concludes with a meditation on visceral knowledge and the potential of sonic ethnography in a time of societal upheaval.

My aim in this brief essay is to approach the concept of dissensus as I heard it made manifest through acts of sonic micro-occupation, specifically examining one instance from the first Women’s March on Washington. To approach dissensus—a term originating in the 1960s as a portmanteau of dissent and consensus and conventionally defined as “widespread dissent”<sup>1</sup>—I lean on the philosopher Jacques Rancière as well as political theorist Chantal Mouffe and her notion of “agonistic democracy.” In thinking through how we might listen for and apprehend dissensus, I want to puzzle through the moments of conflict and discomfort that defined discourse around the Women’s March and became sonically manifest at moments during the day. Before I conclude, I will also reflect on how my experience at the March (as well as the broader context of the 2016 election) has productively destabilized my relationship to my long-term research on popular music and discourses of sovereignty in Ukraine and forced me to re-evaluate aspects of my role as a researcher, interpreter, observer, and participant.

In his *Ten Theses on Politics*, Rancière writes, “Dissensus is not the confrontation between interests or opinions. It is the manifestation of a distance of the sensible from itself. Politics makes visible that which had no reason to be seen.” By extension, it makes audible that which had no reason to be heard. To Rancière, “the essence of politics is dissensus.”<sup>2</sup> Dissensus is produced through ruptures in the sensible order (that which is enforced through the police, his term for juridico-political power) by allowing new things to be perceived and acted upon (i.e., Rancière’s “redistribution of the sensible”). When Janelle Monáe invited the Mothers of the Movement on stage to say the names of their slain children while the massive crowd encouraged them to “say their name!” in time to Monáe’s song “Hell You Talmbout,” this could be understood as dissensus, the manifestation of politics through the eruption of something previously inaudible—the amplified and emotionally-charged voices of these mothers, couched in the aesthetics of a protest song.<sup>3</sup> Below is a short excerpt from that performance:

**Audio clip 1:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0013.102>

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<sup>1</sup> [OED online](#).

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Rancière, “Ten Theses on Politics,” *Theory & Event* 5, no. 3 (2001), <https://doi.org/10.1353/tae.2001.0028>.

<sup>3</sup> Although it should be noted that the Mothers of the Movement had participated in the Democratic National Convention in 2016, though the *aesthetics* of that performance were very constrained (and so, to Rancière, this instance of performing the song at the March, which was so full of emotion, might be more suitably labeled as dissensus precisely because of its aesthetic content.)

Dissensus might also be read into the discourse that swirled around the establishment and implementation of the January 2017 Women’s March, where debates raged about who would be included in the category of “woman” or “feminist” according to the logics of the March.<sup>4</sup> The disinvitation of “pro-life feminist groups” in the days leading up to the March, and the post-March critiques that decried the centering of “white (cis hetero- bourgeois) feminism” are examples of this.<sup>5</sup> These debates raised the question: How can an act of protest—conventionally expected to present a “unified voice” of opposition—accommodate actors with such opposing political views that they might be viewed as adversaries rather than allies?<sup>6</sup>

Chantal Mouffe’s notion of “agonistic democracy”—a process through which compromises are only “temporary respites in an ongoing confrontation”<sup>7</sup>—resonates closely with Rancière’s rejection of “consensus” as the “vulgar name” given to practices that silence or marginalize dissent (or those excluded from politics) and undermine democracy.<sup>8</sup> According to Mouffe, an “agonistic” approach acknowledges the real nature of its frontiers and the forms of exclusion that they entail, instead of trying to disguise them under the veil of rationality or morality.<sup>9</sup> Leading up to and following the Women’s March on Washington, such agonistic conflict over the terms and limits of protest was a defining feature of its discourse, as marchers enumerated reasons for “Why I March,” while critics protested the March for, among other things, having no coherent political agenda. While this fractured discourse was seized upon by critics on both the right and the left to criticize the March, I wish to listen—through both Rancière and Mouffe—through these moments of discomfort and antagonism for those things made newly audible, for evidence of how capacious the first Women’s March turned out to be despite its limitations and later fractures, and for how much we stand to learn from what was newly made audible there.

