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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
SANTA CRUZ

ON TUMULT: A POLITICAL THEORY OF NOISE

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In

HISTORY OF CONSCIOUSNESS
with an emphasis in CRITICAL RACE AND ETHNIC STUDIES

by

Gabriel S. Mindel

September 2024

The Dissertation of Gabriel S. Mindel is approved

Professor Eric Porter, chair

Professor TJ Demos

Professor Nathaniel Deutsch

Professor Anna Friz

Peter Biehl
Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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Abstract

On Tumult: A Political Theory of Noise
Gabriel Saloman Mindel

On Tumult: A Political Theory of Noise makes audible the inextricable relationship between noise and power. Rather than hearing noise as merely an effect of struggles between the powerful and the powerless, this dissertation argues that noise is at the very heart of what is being struggled over, who is engaged in these struggles, and how that struggle is carried out. *On Tumult* examines the unruly crowd and its sound, taking seriously the original etymology of noise that posits a metonymic association between the two. Through a critical reading of three canonical theorists of noise—R. Murray Schafer, Jacques Attali, and Tricia Rose—I explore noise’s conflation with social disorder to gain a better understanding of the sono-politics of sovereign power and the forms of policing required for power’s reproduction. Protest, in its profane refusal to be silent and its ethical demand to be heard, challenges sovereign power over possession of what acoustic ecologist R. Murray Schafer called *the Sacred Noise*, meaning a capacity to make noise that can’t be silenced or censored. According to the political theorist Jacques Attali, this noise of civil unrest portends a radical transformation of social order that can only be constrained through a *sacrificial noise*, as either new musical forms or as permitted protest and limited riots, mediating the potential for revolutionary violence. Tricia Rose’s study of the discursive and social policing of rap artists and fans gives a more specific example of this process, detailing a long historical movement to contain *Black noise* tied to the persistent haunting fear of Black insurrection. By attuning to these thinkers and

expanding upon their studies of noise, this dissertation demonstrates that sound studies' is founded upon a convergence of aesthetics, media theory, political theology and the phenomenology of power. Ultimately, *On Tumult* argues for noisemaking's capacity to materialize the radical imagination through the experience of sound crossing where bodies are otherwise constrained by borders, boundaries and bondage, showing us how those prohibitions might be further challenged, transgressed, and one day abolished.

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Since it is a threat of death, noise is a concern of power; when power founds its legitimacy on the fear it inspires, on its capacity to create social order, on the univocal monopoly of violence, it monopolizes noise.

Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*

Do you see law and order? There is nothing but disorder, and instead of law there is the illusion of security.

Mumia Abu-Jamal, *Death Blossoms*

If the telos of the revolutions collapses, so that the revolution is no longer the means but the sole creative principle, then the destructive desire becomes a creative desire.

Jacob Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*

Anti-War March, Portland, 2003

A knock on my door was the least noisy sound I was greeted with by a small cadre of musicians inviting me to join their march to the protest in downtown Portland. The group on my porch included some friends I knew from the local community of improvisors, many of whom I'd spent hours playing with in free-form ensembles at bars, art galleries, and living rooms. A few of them lived in a house at the improbable corner of Commercial Ave. and Failing St. where we would regularly meet to play, eat food, smoke, and get into it about politics and philosophy. The average age was probably twenty-five though some older heads joined in, and on occasion we'd host a somewhat legendary jazz player making his way between paid gigs in Seattle and San Francisco. The group was there to collect me and as many people as they could muster to grab an instrument and process through the neighborhoods on our way to the rally and march. In October the President, riding on the momentum of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan earlier that year, had formally announced his plans to invade Iraq, stretching the goodwill following 9/11 that had allowed many people to accept the inevitability of that disastrous war. Marches had erupted globally in unexpected size and with unprecedented rapidity, and Portland, gifted the sobriquet of "Little Beirut" by the current President's ex-President father, had already held three other anti-war demonstrations numbering in the tens-of-thousands.

Our group careened through residential areas and past businesses, at some point taking to the street and initiating what would become hours of traffic disruption.

We crossed the Broadway Bridge, our number now dissolving into the hundreds, and eventually thousands of others streaming into Portland's downtown. The march would be winding a circuit from the traditional starting point of protest marches in the South Park Blocks, along the one-way corridors of SW 5th and 6th Avenue, culminating in a rallying point beside Portland State University and the Federal building.¹ The day was atypically sun drenched, adding to a feeling of ebullition and misplaced optimism that the growing numbers and dogged persistence of the global anti-war movement would make an invasion of Iraq impossible. A report from the day captures the impassioned tumult of the city transformed into a carnival:

"Thousands of drumming, shouting, singing Oregonians who oppose a war with Iraq filled the Portland waterfront Saturday and marched through downtown with hopes that their voices will help avert a U.S. attack."² The protest was disruptive but not destructive, an attempt to model being anti-war and pro-peace as acts of non-violence and non-coercive persuasion. Speaking to the rally, the Georgia Congressman and Civil Rights Movement icon John Lewis tried to assure us that our protest was audible, a sonic weapon of peace: "By marching with your feet, you are sending a strong message that will be heard in Washington and around the world, despite what people are saying."³ No protest is a monolith, and some took to blocking the bridges and confronting the notoriously violent Portland police despite insistence by organizers that such tactics were themselves acts of violence.

¹ Shelby Oppel and Boaz Herzog, "Oregonians Rally for Peace," *The Oregonian*, March 16, 2003, A01.

² Oppel and Herzog, "Oregonians Rally for Peace," A01.

³ Oppel and Herzog, "Oregonians Rally for Peace," A01

Only four days later, when the attack on Iraq had begun on the evening of March 20th, protestors returned to downtown to revisit these same tactics, perhaps feeling that Washington couldn't in fact hear their strong message from a only a few days before. Our procession congregated at a distance from the children who led the march holding a banner reminding people that "The World Says No To War", at first falling in with the Lions of Batacada, a Brazilian-style samba group who regularly joined large protests in the city.⁴ Initially we joined in, improvising accents and bursts of dissonance in amongst the drummers' traditional rhythms, but soon we fell back, taking over a street corner as an impromptu performance stage for the passing demonstrators. As we settled in we rose up to meet the cacophony, competing with physical intensity to be overheard, playing a rough and ready fire music in the vein of our artist-heroes—Ayler, Coltrane, Sanders, Shepp—our ecstatic free music operating as a prefiguration of the *free life* that we felt we were demanding in contrast to war. Then our group tightened its ferocity into a multiphonic drone, composed of winds, brass, and voices that carried for several minutes without interruption. We could hear in the distance the hurly-burly of the polytempic drumming, shouting, and singing that stretched on for blocks upon city block before arriving at our intersection concert venue, but as it approached our haunting choral people went quiet, staring with silent faces that expressed sensitive appreciation, confusion, and bemusement. As the river of protestors passed out of earshot they would return to their own noisemaking with

⁴ <https://www.lionsofbatucada.com/>

the same intensity as before, creating the feeling of an atmospheric bubble around us, roughly bounded by the normative tumult of protest.

Our droning built with intensity into an ecstatic eruption of multiphonic cries and howling glossolalia. The crowd witnessing it would join in with infectious enthusiasm. We fell back into our free-form musical wails and clamorous percussion, gnawing our way through the emotions that had swelled amongst us. This too would give way to a drone, and then again disassemble into noise, oscillating back and forth in this manner for over an hour as the whole of the march progressed past us. If our fiery free play was a moment of ‘pure means’, an opportunity for our group to be free as a way of getting free, the drone was something more profound. It transformed space well beyond the physical limit of our own bodies, momentarily enveloping thousands of people in an atmosphere of stillness in flux, provoking an affect of peaceful reverence and spiritual longing, capturing an amorphous emotion that the imminence of war demanded. Its power was its difference. Protests are noisy, seemingly by their nature, so an intervention that drew the crowd into silence without command or coercion was strange, disorienting. It was lived experience of peace as a form of power.

1.0 Power / Noise

Noise is bad. It is the enemy of quiet, the disturber of the peace, the intrusion of the unwanted, a sound out of place. Noise is a pollution that damages the body and psyche, a social problem that requires disciplinary containment, a thing to be policed. Noise is actively regulated by authority and ‘cancelled’ by technology, suppressed and repressed. Definitionally, noise is *unwanted*, *unlistenable*, *unbearable*, and *unintelligible*. How did this come to be? Why is noise given to such derogatory connotations? Is there any stable thing that is noise without this derogation, and could we even know that such a thing is noise if it weren’t for attempts to silence, suppress, and separate noise from that which we allegedly desire and value? Noise’s badness would appear to be a given, yet this is simply not always the case. The same phenomena interpreted for some as noise may be for others a resource of pleasure, an element of art or music, a negligible ambient element, even a source of useful information. Noise isn’t any *thing* exactly, and nearly any *thing* could be noise, so how do we even know that noise is noise beyond saying that we ‘know noise when we hear it’? To define noise, to assign to it all the negativity associated with that word, we can’t resort to seeking out a badness inherent to that thing we’ve called noise. That’s because noise isn’t bad so much as it is dangerous. The question then should be, dangerous to who and how so?

Noise is not a new topic of concern for scholars of sound, music, technology, or society. There are dozens of books on the subject of ‘noise’ (or on its quasi-antithesis, ‘silence’), and the word’s proper definition continues to be debated.⁵ Those debates are typically centered on a question of what noise *is*, or what can empirically be claimed as proof of something being noise. My approach to answering this question is different from how others have attempted to do so. That’s because my real curiosity is why ‘noise’ is noise, and how did this come to be? Though noise does have a materiality that precedes our sense perception, it only becomes noise through our acts of interpretation. Noise is thus anthropological. I’m not only saying that noise is in

⁵ The words “noise” and “silence” have graced the covers of dozens of books on sound written for both scholarly and general audiences. See for examples: John Biguenet, *Silence* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015); Alain Corbin, *A History of Silence: From the Renaissance to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018); Joanna Demers, *Listening Through the Noise: The Aesthetics of Experimental Electronic Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Michael Goddard, Benjamin Halligan, and Paul Hegarty, eds., *Reverberations: The Philosophy, Aesthetics and Politics of Noise* (New York: Continuum, 2012); Michael Goddard, Benjamin Halligan, and Nicola Spelman, eds., *Resonances: Noise and Contemporary Music* (New York: Continuum, 2013); Greg Hainge *Noise Matters: Towards an Ontology of Noise* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013); Hegarty, *Noise/Music: A History* (New York: Continuum, 2007); David Hendy, *Noise: A Human History of Sound and Listening* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013); Anthony Iles and Mattin, eds., *Noise and Capitalism* (Gipuzkoa: Arteleku, 2011); Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Noise in the Arts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999); Garret Keizer, *The Unwanted Sound of Everything We Want: A Book About Noise* (New York: Public Affairs, 2010); Bart Kosko, *Noise* (New York: Viking, 2006); Cecile Malaspina, *An Epistemology of Noise* (New York: Continuum, 2018); Irene Noy, *Emergency Noises: Sound Art and Gender* (Lausanne: Peter Lang, 2017); Mark Nunes, ed, *Error: Glitch, Noise and Jam in New Media Cultures* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012); Marina Peterson, *Atmospheric Noise: The Indefinite Urbanism of Los Angeles* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); Tara Rodgers, *Pink Noises: Women on Electronic Music and Sound* (Durham, NC: Duke University Pres); Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Picador, 2007); Hillel Schwartz, *Making Noise: From Babel to the Big Bang and Beyond* (New York: Zone Books, 2011); Stuart Sim, *Manifesto for Silence: Confronting the Politics and Culture of Noise* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007); Salome Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art* (New York: Continuum, 2010); Inigo Wilkins, *Irreversible Noise* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2024); Aaron Zwitscher, *Noise Thinks the Anthropocene: An Experiment in Noise Poetics* (Punctum Books, 2019). Noise’s sheer ubiquity in sound scholarship – so much so that it can be hardly distinguishable from the study of sound more generally – is one reason that some have asked why the word (or at least *bruit*, its French equivalent) is even necessary: Michel Chion, “Let’s Have Done with the Notion of ‘Noise’,” *differences* 1 December 2011; 22 (2-3): 240–248.

the ear of the auditor, and therefore is a purely subjective assignation of value to any given phenomenon. What I demonstrate below is that there is a social relation behind any description of a sound by its derogation as noise and that this is a relation of power. Put another way, *wherever noise is made, noise has been made noise*. My arguments in the pages below do not refute all other claims that have been made about the nature of noise, but I take some of these claims further and towards different conclusions, with radical implications for the nascent field of sound studies and for political theory. Succinctly put, noise is constituted by contact between power and the powerless, and when noise appears it is an index of the struggle between these antagonistic forces. The word ‘noise’ denotes a struggle over not only aesthetic or social values, but structural hierarchies, spatial relations, and who allegedly can make the world and in what fashion.

My study began with a question: *why are protests noisy?* I have long been involved in social movements that have engaged in acts of protest that utilize a wide range of modalities through which social and political change might be enacted. A ubiquitous feature of these activities is noise making. Most people who are familiar in any way with protest would agree. We can make an exception for silent protests - vigils, marches, stare downs, and sit ins where the participants don’t speak or make sound - but the power of these acts is conveyed by their stark difference from the normative noisiness of other forms of protest. We could easily take this noisiness of protest for granted. Surely with any large crowd assembled in space noise is inevitable, whether

it is the ebullient expressions of euphoria as strangers come together, or the necessity of having one's political 'voice' heard, or the unrestrained sound of that 'madness' that can so easily overcome the masses. Yet silent or muted gatherings occur often (prayer, lectures, meditation), and enthusiasm can be curbed (through humility, discretion, or will), and there are plenty of quiet forums for political dissent (voting, letter writing, petitions). If all this is the case, and public protest needn't necessarily be riotous, then the noise of protest surely has a purpose tailored to its goals.