I report what was made audible there, however, with full awareness of just how incomplete this reporting must be given my own subjective experience on the day of the march. This is compounded by my attempt to make some slice of that overwhelming sensory experience of sound and protest intelligible as scholarship (which is, of course, the baseline conceit of this essay). Creating a comprehensive account of dissensus is never feasible without smoothing over the dissensual contours of an event, reducing distance or disagreement to static positions held by static actors instead of allowing for movement, flux, the thick overlap of sensory experience and its transformations as experiences become memories. But by offering my interpretation of some instances from the march—instances that show the limits of how sound moves and is made intelligible or even meaningful to diverse actors in a moment—I seek to bring the reader along into some of the sonic discomfort that I experienced. I want to revive that confusion, which was made deeper by my own limited visibility at the march (due to my location within the thick of the march throngs, and to my rather small stature). Without many visual cues, I had to rely even more than I usually might on my ears. So how then do we situate the dense sonic circulation of competing feminist ideologies

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Pamela Moss and Avril Maddrell, “Emergent and divergent spaces in the Women’s March: the challenges of intersectionality and inclusion,” *Gender, Place & Culture* 24, no. 5 (2017): 617–8, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2017.1351509>.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Marié Abe, “Sounding Against Nuclear Power in Post-3.11 Japan: Resonances of Silence and Chindon-ya,” *Ethnomusicology* 60, no. 2 (2016): 233–262, <https://doi.org/10.5406/ethnomusicology.60.2.0233>; Laura Kunreuther, “Sounds of Democracy: Performance, Protest, and Political Subjectivity,” *Cultural Anthropology* 27, no. 3 (2018.): 1–31, <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca33.1.01>; and David Novak, “Project Fukushima! Performativity and the Politics of Festival in Post-3/11 Japan,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 90, no. 1 (2017): 225–254, <https://doi.org/10.1353/anq.2017.0008>.

<sup>7</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London and New York: Verso, 2000), 102.

<sup>8</sup> Rancière, 32.

<sup>9</sup> Mouffe, 105.

within a space of monumental facades, protest march infrastructures, and the right-wing political establishment that was freshly inaugurated in Washington DC in January of 2017? This soundbite ethnography, conducted at the inception of a movement, demands that I stay attuned to the multiplicity of dissensual sonic moments: those I heard and those I did not.

### Sonic Micro-Occupation

I move now to the idea of sonic occupation. In the preface to three essays responding to the Occupy Wall Street movement, W. J. T. Mitchell distinguishes between *demonstrations* as events bounded temporally and spatially, and *occupations*, as a “form of expressive conduct that states a determination to remain and to dwell in the public space indefinitely.”<sup>10</sup> (He does not mention *movement* as a potential middle-ground, in that it blends tactics of the other two categories and suggests a spatially more diffuse but equally durational plan of action to an occupation). To Mitchell, an occupation is a “birth space of new democracy,” yet in his zeal, he diminishes the agonistic nature of Occupy Wall Street, which was also defined in part through a refusal to “state its demands” (another example of dissensus as refusal to “partition the sensible” within a protest action).

To access the dissensual process embedded in a range of protest action, I want to propose that attention to the micro-practices of *sonic occupation* as they erupt over the duration of a protest action give us a window into how the inaudible becomes audible over the course of a protest act. J. Martin Daughtry, in his article on “Thanatosonics,” asserts that “[s]ounds are ‘big’ and energetic. They take up more space than us, and they occupy the space dynamically.”<sup>11</sup> So my understanding of sonic occupation follows Daughtry and borrows from Mitchell’s definition of *occupation* above with one change to the temporality of occupation: sonic occupations are “forms of expressive conduct that state a determination to remain and to dwell in the public space” *for as long as the sound is perceptible*. By the occupations that sound enacts—temporal, dynamic, spatial—I mean to retain some of the oppositional charge of the term “occupation,” for it is through the momentary domination of certain sounds over others that a message (of those speaking/chanting/singing) asserts its (possibly otherwise marginal) centrality in the protest. At the same time, the ability of sound as material to be layered (sounds on top of sounds), amplified (through technological means or through the accumulation of voices on the street) or diminished (by physically moving away from the sound source or covering the ears), further connects it to the cacophonous performativity that Rancière and Mouffe would identify as the agonistic or dissensual basis of politics, the inability to reduce politics to consensus, to a single “voice” of protest.

Throughout the course of the January 2017 Women’s March on Washington, such flare-ups of sonic occupation could be heard as, for example, a group of protesters chanting something vulgar or joking would be overwhelmed by another group enunciating a different message. Take, for example, the following audio clip, when a group of protestors began to jokingly chant, “Don’t Be a Shit!” until the phrase became overwhelmed by the much larger group of protestors chanting “Black Lives Matter!”