Noisemaking is a tactic, however unconscious, that in some sense provides the very definition of protest. Thus, my question had to change; instead, I ask: *what does noise do?* In the simplest of terms, we can say that noise disrupts.

This disruption is multivalent. It disrupts our attention and focus—it bothers us—and in protest this disruption undermines a static sphere of norms, habits, and ordinary functions. As a feature of protest noise disrupts our everyday by transgressing any number of boundaries. As disorder it defies social norms, as disobedience it defies the law, and in its vibrational materiality it transgresses property, architecture, and even bodily autonomies in ways that are otherwise proscribed. Given these transgressions, it is not surprising that noisemaking is policed, yet how it is policed defies simple logic. A noisy crowd that has in no other way broken a law might find itself violently suppressed. Even when it is the crowd's noise itself that has broken a law, typically due to its timing, placement, or manner, those prohibitions against noise can supersede other legal obligations and protections, including a right to free

speech and assembly. All this leads to a different question: *why is noise policed?* By examining why noise is policed we can better understand what it is that noise does, which in turn may explain not only why protests are noisy, but also illuminate why noise came to be a category of such negative distinction to begin with, which finally might get us closer to an understanding of what exactly noise is.

Noise as an Unfinished Project

On Tumult: A Political Theory of Noise is a study of noise as a relation of power. Like many other studies of sound and noise before it, it is interdisciplinary in scope and in its methods. However, because it addresses ‘power’ specifically it draws upon other disciplinary fields, including political theory, sociology, political anthropology, philosophy, and political theology, in ways that most studies of sound do not. I do so in part by uncovering a secreted theory of power within the ‘canon’ of sound studies itself. In the chapters that follow I read closely, and expand upon, the thinking of three scholars of noise whose writings have become foundational to the study of sound and music, but whose insights into relationships of power have gone unnoticed, under-theorized, or undervalued. I do this to show that there is corpus of political thought in the study of sound that has been ignored by political theorists, in part because of how they have been understood to be primarily musicological projects. And while many of these scholars have concerned themselves with the political affordances of sound and music, there is a political dimension to this work that has not been fully explored or understood. In the convergence and friction of

musicological and political approaches I articulate a different theory of noise, one that has the potential to change how we hear the unfolding social disruptions that are erupting all around the globe.

I begin this investigation in chapter 2 by attending to how noise has been defined by the field of sound studies, debated by scholars, derogated by its scholarship, and disassociated from its etymological origins. I demonstrate that our commonplace understandings of noise and the ways scholars have tried to define noise for themselves have tended to inform and reinforce one another. As such, our assumptions as to what constitutes noise is often premised upon normative judgements disguised as social scientific empiricism. Yet even as these assumptions have more recently been challenged, those challenges themselves have become foci of debates that reproduce insularity. One such disagreement has focused on the question of whether noise exists materially prior to culture, or if such an ontology is even possible without the imposition of a culturally grounded worldview. These debates are valuable, and this project shares sympathies with both sides, but ultimately my concerns are focused on uncovering the structural relation that noise has within society. My claim is that whatever gets nominated as noise is already thought of pejoratively irrespective of its material nature; otherwise, it would be given a more-or-less value neutral designation as ‘sound’, ‘signal’, or something equivalent. Noise is a derogatory term. Yet this subjective description is transformed into an objective reality, made ontologically ‘bad’ by virtue of the inequality between

whoever makes a sound and who hears it. This inequity is made most apparent by attending to whose soundmaking is policed and by whom. I conclude this chapter by demonstrating that there is a relationship between noise and social disorder embedded in the word from its first entry into English. ‘Noise’ and has always maintained a descriptive interchangeability between an unruly crowd and the sound it makes, a metonymic quality that I find most effectively captured by the word *tumult*.

In Chapter 3 I foreground Canadian composer and theorist R. Murray Schafer’s writings on noise. Schafer was central to the formation of *acoustic ecology*, the study of sound as a feature of our environment, and the ways in which urbanization, industrialization, and environmental degradation both produce and are produced by noise. In his signature work, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and The Tuning of the World*, Schafer summarized years of research on the sonic environment in a philosophical study that included elements of musicological, literary, and religious thought.⁶ Schafer’s text introduces us to *Sacred Noise*, a novel concept that aims to describe a sound which cannot be silenced, censured, or socially proscribed.⁷ His argument is that where once the geophonic sounds of earth and climate (volcanos, earthquakes, thunder, wind) denoted the sacred and drew their authority to interrupt the everyday from divine sources, this power was eventually appropriated by

⁶ R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World* (New York: Knopf, 1977), published in a second edition as *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1994).

⁷ Though it is idiosyncratic, Schafer insists on using “Sacred Noise” as a proper noun and I follow his lead in this regard.

religious authority (church bells, the Adhan, the shofar) and royal authority (occasional music, the throne speech, war), before ultimately being secularized. Today it is the mundane discord of airplanes, police sirens, construction work, and youth music that seems to act with the license of Sacred Noise, much to Schafer's dismay. Though Schafer directs his disdain most broadly against the deleterious effects of industrialization, arguing that the noise made by these transformations should be understood to be pollution and regulated as such, behind his description of the Sacred Noise is a unique audition of the anthropology of power.

I am struck in particular by the similarity between Schafer's description of the devolution of the Sacred Noise and the political theological concept of *sovereignty*. There has long been a fascination with the ways in which theological ideas have persisted and shaped secular politics. Like the Sacred Noise, the exceptional law-making and law-breaking power represented in the figure of *the sovereign* also follows a kind of historical descent from the divine, to priests and monarchs, and ultimately to secular representations of power embodied in 'the People' or 'the State.' I believe that what Schafer is describing—the exceptional power to make noise without being silenced—is what the 16th century jurist Jean Bodin might have called a “mark of sovereignty.” If this is true, then other insights into relations of power become apparent through noise. First, if it is a sign of power that an entity can make noise without being silenced then, as Schafer suggest, where we hear noise undeterred, we can there identify a center of power in society. This suggests that the

bellicose noises of the police and military, the alarms and vehicular noises of infrastructure, the cacophony of building construction, and even the eruptions from sporting arenas, all direct our attention towards a locus (or loci) of power. Secondly, if it is a special privilege that some have the power to make noise without censure, then it means that others lack that privilege. This is self-evident in the face of sound's policing. What then does it mean for those without the authority to make noise to do so anyway? If that authority originally rests in *sacredness*, then perhaps the attempt to take this power to make noise out of that realm is a form of *profanity*.

Making this *profane noise* has particular importance for understanding the use of sound as a resource for protest. Democratic political engagements have often insisted upon the *vox populi* being 'heard,' both figuratively and as an actual sonic encounter. Institutions at the center of power in democratic states are thus compelled to provide spaces for this audition, whether in public forums or through electoral politics. These spaces and practices of democracy can prove insufficient to the desires or ambitions of a given demos, and this can erupt in an expression of contentious politics that exceeds the spaces and means that have been allowed. Contentious politics may arise from grievances around lack of representation, recognition, or inclusion, but they are often fundamentally antagonistic to power, and the disruptive sounds of these politics, their *tumult*, is often an antecedent to other forms of direct confrontation. The transformation of a contained and orderly political demonstration into its unruly other – the crowd, the riot, the insurrection, the rebellion, the revolution – can be

precipitated by its sonic aspect, or even instigated by a sonic event. This is why tactics of crowd control often rest initially upon the containment of the crowd's noise. Sound has the capacity to go where bodies are forbidden, to transgress boundaries established to distribute and deter in service of social order. The noise of the crowd signals the dissolution of social order, anticipates it, and in some moments instigates it. It is for this very reason that policing of sound can seem disproportionate to the apparent violence of the alleged transgression. The police recognize, in a way often lost on protestors, partisans, and ordinary people, that noise already is violence.

Here is where the thought of Jacques Attali becomes invaluable, and in Chapter 4 I turn my attention to him as perhaps the most famous and least understood theorist of noise. An Algerian Jew whose family migrated to France during the war for independence, Attali became a famous economist and public intellectual who served as a minister in the *Parti Socialiste* government of the 1980s. In the anglophone world he is best known for his book *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*.⁸ Published in translation by Brian Massumi, with essays by Frederic Jameson and Susan McClary on verso and recto, *Noise* was taken up by the new musicologists as a legitimizing claim that music, far from apolitical and transcendent, was structurally entangled in political systems.⁹ Attali's central argument is that music anticipates

⁸ Jacques Attali, *Bruits: Essai sur l'economie politique de la musique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1977), published in English as *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. by Brian Massumi, with an introduction by Frederic Jameson and afterword by Susan McClary (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

⁹ The politics of the "New Musicology" varied under the influence of Adornoian critical theory, feminism, and cultural studies among others. A foundational collection of writings can be found in

larger changes in society and that a study of musical transformations can prepare us for political transformations that are soon to be unfolding. It is possible to read *Noise*, as some have, as a kind of self-justifying propaganda tract for the neoliberal democratic socialism that Attali and the Mitterrand government he would soon join sought to establish in France.¹⁰ However, the specific intellectual and historical context from which Attali was drawing his ideas tend to be ignored in favor of his structuralist, and therefore transhistorical, correlations between music and politics. Even then, most scholars who make reference to *Noise* prefer to simply take up the book's implicit aesthetic claim, that today's 'noise' is tomorrow's 'music.'

I believe there is something else in Attali's *Noise* that is of serious theoretical value, something generally ignored by anglophone readers: a political anthropology that meditates on the role of violence in shaping social order. Attali tells us that "*noise is violence*" and that the organization of noise (i.e. music) is a means by which the uncontrollable violence latent in human society can be contained.¹¹ Attali is here interpolating ideas developed by 20th century German and French anthropologists and scholars of religion, and especially in the work of René Girard, who claimed that

Susan McClary and Richard Leppert, eds., *Music and Society: The Politics Of Composition, Performance and Reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). See also Patrick McCrellis, "Contemporary Music Theory and The New Musicology: An Introduction," *Music Theory Online: A Journal of the Society of Music Theory* 2, no. 2 (March 1996); Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh, *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Charles Rosen, "The New Musicology," in *Critical Entertainments: Music Old and New* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 255–272.

¹⁰ Eric Drott, "Rereading Jacques Attali's *Bruits*," *Critical Inquiry* 41, no. 4 (Summer 2015): 721–756,

¹¹ Attali, *Noise*, 26.

ritualized sacrifice was a mediation of social violence that facilitated social order by preventing an even greater and uncontained violence that would destroy that order. It is tempting to attribute to Attali's claim vis-à-vis noise the status of mere analogy, but I suspect it is much more. If we accept that noise is a phenomenon produced by the conflict between power and those contesting it, and that the containment of noise is a means of maintaining social order, then the relation between noise and violence becomes much more explicit. Noise becomes linked at a structural level to the violence of social disorder, and the policing of noise can be understood as a means of policing violence, and maintaining the boundaries of protest so that it can't transform into something out of control. Protest has often been critiqued in revolutionary politics for being a means of containing revolt, transforming rebellion into ritualized performances intended to safely release otherwise insurrectionary energies. In this sense, protest itself is a form of sacrifice, a ritual of organized violence intended to prevent a greater violence. Just as musical composition organizes noise, and just as sacrifice organizes unmediated violence, the unruly crowd finds itself policed into a contained form—so-called peaceful protest.

I should say here that I am treating these analogous relations as much more than mere symmetries. My claim is that noise really is *a form* of violence, and that the policing of tumult is an attempt to constrain social disorder before it has exceeded what is tolerable by power. This makes acts of policing noise the inevitable epiphenomena of the contested relations of power that I have identified in the body of work above. To

put it plainly, we know that noise is dangerous because it is responded to as if it is dangerous. Though I believe this argument could be extended through forms of critique into nearly anything that we call noise, to make my case I am focusing on the place where dissonances most often transform into acts of social violence: *the noise of the crowd*. In the modern literature regarding crowds, beginning perhaps with Gustave Le Bon and including writers such as George Rudé, Elias Canetti, and E.P. Thompson, one notices a slippage between descriptions of the crowd as a collection of bodies and the sound of that crowd. This is evident in the lexicon used to describe both the crowd and its noise that makes no clear distinction between the two: *commotion, pandemonium, rabble, riot, uproar, etc.* All such words describe the aggregate of unruly bodies metonymically by the sound that they make. The inherent and latent potential for violent social disruption embodied in the form of the crowd is not just signified by the noise it makes but manifestly brought into being by that noise.