Audio clip 2: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0013.102>

<sup>10</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, “Preface,” in *Occupy: Three Inquiries in Disobedience*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), xi.

<sup>11</sup> J. Martin Daughtry, “Thanatosonics: Ontologies of Acoustic Violence,” *Social Text* 32, no. 2 (2014): 29.

The moment of dissensual sonic occupation that most stood out to me, however, came towards the end of the long list of scheduled speakers, more than an hour after the March was supposed to begin, but before the official call to March had been made.

This episode represented one of the more uncomfortable moments that I experienced throughout the course of the day, when the chorus of impatient voices began chanting “March!” while speakers on stage continued to speak. Their chant was mounting in volume, resounding off of the monumental façade of the nearby Department of Agriculture and reflecting back by the other massive federal buildings that line Independence Avenue. On stage, the voice of a trans activist—whose voice was amplified by the demonstration’s infrastructure—became temporarily backgrounded in the sonic environment. I stood in the middle of a dense crowd on Independence Avenue, unable to see either the large monitor of the speaker on stage nor those yelling “March!” Without visual orientation to the sources of these competing sounds, I was nonetheless struck by their impact: the sounds were “big” and “heavy” (felt as vibration in the body), to use Daughtry’s terms.

In the days following the Women’s March, amid the congratulatory tone of Marchers who praised the demonstration for never turning to violence in various online fora, this moment of sonic conflict echoed through my memory. How were we to interpret this clash of sound: were these restless chanters, as one blogger asserted, evidence of a “problematic white feminism” covering over “pertinent issues within the Black community”?<sup>12</sup> Or, as a trans friend who was not far from where I was at the rally later said to me, was this impatient crowd unconsciously silencing the amplified voice of the trans speaker by making it virtually inaudible due to insurgent mass chanting? To my friend, this suggested a desire on the part of many marchers to exclude trans women from full inclusion in the Women’s March. Or, was this evidence of an immaturity on the part of unseasoned demonstrators, which also played into racialized pre-March discourse of newbie versus veteran marchers—where newbies were usually construed as somewhat clueless bourgeois feminists stirred to political action for the first time in their lives, much to the dismay of many older white women who had participated in the struggle for civil rights or anti-Vietnam protests in their youth? Or was the fact that the scheduled speakers ran over their allocated time evidence of the March’s poor organization? Or did the attempt to fit too many speakers representing too many different subject positions just reinforce the negative discourse that characterized the March as unfocused, incoherent, or “pointless,” to use the White House advisor Kellyanne Conway’s dismissive term?

By listening to this sonic environment *in total*—to the momentary surfacing of sonic occupations, to the layers of chants over other chants, to the covering over and then resurfacing of the voices of official speakers, to the side chatter and logistics talk of a restless crowd—we might hear such dense sonic textures as making audible something beyond our usual realm of perception, even if what we hear is that there is work left to do. Listening in this way, I propose, is evidence of agonistic democracy in process.

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<sup>12</sup> Ciarra Davison, “The Women’s March on Washington: Reading Between the Signs,” FEM, January 31, 2017, <https://femmazine.com/the-womens-march-on-washington-reading-between-the-signs/>. Though, of course, we cannot verify the exact identities of those who were chanting “March!,” I take the invocation of “white feminism” here as structural rather than reducible to racial identification (i.e. “white feminists”). For a searing critique of exclusionary white feminism and the structures of racism and classism it reproduces, see bell hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984). For a critique of the limits of thinking of “white feminism” (and other constructs) structurally, see Sara Ahmed’s 2014 post, “Feminist Hurt/Feminism Hurts,” on her blog, *feministkilljoys*.

## On Visceral Knowledge and What to Do with It

Ethnomusicologists who train as ethnographers seek to acknowledge the limits of intersubjective knowledge both through the questions we ask and the interpretations we propose. However—and here I recognize that I am at risk of fully revealing my own naivete or underexamined privilege as both ethnographer and US citizen—I found the 2016 election personally destabilizing in a way that was, at first, hard to articulate, but later settled into my body as a new kind of visceral knowledge, as something I had observed but not been fully able to participate in as a student of the recent era of Ukrainian revolution.