The metonymic chain that conflates the crowd and its noise is therefore not an accident; it is evidence of the entanglement in our cultural (un)consciousness between disordered bodies and the sounds those bodies make. The policing of disordered sound is a pre-emptive policing of those bodies. This logic of policing is indexed by the production of noise ordinances that multiplied in Europe's modern era of urbanization and proletarianization, as its cities and its colonies became inundated with dispossessed peasantry and home to landless and unemployed workers. The

streets became a venue for survival economies and everyday sociality, as well as a site of revolutionary convocation. Policing the growing populations of Paris or London or New York required a regulation of sound making, and this led to a proliferation of legislation designed to constrain street life. This is not where the history of noise policing begins – arguably the fourteenth through sixteenth entries in Julius Caesar’s posthumous “Law on Municipalities” from 44 BCE outlawing wagon traffic “after sunrise or before the tenth hour of the day” are the first recorded urban noise ordinances.¹² Nor were those urban ordinances in the metropolises the first widespread attempts at codified noise regulation in francophone or anglophone modernity. For that we can look to the development of slave codes which already by the mid-seventeenth century included laws meant to constrain the assembly and constituent sound making of enslaved Africans and free Blacks in the Americas. Even as the first plantation systems were being established in the Caribbean, the policing of noise had become central to organizing the mass migration of populations, both those filling the urban centers and those being transported to newly formed and rapidly expanding colonies overseas.

¹² Julius Caesar, “Law of Caesar on Municipalities, 44 BC,” in Allan Chester Johnson, Paul Robinson Coleman-Norton, Frank Card Bourne, *Ancient Roman Statutes: Translation, with Introduction, Commentary, Glossary, and Index*, Clyde Pharr, editor (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1961), 93-97. It is a credit to Schafer’s claims regarding Sacred Noise that exceptions to the rule are made for “whatever will be proper for the transportation and the importation of material for building temples of the immortal gods,” [14] as well as “whenever it is proper for the vestal virgins, the king of the sacrifices, or the flamens to ride in the city for the purpose of official sacrifices of the Roman people; whatever wagons are proper for a triumphal procession when any one triumphs; whatever wagons are proper for public games within Rome or within one mile of Rome or for the procession held at the time of the games in the Circus Maximus.” [15] Exceptions are also made for the removal of rubbish and dung. [14; 16]

The slave codes were legal inventions created to regulate social relations in emerging colonial slave societies. Their underlying purpose was to provide juridical justifications for an eternal and nearly unconditional form of enslavement in the New World, and they did this in part by creating parameters for the violence used to enforce it. Unsurprisingly, enslaved Africans regularly and continuously revolted against their conditions, sometimes through subtle forms of resistance, but often enough through overtly insurrectionary means. The fear of these latter rebellions inspired the slave-owning class to create laws that, among other things, severely limited the congregation of the enslaved amongst themselves and alongside free Black, Indigenous, and non-Black colonists.¹³ Thus, wedding and funeral celebrations, religious ceremony (whether Christian or African in nature), and assembly for pleasure with drink, music, or dancing, were all proscribed to various degrees. The sounds attendant to these gatherings, including speech and musicking, were sometimes made explicitly illicit, as when Barbados banned the “using or

¹³ I’ll note that I use “Black” here and throughout to signify a racial category and an identity that includes cultural, ethnic, and some phenotypical markers, but that is, like all racial categories, inherently unstable and in a constant process of revision and reimagining. I capitalize “Black” in accord with contemporary academic and political norms, as well as some artists’ and theorists’ demonstrated preference, but I expect that these norms and preferences can and will change over time as it has done in my own lifetime. I occasionally use “Black” anachronistically to refer to people and cultures that would have used other language in their own day, and at other times I do defer to “African American” and “negro” when it feels historically correct or contextually appropriate. As a prominent component of my study of noise, I take seriously Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s insistence that “blackness is a spatially and temporally differentiated, produced, and *real* condition of existence and category of analysis.” I also recognize the unsettled and contingent nature of “Black” as a “cultural or biological object” which means that I inevitably find myself attending to differing, divergent, and sometimes antagonistic views as to the “nature” of blackness as I attempt to understand the intimate, troubled, and productive relationship of blackness and noise. Gilmore, *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation* (New York: Verso, 2022), 134n8.

keeping of Drums, Horns, or other loud Instruments.”¹⁴ Even after Emancipation, the Black codes in the U.S. perpetuated the regulation of Black bodies, as did Jim Crow laws premised on segregation. The regulation of Black musicmaking in public and commercial spaces persisted through the 20th century targeting jazz clubs, public drum circles, and car stereos. Through most of Americas history, everywhere masses of Black bodies gathered they have been policed, and the playing and enjoyment of music, coded as noise, often has been a pretext for enforcement.

That such policing continues to be the case in the late-20th century is one of the essential arguments of Tricia Rose in her pioneering study of hip-hop and its policing, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*.¹⁵ Rose is widely respected as a Black feminist scholar of hip-hop, but she is rarely considered a serious theorist of noise, the ‘Black noise’ of her title regarded as an ironic dysphemism. In Chapter 5 I read Rose in ways similar to how I engage with Schafer and Attali, arguing that there is a political theory of noise within her writing that has been missed, and that its incorporation into a larger theory of noise and power is an essential insight into contentious politics. In highlighting “Black” noise I am not ignoring the ways that other marginal identities are also perceived as noisy. Rather, I am emphasizing the ways that my general theory of noise and power is given a

¹⁴ William Rawlin, “No. 329. An ACT for the Governing of Negroes (10 July 1688),” *The laws of Barbados collected in one volume by William Rawlin, of the Middle-Temple, London, Esquire, and now clerk of the Assembly of the said island* (Barbados: 1699; Ann Arbor: Text Creation Partnership, 2011).

¹⁵ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994).

particular shape by the forces of racial capitalism as exemplified by historical and structural anti-blackness in the Americas. There is no question that I could make a similar argument attending to how noise is coded variously as non-conforming gender and non-heteronormative sexuality, or differently abled and neurodivergent embodiment, or colonized and Indigenous cultural expression. Literatures pointing to this semantic relationship between noise and the Other *are* being produced and have influenced this work. I've chosen, however, to think with Rose and then with other Black critical thinkers because of the depth and breadth of scholarship that has appropriated 'noise' as a resource for resistance and as a 'keyword' within a lexicon of theoretical poetics exploring what some claim to be the ontological conditions of blackness. Studying Black noise gives us insight into the enduring relationship between sound and Black political philosophy, and between Black musical performance and historical struggles concerned with power, theology, and violence.

By engaging these three principal theorists of noise and putting their work into a broader, multidisciplinary conversation, I seek to make audible a hidden politics of noise. By listening to the theories of *tumult* resonant within their work we gain a better understanding of the sono-politics of sovereign power and the forms of policing required for its reproduction. So, while my inquiry began by thinking about instances of protest and the noise it produced, it has directed me deeper into an examination of noise's role in establishing, maintaining, and unsettling power and ordered society. The result is a mix of political anthropology, theology, and phenomenology that

argues for a non-coincidence between the noisiness of a crowd and its relationship to power. The tumult of protest, in its profane refusal to be silent and its ethical demand to be heard, challenges sovereign power over possession of Schafer's Sacred Noise. This act of profanation thus marks the noise of civil unrest. If such tumult is contained, then it merely acts as a form of sacrifice that mediates the potential uncontrollable violence of revolution. The risk of this *sacrificial noise* rests in its potential to exceed such mediation, and thus noise is policed in regressive and at times highly arbitrary ways. *Black noise*'s history of legal proscription demonstrates this, but it also models a resilience and will to imagine other possible futures in the present, audibly performing determined acts of resistance to containment.

A study of noise used as an instrument of protest, whether it be public speech and musical performance or the use of chant and percussion, would reveal the multivalent ways in which sound undermines attempts at control. At political rallies and public demonstrations, we experience sound crossing where bodies are otherwise prohibited by borders, boundaries, or bondage. Noise is volumetric, unfurling above and below such arbitrary lines of demarcation and separation, enfolding others in its atmosphere, its vibratory matter permeating at molecular levels. Noise's ungovernability, its refusal to consent to its containment, suggests how other bodily constraints might be further challenged, transgressed, and one day abolished. By revealing the contingency and permeability of structures of domination and control, noise's phenomenology activates a radical imaginary. It unmakes the solidity of control and makes imminent

the virtual worlds *otherwise* that lurk behind the façade of power's naturalization. For those defending *what is*, such a possibility of radical transformation (i.e. revolution or, to use the word of our moment, abolition) is terrifying. For those pursuing a world turned upside down, the tumult that both precedes and is that event can invoke an equally exhilarating and terrifying sensorium.

Noise as a Practice

The questions I raise as to the potentials and possibilities of noise are personal for me; for over two decades noise has been at the center of my artistic and social practice. As an experimental musician I have recorded and performed abstract electronic sounds (“noise music”) at intense volume to audiences ranging from intimate subterranean art spaces to music halls containing thousands.¹⁶ In all those years of performing it was my personal ambition that sharing an experience of a *radically other* form of intentional sound making might, by way of analogy, invite a belief that the world itself could be otherwise. The beginnings of this artistic project coincided with the peak of the alter-globalization movement inspired by the Zapatista revolution and the shutting down of the W.T.O. meeting in Seattle, a time when many on the political left had embraced the belief that “another world is possible.”¹⁷ Political organizing on a global scale required prefigurative experiments in the radical imagination, tested

¹⁶ Sasha Frere-Jones, "The Nature of Noise," *The New Yorker*, May 24, 2010

¹⁷ The slogan “another world is possible” is widely associated with the World Social Forum, an annual meeting of civil society organizations from around the world that developed out of these events. David McNally, *Another World is Possible: Globalization and Anti-Capitalism* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2001).

and rehearsed in temporary autonomous zones opened up by creative disruption and direct action.¹⁸ My musical performances were a form of *indirect* action, based upon a premise that if the expectations and limits of embodied musical experience could be challenged, it would instill in my audience a belief that the same could be true elsewhere—in politics, in society, in social relations, and in consciousness more broadly. Noise was not only meant to be a metaphor for radical alterity but also a phenomenological fact of its possibility.

Even as I was performing noise as an artistic intervention, I was also taking to the streets in protest—in opposition to war, corporatism, police violence, and state repression—and in support of immigrant rights, labor organization, and environmental defense. Already highly attuned to noise, inevitably I took note of the ways in which sound played an essential role in these demonstrations. The tumult of protest was an embarrassment of sonic riches: the chanting crowds, the singing of songs, the odd phasing of drums as musicians marched past, the making of speeches, sounds blasting out of mobile sound systems, the squeal of megaphones, the blare of car horns, the whooping sirens of police, the polyrhythms of feet on pavement. Through experience one develops an *audile technique* and an *acoustemology* of protest, methods and modes of knowing through listening that are essential for safety

¹⁸ Chiara Bottici, *Imaginal Politics: Images beyond Imagination and the Imaginary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019); Stephen Duncombe, *Dream: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy* (New York: New Press, 2009); Stephen Duncombe and Silas Harrebye, “Political Imagination,” in *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of the Possible*, ed. Vlad P. Glăveanu (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 1-10; Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish, *The Radical Imagination: Social Movement Research in the Age of Austerity* (London: Zed Books, 2014).

and tactical decision-making: the sound of riot police gathering; the percussive launch of tear gas; the riot of property damage; the silence of an open pathway.¹⁹ Noise is inextricable from protest, but it can also be integral to it, as when it becomes a self-conscious tactic designed to transgress the boundaries that otherwise constrain the bodies of those protesting. In the study that follows I have interspersed small vignettes describing protests and artworks that capture something of noise's essential role in contentious politics. These interludes are autobiographic and phenomenological accounts of tumult's (re)emergence taken from my own direct experiences.

The questions driving my research and inspiring my thinking emerge directly out of these lived encounters with sound and protest, and the apparent relationship between *noise* and *political power* that emerges in the context of these events. To understand that relationship I will begin by addressing some of the most fundamental questions regarding noise, not the least of which is simply *what is it?* This seemingly common-sense object, noise, is anything but transparent and given, and as such has been at the center of ongoing debates over sound, sense perception, music, and communication. Why are some sounds considered noise and not others? Why are some sounds considered noise in some places and times but not all places and times? Why are

¹⁹ Audile technique is a "concrete set of limited and related practices of listening and practical orientations toward listening" that an individual can develop. Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2003), 92. "Acoustemology conjoins 'acoustics' and epistemology' to theorize sound as a way of knowing." Steven Feld, "Acoustemology," in *Keywords in Sound* ed. David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 12.

some noises permitted (legally and socially) while others are censured and abated? Why are some subjects, and the sounds they make, considered noisier than others? Why is certain speech considered unwanted, certain music unlistenable, certain sounds unbearable, certain information unintelligible, when qualitatively and quantitatively similar information, sounds, music, or speech are not? We can only find answers to these questions if we accept that noise is in fact a social category through which political power is expressed.

While this project is indeed yet another example of sound studies concerning itself with noise, I am not merely intervening in this field's ongoing debates over definitions, including recent ones over whether the nature of noise is objective or subjective. To paraphrase Jacques Attali, my intention here is not only to theorize *about* noise, but to theorize *through* noise.²⁰ That is to say that while this work is indebted to the last century of sound and audio culture scholarship, it responds to Attali's "*call to theoretical indiscipline*" by extending its inquiry beyond these academic fields.²¹ Media historian Jonathan Sterne has made a similar demand of scholars of sound. In his book *The Audible Past* he accused the (then) dominant disciplines that conduct sound scholarship of an intellectual incoherence, arguing that cultural studies has "shied away from questions of sound culture as such... [preferring] instead to work within other disciplinary or interdisciplinary intellectual

²⁰ Attali, *Noise*, 4.

²¹ Attali, *Noise*, 5.

domains,” while the vast literature on the philosophy of sound tends to be “conceptually fragmented.”²² Sterne called for sound scholarship to address more “fundamental and synthetic theoretical, cultural and historical questions” in order to “bring broader philosophical questions to bear on the various intellectual fields that it inhabits.”²³ A great deal of work has happened in sound studies in the two decades since the publication of *The Audible Past*, and yet many of the same disjunctions that Sterne identified persist. My work is a response to these very problems, taking interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary methods of study and critique and pulling them into connection with one another in order to hear what noise does, only differently.²⁴

To that end, in the pages that follow readers will come across material that engages a range of fields, disciplines, and methods that draw upon humanism, art, and the social sciences. I choose as interlocutors an assortment of philosophers, historians, geographers, artists, criminologists, sociologists, scholars of religion, anthropologists, legal historians, musicologists, and political theorists. Chapter 2 attends to debates over the definition and nature of sound drawing from theories of art, communications, literature, and philosophy. The chapter that follows examining Sacred Noise is a dialog between sound studies and political theology, exploring the value that each has

²² Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 4.

²³ Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 5.

²⁴ There is debate as to what the terms antidisiplinary, transdisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and undisciplinarily in fact describe, but generally speaking they all point towards an escape from the dominant norms and narrow confines of traditional academic discipline. See the discussion in Natalie Loveless, *How to Make Art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research Creation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

for the other as a method, while also exploring their intersections with political phenomenology. My chapter on *sacrificial noise* builds upon modern sociological studies of the crowd to make an argument for a political anthropology of noise, drawing on religious studies, penology, and once again phenomenology. My final chapter on *Black noise*, engages in musicology and hip-hop studies, uses historical methods and critical race theory to explore the policing of noise, and then opens into a conversation with contemporary Black critical theory. As noisy objects of study I take up artworks, performances, musical recordings, novels, books of philosophy, legal records, and media. This promiscuous approach to scholarship is rooted in a faith in the productive refusal of disciplinary silos, and a belief that new insights await in the borderlands between them. I might not go so far as to say that I am using noise as a method here, but I am taking inspiration from its refusal to be contained in discreet space, its excess and over-abundance, its blurring of distinctions. In this way, reading this project is meant to be an experience of what it contends to be about.

Antifracking Noise Demo, Vancouver, 2015

On October 14th, 2015, a few hundred people gathered together on the Vancouver waterfront at sunset to hear Khelsilem Rivers of the Squamish First Nations speak.²⁵ Rivers was one of a half-dozen activists and Indigenous leaders there to speak-out against proposals to produce Liquid Natural Gas (LNG) regionally through fracking, part of the wider and ongoing petro-capitalist assault on Indigenous land and life that was being perpetuated by extraction industries from the US, China, Europe and Canada. Participants were invited to participate in a “Noise Demo,” first congregating at the Vancouver waterfront, beside the large latticed Olympic Cauldron that had been left behind by that megaevent’s departure a few years earlier, and then coursing through the towering financial district a few meters away. The 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics would have many legacies: explosive gentrification, increased houselessness, militarized police, and bailouts of private-public housing projects whose primary function shifted from offering shelter for low-income residents to offering a different kind of shelter for international finance. Another legacy was that the relationships between different communities of resistance, including First Nations, environmentalists, housing activists, migration activists, anarchists and progressive political parties, overlapping if perpetually fraught, had become further

²⁵ “Make Some Fracking Noise – Community Noise Demo.” *Rising Tide Vancouver Coast Salish Territories* (blog), September 16, 2015. <https://risingtide604.ca/?p=2032>. Kheselim Rivers, then part of the activist group Skwomesh Action, currently leads a language revival movement for Coast Salish speaking people, the x?m??kw?y??m (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and S?l?ilw?ta? (Tsleil-Waututh) among them.

entangled by anti-Olympic organizing.²⁶ Concepts and tactics began migrating, and so it was that colorful painted flier had invited supporters to “make some fracking noise.”²⁷

The rally at the Waterfront was organized and led by Indigenous speakers, but the crowd was dense with settlers like myself expressing solidarity with our indigenous neighbors.²⁸ As the crowd decamped into the streets, Indigenous leaders dressed in a mix of regalia and street clothes took to the front, singing in loose unity while beating a pulse into their hide and cedar drums. Behind them a motely group of activists and allies chanted, banged on kitchenware, shouted through megaphones, blew brass and woodwinds, and lurched back and forth in a constantly unspooling polyrhythm that synchronized and fell apart in unpredictable fashion. We stopped outside pre-selected buildings that housed the offices of extraction industry giants, and raised our tumultuous noise to peaks of density and volume to decry their complicity in ecological and colonial trespasses. The buildings seemed to be

²⁶ Jules Boykoff, “The Anti-Olympics” *New Left Review* 67, January-February (2011), 41-59.

²⁷ Handbill, author’s collection. This particular instance of the noise demo emerged out of a convergence of influences from around this same time: the Quebec Student Strikes *casseroles*, the Tamil refugee solidarity protests led by No-one Is Illegal and the round dance drum protests of Idle No More.

²⁸ In my use of “Indigenous” I am following current academic convention that offers it in lieu of “Aboriginal”, “Native”, or “First Nation” in the Canadian context. This is in keeping with the 2007 *United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. “First Nation”, though widely used in Canada and the Pacific Northwest, does not include Inuit or Métis and normalizes the nation-state as system of governance and criteria of belonging. Where I do use the term, it is a reasonably accurate description of how the parties involved self-identify. When referring to “settler” I am referring to all “non-Native” people living on colonized territory, though I understand the term to still be the subject of debate (see, Jeff Corntassel, Rita K. Dhamoon and Corey Snelgrove, “Unsettling settler colonialism: The discourse and politics of settlers, and solidarity with Indigenous nations” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 3 (2) 2014, 1-32.

abandoned, and in the equally desolate streets our noise felt more like a cathartic rehearsal for another future confrontation yet to come.

Even so, this noise operated as an extension of our communal body, a surrogate for the corporeal limits of the flesh, with the capacity to go where we were otherwise refused access. Our noise transgressed these building's bland corporate façade, permeating their office sanctuaries inside, inhabiting the atmospheres of a workplace that self-consciously insulated itself from an outside world shaped by the environmental and social consequences of their daily labor. The drums and chants and general cacophony of the crowd drew into our present moment a possible future where it would be actual bodies occupying the lobbies, elevators, work desks and boardrooms of corporate headquarters. Such an act would be a real threat to this social order, to a so-called democracy that gives away the necessary authority to regulate and terminate an enterprise to a corruptly entangled set of officers, instead of the masses that they are meant to represent. In this concatenation of sounds I felt sure that I was hearing a prefiguration of the future of Indigenous-Canadian democracy. As waves of polyphony spread through the streets I began to think about Vancouver's legacy of critical urbanism and its intersection with environmentalism, something that lead R. Murray Shafer and others to develop their concept of *acoustic ecology* decades ago. This anti-LNG noise demo was a radical interruption of the city's "soundscape" in a city that had given birth to the concept half-a-century earlier. Like a palimpsest, this event carried the traces of the emerging environmental politics of the latter decades of the 20th Century and the uneven power relations that sound

ecologists of that time elided as often as not. Its possible that this noise could have been called “Sacred” because of its insistence that it interrupt the tedium of the profane world with a sound that would not be, could not be, censured. This noise did possess a sacred character, a power that might have been, or might as well have been, given by godly authority. Yet this power was not extrinsic to the world; it was material, embodied and utterly profane.

2.0 Defining Noise

Noise is a problem for its own study. The common-sense understandings that we have of noise are so mundane and intuitive that they can't help but direct our attention to a handful of familiar definitions. Noise, according to a wide consensus, is alleged to be 'unwanted', or 'ugly', or 'meaningless', or 'non-musical', or any of these in combination. I have always been unsatisfied with these standard definitions of noise and their derogatory orientations. I have had decades of first-hand experience as an experimental musician that tells me these qualitative assumptions are not necessarily true, and that denoting something as noise is a fundamentally subjective process. What one person experiences as a performance of something purposely discomfoting, *too loud* or *dissonant* in some overtly unpleasant way, for another can be a deeply moving and phenomenologically rich experience.²⁹ Yet such differences of experience bely something more profound than habituated matters of taste.³⁰ Any attempt at discerning 'what is noise?' requires us to accept normative definitions of aesthetic value, of physical comfort, and utility. Such qualities are contingent however, not universal or *a priori*. And yet, things do get called 'noise' and there is a general sensibility to those designations that suggests that noise has a coherent basis or meaning of some kind that raises its determinations to the level of a meaningful

²⁹ "I do not reach out toward the sound—instead, I am assaulted from the inside by a pulsation that is also sound, a physical force that almost lifts me off the floor." Timothy Morten writing on My Bloody Valentine from Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 29-30.

³⁰ Vilém Flusser, "Habit: The True Aesthetic Criterion" (1990), in *Writings*, edited by Andreas Strohl, translated by Erik Eisel (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 51-57.

descriptor. I am not making the argument that noise doesn't exist (except in the ear of the beholder) but rather that we have misunderstood how and why something has become noise.

The designation of something as noise is not dependent upon a universal or transcendent quality intrinsic to noise, but rather on relationships of power, and these relationships of power disguise themselves in their normativity. In the pages that follow I trace a relationship between noise and power that begins at the place where these abstract ideas become concrete, in the exercise of power over the powerless and in the resistance to subjugation that are manifest in unrest, riot, and revolt. It is here that noise *indexes* struggles for power, making audible their presence in the tensions, or 'dissonances' as Adorno called them, between those that govern and the ungovernable. Such tensions invariably erupt, a necessary release that can range from quiet passive dissent to protest, revolt, even civil war. These explosions contain a spectrum of control and disorder, of potential and actual violence, and of stasis and transformation. The worlds that such disrule produce can be radically different than what has come before it. This radical alterity, what Black religious scholar Ashon Crawley calls "otherwise possibility," threatens to abolish the world that comes before.³¹ Tumult can produce a space where our radical imagining of what is possible might become actualized, even if only momentarily, in the material present. As Vilém

³¹ Ashon Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

Flusser once wrote, “Everything that is new is terrible, not because of what it is, but because it is new”—it is the promise of something radically new that gives tumult its overtones of terror.³² Over the course of these pages I will show how the terror of tumult, and the aesthetic hatred of noise, is tied up in this world-making and world-destroying potentiality.

This is a different way of thinking about noise, about what it is and does and how it came to be. To arrive there, we must return to noise and how it has been thought. This chapter considers the state of the study of noise so that I can make a case for a different set of claims, a critical noise studies approach that attends to relations of power that shape and define what noise is and does and how it came to be. The chapter begins with a survey of how definitions of noise have developed alongside the interdisciplinary field of sound studies. Noise is so ubiquitous, so concomitant with sound itself, that some of the field’s early theorists have suggested “we have done with the notion of noise” altogether.³³ All the same, noise seems to function in the world materially and socially in ways that make it an importantly distinct subcategory of concepts like sound, music, or signal. This has given rise to debates over its definitions, over what social constructions lead to something being deemed noise, and even the extent to which noise has an existence ontologically prior to human perception. I think through these debates with attention paid to contemporary

³² Flusser, “Habit,” 51.

³³ Michel Chion, “Let’s Have Done with the Notion of ‘Noise,’” *differences*, 1 December 2011; 22 (2-3): 240–248.

theorists of noise, in particular Marie Thompson and Christoph Cox, expanding on their arguments for an ‘onto-epistemological’ view of noise by proposing my own ‘ontological’ claim, one drawn from the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s genealogy of morals. I argue that perception of noise’s ‘badness’ is tied up in its relation to power. Thinking alongside Thompson’s critique of R. Murray Schafer’s “aesthetic moralism” I use noise’s *ontological badness* to analyze relations of power implicit in Schafer’s definitions of noise. Finally, I turn to the etymological origins of ‘noise’ to show that my claims regarding noise and its relationship to power can be found in its basic definitions, that noise has always had a meaning tied up in forms of social disorder, and that there exists a whole lexicon of synonyms, of which *tumult* is exemplary, that conjoin the unruly crowd and its noise.

2.1 Noise Studies

Noise is perhaps the single most ubiquitous keyword in the emergent and promiscuous interdisciplinary field of sound studies. Yet noise as an object of study has elided any proper consensus in terms of its definition, function, or value. In his coedited volume, “Keywords in Sound Studies,” David Novak describes it as “a subject of deep fascination that cuts across disciplinary boundaries,” though even here he tries to organize it discreetly in terms of musical aesthetics, acoustic ecology, and communications.³⁴ Noise appears across discursive domains in ways that can be

³⁴ David Novak, “Noise,” in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 125.

resonant or divergent, and that change overtime, leading slippages of meanings and infectious ambiguities. Novak's analysis follows British literary critic Raymond Williams' study of 'keywords' that had both become common language and situated themselves at the center of argument, words that forced themselves on one's attention because "the problems of its meanings seemed [...] inextricably bound up with the problems it was being used to discuss."³⁵ Williams' great insight was that language, in its use and transformations, unlocks for us powerful tools for critically thinking about culture and society. Novak's engagement with 'noise' as a keyword signals its theoretical importance in critical studies of sound and culture, even as sound studies as a field has mostly failed to appreciate that word's utility in the vocabulary of power. It is noise's feral nature, its refusal to allow its meaning to be fixed in place, that has made it a perennial fixture of the study of sound and its material and cultural effects.