To clarify: what I felt was not surprise at how the election legitimized many of the bedrock structures of violence upon which the US exists (its legacies of settler colonialism, racism, misogyny, xenophobia), but rather by the degree to which I had taken for granted the relative stability of the society into which I was born. In part, no doubt, this is because my identity, my job, my age, and my upbringing within the US have insulated me from seriously considering or expecting that revolution or other disaster might be imminent, a luxury I understand that not all US citizens—especially those who move through the world without the privilege of whiteness—of my generation have had. But the awareness of my own luck at being born into a fairly stable and predictable regime was cast into relief because of the terrifying new low that our society achieved with the 2016 presidential election, which called into question many ground-level norms—of what constitutes verifiable knowledge, of how we communicate in the most rudimentary ways, of the vitriol that could suddenly be uttered openly by the powerful and still tolerated, etc.—that I had previously assumed were inviolable.

This visceral experience of uncertainty, of the feeling that everything is suddenly open for negotiation, has added new reach to my understanding of what it must have been like to live, for example, through the sudden end of the “eternal” Soviet Union. The anthropologist Alexei Yurchak describes that this was experienced by many late Soviet citizens as a “break of consciousness” (*perelom soznania*).<sup>13</sup> A Ukrainian friend once poignantly described this as a “shattering of her world.” She recounted to me the transformative feeling of wonder that she experienced when she first entered Red Square in Moscow and visited the mausoleum of Lenin as a 10-year-old. She remembered the tidal wave of hope she felt as she considered the utopian promise of the ideology that she was still being taught in school in Kyiv at the time (even though her family’s daily life did not come close to that promise). This occurred only a few months before statues of Stalin and Lenin began to be toppled throughout the former U.S.S.R. in 1991, as its 15 republics declared independence. Just imagine her confusion, the ideological whiplash. Her story resonates for me now with stomach-churning undertones.

Similarly, I begin to empathize in new ways with the feelings of urgency to *do something* that mobilized the generation of Ukrainian musicians whom I have most closely studied, who have participated in two tumultuous revolutions in the twenty-first century: the 2004 Orange Revolution, which overturned a corrupt presidential election, and the 2013–14 Maidan Revolution, which chased out a corrupt (albeit democratically elected) President. These Ukrainian musicians seek to instrumentalize the ethical potential of their musical-aesthetic projects precisely because of this sense of urgency.<sup>14</sup> While I had grasped this intellectually as a researcher, I know it in new ways now: viscerally, emotionally, empathetically.

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<sup>13</sup> Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> See Maria Sonevytsky, “The Freak Cabaret on the Revolution Stage: On the Ambivalent Politics of Femininity, Rurality, and Nationalism in Ukrainian Popular Music,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 28, no. 3 (2016.): 291–314.

Comprehending the limits of what music can do, of what musicians can do, and—most relevant to my life, of what scholars of music can do—as we witness the erosion of citizens’ rights and political norms, has taken on new significance.

In Ukraine, my research has been oriented to questioning how the musical practices of different groups who fuse indigenous with global popular musics contribute, through diverse sound-based practices, towards crafting what I call “sovereign imaginaries,” future-looking projects predicated on Ukrainian statehood, yet that often question the premises of Ukrainian nationhood.<sup>15</sup> In Ukraine, I have observed how music produces and reflects emergent discourses of sovereignty, discourses which are inevitably sparked through dissensus as much as consensus. In both the Ukrainian and US contexts, then, I have been listening for dissensus with a grain of hope that, by understanding it as “the essence of politics,” the sounds of dissensus might be what a reinvigorated agonistic democracy sounds like.

As I complete this essay in the closing days of 2018, the empathetic and visceral knowledge I described above has been assimilated more fully into my body, integrated into my daily life. I monitor the ongoing fractures within the Women’s March movement (and Women’s March, Inc.) and wonder if the coalition of protestors who convened in locations around the globe in January 2017 still exists or has grown alienated or complacent. In the musical ethnography graduate seminar I recently concluded, my students demanded that we probe the ethics of what we do: what positive work does critique enact? What do our singular interpretations do, and when do our arguments flatten the striations of lived experiences and risk enacting an epistemic violence of silencing? When, as ethnographers of sound and music, should we simply listen, bear witness, describe, stop interpreting? For now I will end here, very close to where I began: striving to listen for dissensus, writing about this listening, and working through this writing to keep some of these sounds reverberating well after their initial attack has decayed.

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<sup>15</sup> Maria Sonevtyky, *Wild Music: Sound and Sovereignty in Ukraine* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, in press).

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