³⁵ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford UP, 1976), 13. His eponymous collection of keywords from 1976 gave an account of historical definitions and contemporary usages of various words or phrases as "a way of recording, investigating, and presenting problems of meaning in the area in which the meanings of culture and society have formed." 'Noise' was not featured in Williams' collection.

Sound studies today has coalesced around its own self-identity, represented by scholarly journals and academic societies;³⁶ the subject of numerous anthologies;³⁷ and taught as a discipline at universities and academies.³⁸ The origins of the field can be traced back to early 20th century technological and scientific studies of acoustics.³⁹ At same time, histories of the field could just as easily begin with the modern musical avant-garde's artistic-research into sound's properties: Italian Futurist Luigi Russolo's noise machines, the *Intonarumori*, for example, or the *Bruitist* sound poems of the Dadaist and psychoanalyst Richard Hüelsenbeck, or the mid-century

³⁶ Though most scholarly journals focused on music and popular culture, film sound, radio, and sound technology include substantial contributions to the sound studies field, the following journals attend to that field as their primary focus: *Interference: A Journal of Audio Culture*; *Journal of Sonic Studies*; *Organized Sound*; *Resonance: The Journal of Sound and Culture*; *SoundEffects: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Sound and Sound Experience*; *Sound Studies Journal*. Scholarly societies devoted to sound studies include the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology (WFAE); the European Sound Studies Association (ESSA); the Canadian Association for Sound Ecology. There are also sound studies sub-groups connected to many additional societies and associations including the American Studies Association (ASA), the Cultural Studies Association (CSA), the Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association (MeCCSA), the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS), and the Society for Ethnomusicology (SEM).

³⁷ Jonathan Sterne, ed., *The Sound Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2012); Karin Bijsterveld and Trevor Pinch, *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Holger Schulze, *Sound Studies: Traditionen-Methoden-Desiderate: eine Einführung* (Berlin: Transcript, 2015); Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner, eds., *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music* Revised edition (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017); Michael Bull, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Sound Studies* (London: Routledge, 2018);

³⁸ Master's degrees in Sound Studies are offered at Bard College; Berlin University of the Arts, Columbia University, Goldsmiths (University of London), New York University, The New School, University of Amsterdam, University of Copenhagen, and University of Sussex, while graduate certificates in Sound Studies are available at Princeton University, University of Michigan, and University of Pennsylvania. Harvard University offers a secondary field in Sound Studies for PhD students and Brown University offers a concentration in Sound Studies within its Music and Multimedia Composition program, while Manhattan College and McGill University provide majors and minor in Sound Studies respectively. Research focused on sound studies is supported by the Sound Studies Lab at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, the Sound Studies Lab at Copenhagen University, and the Sound Studies Institute at University of Alberta in Edmonton.

³⁹ Chen-Pang Yeang, *Transforming Noise: A History of Its Science and Technology from Disturbing Sounds to Informational Errors, 1900-1955* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

compositions of Pierre Schaefer and John Cage.⁴⁰ Of course the study of music itself is inherently a study of sonic materialism and audio culture, and as such we can retroactively find lineages of sound studies in histories of music and in musicology. Philosophy has contemplated music, voice, and listening for millennia, and 20th century structuralist and post-structuralist theorists have studied sound through writings on language, anthropology, and literary criticism.⁴¹ It was not until a flurry of publication in the 1990's and early 2000's that sound studies began to coalesce as its own coherent field of study.⁴² To the extent that the field has become more strongly associated with humanistic scholarship, sound studies is often understood as emerging from two interdisciplinary projects that can retroactively be considered canonical, R. Murray Schafer's *The Soundscape* and Jacques Attali's *Noise*. Thus the

⁴⁰ Richard Huelsenbeck, *Phantastische Gebeté*, 1916) *Ubu Web Sound*, <http://www.ubu.com/sound/huelsenbeck.html>; Barclay Brown, "The Noise Instruments of Luigi Russolo", *Perspectives of New Music* 20, nos. 1 & 2 (Fall-Winter 1981, Spring-Summer 1982): 31–48; Pierre Schaefer, *Treatise on Musical Objects: An Essay across Disciplines*, translated by Christine North and John Dack (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017); John Cage, *Silence: Lectures & Writing by John Cage* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961). Excellent overviews of noise and art can be found in Brandon LaBelle *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art* (New York: Continuum, 2006); Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat*; Seth Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear: Toward a Non-Chochlear Sonic Art* (New York: Continuum, 2009); Alan Licht, *Sound Art: Beyond Music, Between Categories* (New York: Rizolli International Publications, 2007).

⁴¹ Primary and secondary philosophical engagements with music include Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) and *Philosophy of New Music*, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Jacques Derrida, *Voice and Phenomena* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011); Veit Erlmann, *Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality* (New York: Zone Books, 2010); Michael Gallope, *Deep Refrains: Music, Philosophy, and the Ineffable* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2017); Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, trans. by Carolyn Abbate (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); Brian Kane, *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound In Theory And Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁴² It is still an unresolved question as to whether 'sound studies' is a field or constitutes a discipline in and of itself. See Melle Kromhout, "'Sound Studies: A Discipline?'" *Sound Signatures Winter School*, Amsterdam, January 2014.

study of sound, in technology, art, music, philosophy, critical theory, and even in its formation as a quasi-discipline, has always proposed a parallel study of noise.

2.2 Noise's Ontology

For all this, noise as an object of study has elided any proper consensus in terms of its definition, function, or value. Scholars have generally failed to converge upon a broader theory of noise that answers not only epistemic questions about *what noise is* (such as David Novak's "What kinds of noise does 'noise' make?") but also addresses the material, social, and psychological functions of *what noise does*.⁴³

Roland Barthes already made this distinction in the 1980s, separating the vibrational physicality of noise from its psychological effects, but he never reconciled their differences into a unified theory of noise.⁴⁴ Rather than hold these epistemological modes in tension, scholars tend to either privilege noise as a sonic event in time and space that is attached to its social context, or else disavow any culturally grounded specificity in favor of transcendent philosophical approaches to noise. These potentially irreconcilable approaches have led to debates regarding noise's ontological status and the limits of our epistemological access to it, resulting in a host

⁴³ David Novak, "Noise" in *Keywords of Sound*, David Novak & Matthew Sakakeeny, eds. (Durham: Duke UP, 2015), 125. This distinction between what noise *is* and *does* is influenced by W. J. T. Mitchell's work on the visual cultures of landscape where he asks, "not just what [landscape] 'is' or 'means' but what it *does*, how it works as a cultural practice." W.J.T. Mitchell, "Introduction" in *Landscape and Power*, edited by W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994), 13.

⁴⁴ Roland Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art and Representation* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985).

of questions as to whether noise has an objective existence that precedes its cultural meaning. This has led to what Brian Kane describes as an “ontological turn” in sound studies, one that has attempted to think noise in a philosophically materialist way while positioning itself in contrast to the “cultural” orientation of others.⁴⁵ In some very real sense, the field of sound studies has become embroiled in the clichéd *acoustemological* question of whether a tree falling in a forest devoid of people does in fact make a sound.⁴⁶

Those scholars championing the primacy of sound’s materiality would likely say ‘yes, of course a tree falling makes a sound.’ Sound (and, by extension, noise) for them are “ontologically prior” to human sociality and cultural context. Philosophers such as sound artist Steve Goodman are critical of the “preoccupations of cultural studies’ critical musicological approaches” that he believes have a tendency “to limit discussion [to] issues of representation, identity, and cultural meaning.”⁴⁷ For Goodman, a sonic materialist whose work draws upon the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, the affective force of vibration precedes both its interpretation and representation.⁴⁸ Christoph Cox, a scholar of philosophy and sound art that Kane

⁴⁵ Brian Kane, “Sound Studies Without Auditory Culture: A Critique of The Ontological Turn,” *Sound Studies*, 1:1 (2015), 2-21.

⁴⁶ Though not exactly philosopher George Berkeley’s phrasing, it is essentially a version of an argument supporting his philosophy of subjective idealism; Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge and Three Dialogues*, Howard Robinson, ed. (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999 [1791]), e.g. on. pg. 33.

⁴⁷ Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* (MIT Press, 200x), 9-10.

⁴⁸ Goodman claims that this doesn’t neutralize noise’s political import but rather emphasizes its first resort as a weapon against deterritorialization and in service of radical forms of reterritorialization. See Goodman, “Conclusion: Unsound—The (Sub)Politics of Frequency,” *Sonic Warfare*, 189-194.

likewise critiques as an “ontologist,” describes sound’s materialization as an already and always existing “sonic flux” that by its nature is virtual, only ever becoming actualized through mechanisms such as the formal restraints of musical composition.⁴⁹ Matter, for Cox, “is all there is, [and] all entities and events in the universe are the products of immanent and contingent material and energetic processes.”⁵⁰ The sonic flux meanwhile is “a nonlinear flow of matter and energy on par with other natural flows.”⁵¹ Sonic flux is sound—vibrating matter—which has as yet not been delimited by human cognition or manipulation; it is sound in its inchoate, changing, and agential *for-itself* state.⁵² According to Greg Hainge this state is an ontologically distinct “condition of possibility for all matter in an expressive state,” and even in its virtuality it is never really external to *being*.⁵³ All three of these thinkers have argued that noise has a material existence that precedes its representation and signification, which themselves are only the aftereffects of anthropocentric culture.

⁴⁹ Christoph Cox, *Sonic Flux: Sound, Art, and Metaphysics* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2018)

⁵⁰ Cox, *Sonic Flux*, 6.

⁵¹ Cox, *Sonic Flux*, 43.

⁵² Christoph Cox, “Beyond Representation and Signification: Toward a Sonic Materialism,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 10, no. 2 (2011): 145–161.

⁵³ Hainge, *Noise Matters*, 123. There are several other thinkers who share with Hainge and Cox a notion of a non-differentiated sonic substratum which only periodically constitutes itself as a signal we recognize as distinct. See for example Lawrence Kramer, *The Hum of the World: A Philosophy of Listening* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018) or Daniel K. L. Chua and Alexander Rehding, *Alien Listening: Voyager’s Golden Record and Music from Earth* (New York: Zone Books, 2021). Chua and Rehding describe this sonic totality against which we apprehend other sounds as “black noise,” the vast “background frequency of a flat ontology.” Meant to evoke ‘dark matter’ and stand in juxtaposition to ‘white noise’ in its technical sense, I prefer to use Cox’s ‘sonic flux’ to avoid confusion with uses of ‘Black noise’ in Black critical theory and American studies that I explore below.

Such attempts to ontologize noise are reverberations of the so-called ‘ontological turn’ in philosophy more broadly—a cohort of philosophical concepts that include *object-oriented ontology*, *speculative realism* and *new materialism*.⁵⁴ These philosophical approaches emphasize an agential and concrete existence for non-human ‘things’ that is both prior to and independent from human relations. They critique what Quentin Meillassoux has called “correlationism,” the belief that our ability to access things in the world is necessarily mediated by human relationships.⁵⁵ Things, including noise, are said to have a reality-in-themselves irrespective of human experience that, even if not wholly accessible, persists in being with or without human cultures. Kane critiques this claim, arguing that ontologists must resort to analogy to describe that which is otherwise unrepresentable (i.e., virtual), and thus “their supposedly culture-free ontology presupposes a cultural ground.”⁵⁶ These theories have also been critiqued on similar grounds by some feminist, Indigenous, and critical race scholarship for assuming that existence that is knowable outside of culture, or that any epistemology precedes the influence of race, gender, and other markers of difference that situate the knowing subject.⁵⁷ Annie Goh directs

⁵⁴ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, Or What’s It Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman (eds). *The Speculative Turn* (Melbourne: Repress, 2011); Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002).

⁵⁵ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, translated by Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008).

⁵⁶ Kane, “Sound Studies Without Auditory Culture,” 15.

⁵⁷ Celia Åsberg, Kathrin Thiele and Iris van der Tuin, “Speculative Before the Turn. Reintroducing Feminist Materialist Performativity,” *Cultural Studies Review* 21, 2 (2015): 145–72; Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, “Animal: New Directions In The Theorization Of Race And Posthumanism,” *Feminist*

this critique towards the field of sound studies, claiming that a Harawayan approach to “ethico-onto-epistemology” would reveal the listening subject-object relationship is never neutral.⁵⁸ Sound scholar Marie Thompson calls this same assumption “white aurality,” denoting a “racialized perceptual schema” that obscures “its own, active presence” in the role such subjectivity plays in interpretation.⁵⁹ Thompson is not disavowing ‘ontology’ as such, but through her recourse to feminist, Indigenous and Black scholarship she is attempting to offer an ethico-political corrective, arguing that ontology itself requires a “*resituating* amongst its co-productive relations with the social world.”⁶⁰ The turn towards ontology may be correct in its belief that there exists a real outside of culture, but how can we possibly know it?

A position that affirms both situated knowledge and a material world prior to human culture is not impossible, and in response to critiques by Kane, Thompson, and Goh, Cox claims that “ontology and cultural analysis [can] be complimentary rather than adversarial projects.” Cox believes that there are real affinities but also meaningful philosophical differences between the former cohort’s “onto-epistemological” views and what he calls a “realist ontology.”⁶¹ What Cox means here is that he believes

Studies 39, 3 (2013): 669–685; Zoe Todd, “An Indigenous Feminist’s Take On The Ontological Turn: ‘Ontology’ Is Just Another Word For Colonialism,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 29 (2016): 4–22; Vanessa Watts, “Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency amongst humans and non-humans (First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European world tour!),” *Decolonization* 2, 1 (2013): 20–34.

⁵⁸ Annie Goh, “Sounding Situated Knowledges: Echo in Archaeocustics,” *parallax*, 23:3 (2017), 283–304; Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies*, 14, 3 (1988): 575–599.

⁵⁹ Marie Thompson, “Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies,” *parallax*, 23:3 (2017), 278.

⁶⁰ Thompson, “Whiteness and the Ontological Turn,” 278, emphasis in the original.

⁶¹ Christoph Cox, “Sonic Realism and Auditory Culture: A Reply to Marie Thompson and Annie Goh,” *parallax*, 24:2 (2018), 234–242. As much as there is a genuine gesture towards reconciliation bookending the essay, the tone shifts through most of Cox’s response in which he offers *philosophical*

there exists a “real,” of which noise is a part, that precedes human cultures, precedes *human existence*, and that does not cease to have a material existence without humans, a truth of being that must be understood as “a way the world really is.”⁶² Thompson defines her own position as “the entanglement and co-constitution of ontology [...] and epistemology,” a belief that existence and knowledge of that existence actively depend upon one-another, which Cox interprets to mean that nothing exists outside of human perception and conception.⁶³ The embodied and social critique that Thompson and Goh are attempting to mobilize is itself a kind of materialism, emphasizing the facticity of human bodies existing in the situation of society in a temporal now. In response to this position, Cox challenges the orthodoxy of critical theory through a reversal: he claims that in ironic contrast to the feminist aspirations of onto-epistemology, a materialist approach to sound in fact presents a radically egalitarian view of the world because “material realism affirms the self-organizing power of material processes, of which human knowing is but an instance.”⁶⁴ Rather than reproduce the patriarchal and colonial hierarchies that

arguments in response to what he correctly registers as a *political* polemic. Cox fails to address Thompson or Goh on the same cultural grounds through which they are working, pulling their arguments out of context and challenging them for not addressing his own concerns – an inversion of what I sense he feels they’ve done to him.

⁶² Cox, “Sonic Realism and Auditory Culture,” 235.

⁶³ Thompson, 279n26; Cox, “Sonic Realism and Auditory Culture,” 235-236.

⁶⁴ Cox, “Sonic Realism and Auditory Culture,” 236. In an earlier essay that anticipates his arguments in this response, Cox argues that the audio culturalist distinction between listening and hearing (implicitly the one being made by Jonathan Sterne in *The Audible Past*,) is “ontologically problematic” since it “ignores Nietzsche’s point that every entity in the world is fundamentally interpretive - that nature is already interpretive, and hence political, insofar as interpretation is ‘will to power’.” His claim is that audio culture presumes that listening in a particularly human way is somehow exceptional, and always agential, which ignores the innate passivity and habituation that conscious listening can perform. If we were to “level the ontological field” we might disrupt the supposed chain of being that places humans above animals, the inanimate and the mechanical. This leveling does have radical implications for human and other-than-human relations, but this is not a

assumes human dominion over the world, a realist ontology flattens the ‘great chain of being’ into a field of relational equality.⁶⁵

Yet how does such relational equality function in relation to a human experience overdetermined by a social world that, at this historic conjuncture, is structured by inequality? If Goh and Thompson insist that we hear noise in its social context, as sound organized by the violences of unequal relations, Cox insists that noise gives us auditory evidence of a world outside these conditions, not in the future but *now*. Does the existence of a *being* that is outside of human cognition give us hope that there is an existence outside of human-induced social injustice? Can humans even be a part of this existence? And what does this mean for noise? Does the “self-organizing power of material processes” mean that sound, and noise in particular, has agency? Does it act in the world on its own volition? Or is noise by its definition always the product of human activity and consciousness? In a sense these ontological debates are simply an echo of older debates over how we distinguish signal from noise. Everything is signal or noise all the time until signals and noises become differentiated as signals and noises through an act of judgement, our separation of material into what we value (‘signal’). Noise is simply a ‘bad’ signal, a signal we don’t value, emerging from the same sonic flux as ‘good’ signals. Yet it is the event of our becoming aware of these signals and our interpretation of the affects they produce as we struggle to give them

given. Christoph Cox, “Listening as Agon in the Society of Control,” in *What Now? The Politics of Listening*, ed. Anne Barlow, Lindsey Berfond, and Kristen Chappa (London: Black Dog, 2015).

⁶⁵ Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

meaning, through attribution and differentiation, that makes them thinkable. Cox may be right that his and Thompson's positions are not incompatible, but rather they reflect distinct intellectual priorities. What is at stake in any definition of noise depends on whether one's concerns are metaphysical or "primarily political."⁶⁶

While it may be true that noise has a being that precedes its materialization and interpretation, and also that interpretation is a product of social constructions in actually existing society, there is a third process, a *retroactive ontologizing*, that other theorists have not addressed. Noise as it is understood today has a fundamentally derogatory connotation that takes for granted that all sounds *interpreted* as noise are noise *in fact* in some natural and universal sense. This view assumes that noise *as a sign* was always and already noise, that it has preceded its interpretation as such. This is not the same thing as saying noise exists prior to interpretation, but rather that its negative value is native to its existence. To accept this requires we ignore all the forces and conditions which might make noise *noise*. Instead, we should register noise as a sign and not a thing in-and-of-itself, which is to say (here paraphrasing Michel Foucault) that the word 'noise' does not denote a signified; rather it imposes an interpretation.⁶⁷ But where does this imposition come from, and to what end? The derogation of noise, its perception as being bad, exemplifies what Nietzsche

⁶⁶ Cox, "Sonic Realism and Auditory Culture," 237.

⁶⁷ "Words themselves are nothing but interpretations, [...] they interpret before being signs, and ultimately they signify only because they are essentially nothing but interpretations. [...] This is also what Nietzsche means when he says that words have always been invented by the ruling classes; they do not denote a signified, they impose an interpretation." Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Freud, Marx," *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*, James Faubion, ed. (New York: New Press, 1998), 276.

described in *Beyond Good and Evil* as a “master morality.” Nietzsche claimed that, in a master morality, that which is associated with the powerful is ‘good’ and worthy of praise, and that which is understood as its opposite, whatever is produced by the powerless, is by its nature ‘bad’ and worthy of contempt.⁶⁸ Commonplace distinctions between what sounds are or are not understood as noise hinge on just this moral framework. The interpretation of a sign as noise is the imposition, in the present *and a priori*, of a set of values determined by power.

In this framework, noise is what we name sounds associated with the powerless, and that are therefore *ontologically bad*. This is a moral relationship to power that shapes language itself, determining our interpretations of signs. This means that the word “noise” (and its synonyms) denotes not a specific sound but rather a power relation. Foucault suggests that all language does this, that “there is always a great tissue of violent interpretations beneath everything that speaks,” and thus any original interpretation of noise *as noise* is the direct result of an originary violence that enabled one class of humanity to possess the power to impose moral value on the word itself.⁶⁹ The questions that I juxtaposed earlier—‘*what is noise?*’ as opposed to ‘*what does noise do?*’—can be reframed through Foucault’s method: rather than attempting to interpret *what* is signified as ‘noise’, we should ask *who* has imposed

⁶⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 260, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. by Walter Kaufman (New York: Knopf, 2000 [1967]), 394-398.

⁶⁹ Foucault, “Nietzsche, Freud, Marx”, 276. Foucault argues that “the sign is already an interpretation that does not appear as such” and goes on to say that “the idea that interpretation precedes the sign implies that the sign is not a simple and benevolent being.” 277.

this interpretation of sound as ‘noise.’⁷⁰ When scholars argue that noise exists prior to culture, they ignore the question of what power relations are made audible by calling it ‘noise’. Meanwhile, those who do address this question underestimate the reach of noise’s bad ontology, still claiming that *some things* are worthy of being called noise, just not those noises that they hope to redeem. For noise to not simply be given to badness, for its badness not to be ontologized, requires a political project that understands how power is always expressed through noise by its derogation.

2.3 Unwanted Sounds

If we wish to understand how power is expressed through noise’s derogation, we must first audit the negative interpretations through which we hear noise already. Many of our commonplace definitions are rooted in long-standing interpretations of noise’s disruptive and negative effects and attempts to regulate specific activities that produced them. It was R. Murray Schafer’s definitions of noise, first articulated half-a-century ago, that have tended to shape interpretations found in sound studies and acoustic ecology today. In a chapter from *The Soundscape* titled “Noise”, Schafer offered four provisional definitions of noise that he summarizes as follows: *unwanted sound; unmusical sound; any loud sound; disturbance in any signaling system*.⁷¹ These definitions reappear throughout studies of noise in the academy and popular culture, repeated or reinforced regularly in books on noise, silence, and sound.

⁷⁰ Foucault, “Nietzsche, Freud, Marx”, 278.

⁷¹ Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 182, 273.

Though Schafer often made caveats in his own writing, he deploys these four categories as pragmatic approximations of what defines noise. Schafer slips between an objective scientism and a kind of subjective evangelism that Marie Thompson calls “aesthetic moralism,” desperately trying to bring about a society that shares his audiophilic values.⁷² It is a testament to his persuasive labors that his interpretation of noise has become normative in noise regulations, ordinances, and acoustic design in the decades since he began these studies.

Unwanted: Noise Sounds Bad

Of his four categories defining noise Schafer treats “unwanted sound” as preeminent, and understandably so since it is the premise that underlies his other three.

Unwantedness is clearly an unscientific criterion, one Schafer admits is ultimately a subjective preference, but he believes there is a potential in this definition to support a consensus as to what qualifies as noise. Presumably this is because a set of shared social and cultural norms could be cultivated through a combination of education and legislation.⁷³ Schafer does not address the question of who is or isn’t capable of building that consensus, or whether a popular consensus disqualifies the needs of a minority, or by what mechanism even a popular consensus is able to avoid sanction from those with the authority to impose it. In Schafer’s account there is no friction,

⁷² Marie Thompson, *Beyond Unwanted Sound: Noise, Affect and Aesthetic Moralism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).

⁷³ Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 183.

only the powers of discipline and control acting on behalf of a subjective consensus premised on observable facts. Schafer's fundamental problem is that he believes that there exist objectively *good* sounds, and therefore there also exist objectively *bad* sounds. Were this the case, such sounds could be made to work as an empirical constant by which other, more ambiguous sounds could be assessed. This assessment, as Paul Hegarty has pointed out, is a form of *a posteriori* judgement fundamentally determined in the negative – noise is defined as the opposite of, undermining of, or failure of whatever is desirable, pleasing, productive, beautiful, musical, intelligible, etc.⁷⁴ In other words, noise is ontologically bad, bad because it is not good, a goodness that is defined through the effects of Nietzsche's master morality.

Unlistenable: Noise is Non-Musical

Before his forays into ecology, Schafer was already a renowned Canadian composer, so it is unsurprising that he considers a key definition of noise to be "*unmusical*," defined as all sounds that are not "organized" into a pure and aesthetically whole form.⁷⁵ Yet noise in the modern era has been a resource for music as a means of building affective tension, enacting signification, and implying novelty, something evident even in conservative histories of European classical music.⁷⁶ In a more

⁷⁴ Hegarty, *Noise/Music*, 3.

⁷⁵ Matt Sakakeeny, "Music" in Novak and Sakakeeny, *Keywords in Sound*, 112-124.

⁷⁶ Modern 19th and 20th century composers have employed or mimicked the sounds of birds, hunting and war; have integrated unpitched percussion; and featured noise producing machinery. Examples of such composers could include Jacobus Handel, Joseph Haydn and Ludwig van Beethoven; Louis-Hector Berlioz, Edgard Varèse and Henry Cowell; George Antheil, Sergei Prokofiev and Carlos Chàvez. See Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise*; Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 103-114.

contemporary context, ‘noise’ serves as a genre name for a whole category of electronic and electro-acoustic music.⁷⁷ Historically, music that would have been described (or dismissed) as noise has become incorporated into popular music, with previously abject sonic elements becoming building blocks for contemporary pop, electronic dance music, and hip-hop production.⁷⁸ More egregious is the extent to which Eurocentric standards of aesthetic virtue have been applied to the music of non-European cultures, with often highly sophisticated traditions of musicking rejected even by musicologists as ‘primitive noise.’⁷⁹ Over time and space, taste and cultural norms change, and the contingent noisiness or unmusicality of any given array of organized sounds is made evident. All this is to say that Schafer’s pithy “one man’s music may be another man’s noise” encapsulates the uselessness of non-musicality as a definition of noise.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Varieties of *noise music* have little in common other than a commitment to abstraction and a disavowal of the formal logics that might otherwise make it compatible with the aesthetic sensibilities of more mainstream musical forms. Even within its own esoteric domain, noise music has minute distinctions that might not be immediately obvious to outside listeners. A telling example of this is presented by the documentary, *People Who Do Noise* (dir. Adam Cornelius, 2008). Some artists such as Merzbow, The Rita and John Wiese eschew all formal rhythm and structure, delivering to listeners a barely differentiated mass of sound that may not deviate for its duration. Ostensibly “white noise”, for practiced listeners even the most militantly opaque examples nonetheless betray the performers “hand” (the signature trace often discussed in telegraphy). Such music is often described generically as “Harsh Noise.” See David Novak, *Japanoise: Music at the Edge of Circulation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013). Other artists use elements of *musique concrète* and tape collage, deconstructed elements of rock music, or extreme extrapolations from electronic music. Surveys of different methods, styles and subgenres of noise music can be found in Hegarty, *Noise/Music*; Novak, *Japanoise*; Tara Rodgers, *Pink Noises*; and Thompson, *Beyond Unwanted Sound*, 127-174.

⁷⁸ Hua Hsu, “How Noise Became Music” *The New Yorker*, July 20, 2015.

⁷⁹ Kofi Agwani, *Representing African Music: Postcolonial Notes, Queries, Positions* (London: Routledge, 2003); Ronald Radano and Tejumola Olaniyan, eds., *Audible Empire: Music, Global Politics, Critique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Greg Steingo and Jim Sykes, eds. *Remapping Sound Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

⁸⁰ Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 183. See also Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and The Culture of Listening in America, 1900-1933* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 128-130.

Unbearable: Noise is Loud

However much what has been discussed above does rely on subjective feelings, there are features in musical sound (complexity, non-periodicity, flat spectrum) that while perhaps not always unwanted or unlistenable, are none-the-less attributes of a type of sound signal that are empirically measurable.⁸¹ These attributes need not even disqualify such sounds as music; Schafer was far too Cagean (and too indebted to the utility of Pierre Schaeffer's techniques of *musique concrète*) to promote a definition of noise as "non-musical" unproblematically. His (dis)taste for contemporary music, and his justifications for its designation as noise, seem to have more to do with the impacts of amplification, the related increase in the volume of youth music, and the physical hazard of exposure to excessive decibels. Schafer places the countercultural insurgency of 1960's rock music at the tail end of a genealogy of orchestration that brought folk music inside the concert hall and, in the process, developed in audiences the audile technique of "concentrated listening," a capacity that Schaefer fears will deteriorate (along with "manners") as "listening gives way to impressionism."⁸² Of course Schafer isn't wrong to point out that rock concerts operate at extraordinary volumes with real physiological consequences for audiences, something that has only intensified as technology and social norms have evolved.⁸³ Jonathan Sterne has gone

⁸¹ Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 25.

⁸² Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 114.

⁸³ A 2023 Taylor Swift concert in Seattle, Washington produced enough sound pressure to register as a 2.3 earthquake. Aidin Vaziri, "Taylor Swift fans caused an earthquake in Seattle. Can the Bay Area expect the same?," *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 28, 2023.

so far as to characterize audience participation in these environments as a kind of ritualized act of inner-ear scarification, while others have suggested a spiritual motivation behind this exposure.⁸⁴ Still, amplitude is a measurable feature of sound that can be narrowly determined, and that has undeniable physical and even psychological effects. This makes “any loud sound” a potentially useful ‘value-free’ criteria for enforcing noise abatement, with decibel levels continuing to be the terms under which such policing is typically justified.⁸⁵ Yet the content and context of a loud sound is never ‘value free’ and the impact of sound can’t be measured in decibels, because it is always overdetermined by our feelings about the perceived sound and the perceived source.

Unintelligible: Noise Lacks Signal

At the root of Schafer’s disparagement of noise as “unwanted sound” is an assumption that there are a host of sounds which are actually welcomed and that noise, not merely unpleasant aesthetically, occupies a space that would otherwise be filled by sounds we desire. Schafer uses the binaristic relationship between noise and

<https://www.sfchronicle.com/entertainment/article/taylor-swift-eras-tour-earthquake-santa-clara-18266714.php>.

⁸⁴ Jonathan Sterne, *Diminished Faculties: A Political Phenomenology of Impairment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022); Owen Coggins, *Mysticism, Ritual and Religion in Drone Metal* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018).

⁸⁵ This is the case in most social science studies of noise abatement, though critical assessments typically recognize that it is not just “any loud sound” that gets censured. See Karin Bijsterveld, “Sound Waves of Protest: Noise Abatement Movements” in *The Routledge Companion to Sound Studies*, Michael Bull, ed. (London: Taylor & Francis, 2018); Leonardo Cardoso, *Sound-Politics in São Paulo* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); Key MacFarlane, “Governing the Noisy Sphere: Geographies of Noise Regulation in the U.S.” *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 38, no. 3 (2020): 539-556; Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity*.

signal in communication technology as an analogy. As Schafer puts it, noise constitutes “any disturbances which do not represent part of the signal,” and an anti-signal impeding the reception of information that is desired.⁸⁶ Whereas signal is a distinct message, one whose meaning is discernable and contains useful information, noise is an undifferentiated, unintelligible, purposeless mass of outputs. In this schema, media technologies are seen to have progressed to the extent that they can reduce, cancel, and eliminate noise, or else burrow down into noise to retrieve a signal from within it. Yet noise can in effect complete the relay between signal and receptor and become, in Michel Serres terms, a parasitic third party that completes the circuit.⁸⁷ In some contexts (astrophysics, finance, encryption) noise itself functions as a useful signal relaying information actively being sought.⁸⁸ Noise’s meaningless unintelligibility is not an objective feature of the signal, but a subjective assessment, not a characteristic lack inhered in noise, but rather a potential indication of an auditor’s own failure or refusal to perceive what is being transmitted. Noise, as engineer Bart Kosko’s elegant definition suggests, is simply “a signal we don’t like.”⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 182.

⁸⁷ Michele Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. by Lawrence Schehr (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1982).

⁸⁸ Chen-Pang Yeang is particularly helpful in showing how the study of noise in statistics and information sciences has demonstrated a consistent valuation of noise as signal. See Yeang, *Transforming Noise*; Claude Elwood Shannon and Warren Weaver, eds. *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998); Barry Truax, *Acoustic Communication*. 2nd ed. (Westport, CT: Ablex Publishing, 2001); Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2012). There has also been particular attention paid to how noise functions in service of finance and electronic trading: Nicholas A. Knouf, *How Noise Matters to Finance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016); Alex Preda, *Noise: Living and Trading in Electronic Finance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

⁸⁹ Bart Kosko, *Noise* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 3.

Unsatisfactory: Marie Thompson Responds

Schafer's schema was one of the first to try and account for 'noise' as an object of study outside of its divergent disciplinary meanings, presenting a theory of noise that could encompass mathematics, technology, social sciences and art. For all its shortcomings it provides a basis for critically thinking noise. If I were to be generous, I would say the novelty of Schafer's approach explains the failures and blind spots that characterize his results. Four decades on from the publication of Schafer's *Tuning of the World*, Marie Thompson has presented a thorough intervention and reinvention of his categories in her book, *Beyond Unwanted Sound*. Here she has honed Schafer's categories into her own quartet of noisy forms:

1. *Subject-oriented noise*: Sounds identified by a "value judgement that is made during perception" and typically described by binaries, often resulting from tenuous attempts to distinguish between sounds that are musical or non-musical, pleasant or ugly, etc.
2. *Object-oriented noise*: referring to sounds that can be defined along materialist lines, characterized by "particular acoustic qualities and attributes" that are empirically grounded.
3. *Noise-as-unwanted source*: Sounds defined as noisy based on a relative antipathy for the noisemaker.

4. *Noise-as-loudness*: A sound whose primary quality is quantifiable in terms of sound pressure or energy, and yet whose wantedness is highly subjective at the same time.⁹⁰

Thompson's categories attempt to address the overlap between phenomenological experience and empiricism, attending to the epistemologically subjective yet observable qualities of sound that gives rise to the determination that something is noise. They incorporate Schafer's work but also complicate it. Whereas Schafer seemed indifferent to the subjectivity implicit to his system, and therefore the relations of power, Thompson's categories establish a framework for interpreting noise as a power relation even while acknowledging its objective social and material characteristics. As Thompson has pointed out, the dualism of sound/noise, where noise's only quality is that it is "perceived as negative," cannot be universalized, and yet can potentially become emptied of meaning "lead[ing] to an unsatisfactory relativist endpoint, where noise can be anything to anyone."⁹¹ Yet beginning with a framework that registers subject-orientation—perhaps we could concede it as correlationism—opens up possibilities for thinking through how noise functions as a field of conflict and struggle in ways that Schafer's work seems to refuse.

Nowhere is Thompson's subject-oriented character of noise more easily registered than in the context of music. For her, the assignation of a musical sound as noise is

⁹⁰ Thompson, *Beyond Unwanted Sound*, 17-18, and 17-40 passim. Thompson does not fully address Schafer's category for noise as a 'disturbance in any signaling system.'

⁹¹ Thompson, *Beyond Unwanted Sound*, 35.

never merely a question of taste. The struggle between dominant Western concepts of harmony and dissonance have often been cast as civilizational struggles, real or imagined. The normative valuation accorded some European traditions of composition, from the Pythagorean harmonics of ancient Greece through to our current capital-driven pop music hegemony, has been set in antagonistic juxtaposition to musical expression from marginalized, subcultural, and subaltern communities. Schafer describes this antagonism in Nietzschean terms as a struggle between “Apollonian” and “Dionysian” music.⁹² In ancient Greece the Dionysian cult was notoriously noisy, allegedly disguising their violent secret rites with chaotic percussion, the roar of the *rhombos*, and the shrieks and cries of their collective tumult. Nietzsche understood that this music – what he called the “primordial phenomenon of Dionysian art” – was by its nature difficult, and that there was “only one direct way to make it intelligible, and to grasp it immediately: through the wonderful significance of *musical dissonance*.”⁹³ In the West, dissonance has come to signify social disorder and dread, while harmony has become a metonym for social cohesion. As Thompson suggests, “noise is that which is beyond our control,” something that threatens to disrupt not only musical order, but also “features as an invasion from the outside that threatens to disrupt” a social order defined by those who feel they belong within it.⁹⁴ Schafer believed that these parallel relationships, between music and social cohesion and between non-music and disorder, were self-

⁹² Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 5-6.

⁹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner* (NY: Vintage 1967), 141, sec. 24.

⁹⁴ Thompson, *Beyond Wanted Sound*, 22.

evident. Such an interpretation can't help but function as an analogy for the hegemonic dominance of Western modernity and the colonized Other that it has produced. Framed as such, the debate over how or whether we value the alleged universal music of 'the West' or the allegedly self-evident noise that is its outside, begins to have actual stakes beyond aesthetic preference.

Noise *as we encounter it*, as it manifests in a world that we can apprehend, never fully disentangles itself from our *subject-orientation*. The ontological realist view of noise describes a condition of virtual possibility that precedes thought, which may be an important problem for thought, but noise as an object that is materially immanent in the world is only perceptible to us via human consciousness and the cultures it creates. Our basic categories for understanding sound as noise rely on the onto-epistemological situatedness of those who attempt to make sense of what they perceive. Consequently, noise is interpreted through our own biases, such that noise is always overdetermined as a negativity particular to the dominant cultural norms to which we are accustomed. Noise is unwanted, unlistenable, unbearable, and unintelligible, always derogated, and always ontologically bad because it actually *is* all those things. Yet this derogation points us beyond the unsatisfactory and probably unanswerable question of what noise is, towards a recognition of what it does through its materialization, its worldly effects, and its psychic consequences. In the negative contour of what is occluded, rejected, repressed, excised, and silenced we can sense the boundaries of what is deemed by power to be knowable, acceptable, permitted,

possible, audible. Noise is what exceeds these limits, what resists them, and ultimately what threatens to abolish them.

It is probably clear that my own sympathies lie with the anthropocentric concerns of Thompson and social critics of noise like her. Of course, I agree with the sonic materialists that there is a sonic *real* that precedes human culture, a vibratory world that has anticipated me by at least 26.7 billion years, and that the reverberations of our cosmic reality move on something like its own agential path. I don't want or need to abandon the vastness of this unknowable but abstractly representable truth of sound, or the metaphysical inquiry that it demands, to attend to the consequences of sound for human society. However, the concerns that I address in what follows are, as Cox put it, "primarily political," and therefore the virtuality of noise, and its emergence into the actuality of our lived sensorium, are important to me because of the *political possibilities* that this noise actualizes. I hear these insurgent possibilities in the "sonic singularities" of protest and riot, in political discord and rebellion, "moments of inflection or bifurcation that reroute the flow of sound." It is through the "overdetermining effects of biological, political, economic, technological, and cultural forces" that human activity concretizes, actualizes, and codifies noise in the phenomenological event of tumult.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Cox, *Sonic Flux*, 43-44.

Sonic flux's noisy effluent and the frictions of competing historical destinies converge in moments of revolt and insurrection, in the event of tumult. This explosion of disorder, of the crowd and its noise, concentrates the cacophony of human sociality into an eruption of insurgent energy. That eruption of noise out of the sonic flux harmonizes with what political theorist Massimiliano Tomba calls "chronotones," the "plurality of historical temporalities interwoven and in friction with each other," that disrupt our ordered present and its teleological claims of power.⁹⁶ Into this rupture of the everyday otherwise possibilities enter, however momentarily, haunting the future with otherwise times and places. The sense that this ghostly presence lingers on the other side of a veil, ready at any moment to interrupt this world, is the origin of that terror that seems to demand these boundaries be policed. That terror is activated by noise, the first indication that something has dangerously altered our static norms, that there is a tear in the veil, that whatever it is that must remain outside, or must abjectly be excised from within, has exceeded its containment. Noise's badness is its promise to disrupt, to border cross, to overwhelm from all directions, the natural order of power.

2.4 An Etymology of Noise

⁹⁶ Massimiliano Tomba, *Insurgent Universalities: An Alternative Legacy of Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 6. A "chronotone" is an event where simultaneous but stratified temporalities appear to occupy the same space.

The desire to define noise is driven in part by the sheer variety of technical and vernacular meanings that have proliferated in the 20th century, many seemingly far afield from those phenomena which the word originally described. Yet none of its associations with disruptive excess, or its overflowing challenge to social order, would seem strange to those Middle English-speakers who first began using the French word ‘noise’ sometime in the early 13th century. At that time, a relationship to riotous assembly and social disorder was not extrinsic to noise, but definitional. ‘Noise’ as defined in the Oxford English Dictionary is effectively synonymous with the sound of an unruly crowd: “disturbance caused by sounds, discordancy, (in early use) esp. disturbance made by voices; shouting, outcry.”⁹⁷ Prior to this usage ‘noise’ remains an etymological mystery. It appears to have migrated relatively recently from the Anglo-Norman etymon *noice*, similar to the Old and Middle French *noise*, or *noyse*, and the Old Occitan *nòisa*, or *noisa*, all of which share a common reference to dispute, quarrel, disturbance, and unrest. Its older Latin origins are even more uncertain: possibly *nausea*, suggesting upset, literally seasickness or *ναυτία*, derived from the Greek root *naus* meaning ship. There is a logic of “sense development” that speculatively and anachronistically flows “from ‘sea-sickness’, the literal sense of classical Latin *nausea*, to ‘upset, malaise’ [...], then to ‘disturbance, uproar’, and thence to ‘noise, din’ and ‘quarrel’.”⁹⁸ Also possible is *noxia*, alluding to harmful

⁹⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “noise (n.), sense I.1.a,” March 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9855906369>. As its first definition for noise, the second edition (1989) had “Loud outcry, clamour, or shouting; din or disturbance made by one or more persons.”

⁹⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “noise (n.), Etymology,” March 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/3698155280>.

behavior, possibly linking noise to noxious and nuisance.⁹⁹ Even as its earlier sources remain unclear, throughout the High and Late Middle Ages there was a strong correlation across a great number of synonyms in English, French, Italian, and Spanish between ‘noise’ and the sound of the crowd.

The ‘crowd’ is itself a word that signifies not only an aggregation of bodies in space but also, in its modern sense, a dangerous gathering, or the manifestation of social disruption. This is a connection expressed through a whole lexicon of words that, while not in every sense equivalent, function metonymically as signifiers for both the unruly crowd and the noise that it makes: *anarchy, bedlam, brouhaha, cacophony, clamor, cohue, commotion, craze, din, disarray, disorder, disquiet, disruption, fight, frape, fracas, frenzy, furore, hullabaloo, hurly, hurly-burly, hoo-ha, hubbub, hurry, mayhem, melee, pandemonium, pig pile, rabble, rabble-rousing, rabblement, rabble rout, raffle, rage, ringat-rangat, riot, ruction, ruckus, scrimmage, stir, storm, tempest, tumult, turbulence, turmoil, unlawful assembly, unpeace, unrest, and uproar*. We could also include the French *chahut, charivari, clameur*, and *émeute*; the Italian, *baccano, chiasso, fracasso, rumore*, and *sommossa*; and the Spanish *alboroto, desorden*, and *ruido*.¹⁰⁰ Each of these words can be used to signify *the noisy upheaval*

⁹⁹ Ibid. Schafer states without citation or explanation that “the suggestion that [the word noise] may have originated in either of the Latin words *nausea* or *noxia* has been rejected.” Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 182. There are semantic issues in the chronology of the sense development of these words that makes it difficult to determine a definitive etymological source.

¹⁰⁰ For an analysis of “the sonic landscapes of [late] medieval revolt” in France, Flanders, and England, see Michael Sizer, “Murmur, Clamor, and Tumult: The Soundscape of Revolt and Oral Culture in the Middle Ages,” *Radical History Review* 121 (January 2015).

of a people gathered together, yet it is not necessarily transparent, even in context, whether these words signify the noisy upheaval or a people gathered together.

Perhaps no word so perfectly describes this non-coincidence between a crowd and its noise than *tumult* (Latin *tumultus*; me. *tumulte*; fr. *tumulte*; it. *tumulto*; sp. *tumulto*), defined as the “commotion of a multitude, usually with confused speech or uproar; public disturbance; disorderly or riotous proceeding.”¹⁰¹ That word, already established in its Romance language variations, migrated to English from its Latin etymons in the Early Modern era. In doing so it seemed to capture the increasingly unsettled nature of an English society racked by revolts and upheavals, food and tax riots, and the violent contests between Reformation and Catholicism.¹⁰² The people of that particular time and place, those multitudes and masses, became denser in their concentrations and more animated in their demands for land, food, and freedom. It is unsurprising that a new vocabulary would emerge to describe the unsettling upheaval of what had been the social order for nearly a millennium—the peasant uprisings and the wars of religion, the advent of capitalism, urbanization, the enclosure of the commons, and the colonial dispersal and dispossession that characterized the time.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “tumult (n.), sense 1.a,” July 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4410153643>.

¹⁰² Google Book’s Ngram Viewer shows a number of spikes in usage in the 16th and 17th century up until the “Glorious Revolution,” after which there appears a lull until a steady climb greets the era of the American and French Revolutionary Wars: https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=tumult&year_start=1500&year_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=0

¹⁰³ Sylvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004); Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1972); Peter Linebaugh and Markus Rediker, *The Many-*

Something of the enormity of this upheaval is captured in *tumult*, a word that not only evokes the noise of war and revolt but expresses the scope and scale of material disorder caused by such conflagrations, and the sense that what is at stake is more than a local conflict between parties, but rather a conflict between social worlds. Tumults emerge out of the antagonism of social inequality, a tension that took new forms in the balance of tyranny and republicanism that emerged in the Renaissances of Italy and England. Tumult was an essential component of what created modernity, what allowed the emergent social orders of capitalism, liberal democracy, and rationality to take form and take hold. Machiavelli, comparing Rome to his own 15th century political world, wrote “I say that to me it appears that those who damn the tumults between the nobles and the plebs blame those things that were the first cause of keeping Rome free, and that they consider the noises and the cries that would arise in such tumults more than that good effects that they engendered [...] They do not consider that in every republic are two diverse humors, that of the people and that of the great, and that all the laws that are made in favor of freedom arise from their disunion.”¹⁰⁴ The *tumulto* described here in Machiavelli’s *Discourses on Livy* is the process by which a struggle for self-determination and collective agency reshapes the structure of power, a necessary (as in both inevitable and useful) sacrifice of momentary peace for enduring stability. Machiavelli believed that peaceable

Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013).

¹⁰⁴ Niccolò Machiavelli, Book I.4.1, *Discourses on Livy*, translated by Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 16.

kingdoms required a stable social order, held together in tensions of class or religious compromise, a compromise only possible through the release of tumult. Without this release, a kingdom descends into (civil) war, and it's in this sense that the word gains usage in English.

Tumult in early modern England typically meant war in the heavens, or war abroad, but could also mean war at home. First appearing in English print in John Lydgate's *The Troy Book* ("Al tumulte stinted, and silence Was þoruȝ þe pres, to ȝif hym audyence"), *tumult* would take on new resonance following centuries of interreligious strife.¹⁰⁵ By the time of Shakespeare and his patron, King James I & VI, a century later, tumult would become synonymous with the blooming populations of 17th century London and their conspiratorial disorders. Shakespeare's plays resound with rumor, calumny, murmuring, and clamor every bit as much as Machiavelli's Florence, but tumult's reverberations evoke the sounds of battle and politics...¹⁰⁶

King Henry VI Civil dissension is a viperous worm
That gnaws the bowels of the commonwealth
[A noise within, 'Down with the tawny-coats!']
What tumult's this?

Earl of Warwick An uproar, I dare warrant,
Begun through malice of the bishop's men.
[A noise again, 'Stones! Stones!']¹⁰⁷

... and the elemental ruptures of divine wrath:

[Here an alarum, and it thunders and lightens]

¹⁰⁵ "All tumult stopped, and silence went through the crowd, to give him audience." John Lydgate, *The Troy Book* (written c.1412-1420; pub. 1513), Book II, Line 5235.

¹⁰⁶ Kenneth Gross, *Shakespeare's Noise* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

¹⁰⁷ William Shakespeare, *Henry VI, Part I* (1623) iii. i. 2-6.

Talbot What stir this? What tumult's in the heavens?
 Whence cometh this alarum, and the noise?¹⁰⁸

Early modern Tumult is mirrored, a sacred war in heaven and on earth. In James' contemporaneous version of the Bible, revenge on Babylon is prophesized by Isaiah ("Because thy rage against me, and thy tumult [תִּמְנוֹן], is come up into mine ears"); as is punishment of the unfaithful in Hosiah ("Therefore shall a tumult [תִּמְנוֹן] arise among thy people, and all thy fortresses shall be spoiled"). Tumult could be apocalyptic, and its abatement a mercy on the people ("Who stillest the roaring [תִּמְנוֹן] of the seas, the roaring [תִּמְנוֹן] of their waves, and the tumult [תִּמְנוֹן] of the peoples").¹⁰⁹ It is telling that תִּמְנוֹן appears again and again in biblical translations as *tumult*, or *commotion*, but also and most often as *multitude*, and even at times as *abundance*.¹¹⁰ In these literatures, composed at the very height of their language's entry into modernity, is a full embrace of tumult as both social unrest and its noise, of the excesses of the multitudes gathered together at once. There in the discordance of language's unfixed meaning is a tying together of noise, both sacred and profane, and the unruly masses. This coincidence of the abundant multitude and its tumultuous roar is the non-coincidence of metonymy that is the center of my study.

¹⁰⁸ Shakespeare, *Henry VI, Part I*, i. iv. 98-99;

¹⁰⁹ Isaiah 37:29; Hosea 10:14; Psalm 65:8 from *The Bible: Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹¹⁰ These translations are derived from Bible Hub's online interlinear Bible: <https://biblehub.com/>. It is significant that there, in ancient biblical Hebrew, is this same metonymic chain between the crowd and its noise.

What I have argued above as being implicit in the debates over noise's definition is in fact explicit from the very start. The contention over who makes noise, who makes noise *noise*, who can suppress that noise, and to what ends, is explicit in tumult even as it is veiled by the aesthetic moralism of Schafer's crusade against noise. The onto-epistemological critique of Thompson and others is an attempt to redirect our attention to relations of power embedded in our thinking about noise, relations of power that were already laid bare by the word's earliest written meanings. The ontological realism of Cox does offer us an imaginary outside to twisted knot of modernity's displacements, dispossessions, and destruction. One can imagine a metaphysics that by passes the constructed hierarchies of social inequity. Noise becomes liberatory, not because it represents resistance or revolution, but because it represents an being that has been, is, and will be a real beyond capture. What then if we want that world now, here, in its full immanence? Noise still might direct our attention to that ends. It is in noise's relation to power, its derogation by power, that we can begin to hear the possibilities of the world turned upside down, made anew, revolutionized, transformed. The secret of noise's power is embedded in its bad reputation, its association with war and disorder, with cataclysmic storms and other very loud sounds from the heavens.

Occasional Music, Oakland, 2013

In the Fall of 2013, residents of Oakland, California who lived, worked, or transited the downtown core would have encountered a queer and disorienting object of sound: a dispersed carillon of five bells ringing out over the city at odd hours and odd intervals announcing... what? Neither synchronically tied to the workday, nor signaling a specific event, this occasional music disrupted the repetition and tedium of everyday life in an audible circle around Frank H. Ogawa Plaza and City Hall. The bells were installed by artist Zarouhie Abdalian and programmed to sound out at random selected instances, an algorithmically orchestrated set of signals without clear referent.¹¹¹ Yet in 2013, this plaza's manicured green lawn (named "the Common" by its designers), with its iconic Coast Live Oak and tiled amphitheater ("the Forum") cradled between office buildings and the seat of city government, would have still resonated with the echoes of the Oakland Commune, the months long Occupy inspired protest camp which had renamed the plaza after Oscar Grant, a young black man whose death at the hands of police had ignited a wave of rebellions, riots and protest.¹¹² Thanks to Abdalian, a reverberating brass touch would now punctuate the emptiness of the plaza with the haunting clamor of the nearly two-year-old memories of its various occupations, signaling the remnant possibility of gathering there as a

¹¹¹ Zarouhie Abdalian *Occasional Music* (2013), September 14-November 15, 2013; Commissioned as part of the 2012 SECA Art Award, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA.

¹¹² Susan Dinkelspiel Cerny, *An Architectural Guidebook to San Francisco and the Bay Area* (San Francisco: Gibbs Smith, 2007), 247; Aaron Brady, "The Oakland Commune," *Possible Futures* (blog), December 5, 2011. <http://www.possible-futures.org/wp-content/plugins/really-static/static/2011/12/05/oakland-commune/>.

collective body once again. That calmor might also direct one's attention to the empty bell tower crowning City Hall, and perhaps the greater destitution of civic power below, the emptiness of an institution which had failed time and again to protect its citizens from its own law enforcers, to say nothing of the slow violences of environmental racism, gentrification, and displacement.

Abdalian's "*Occasional Music*" hailed not only the emptiness of civic power, but also the as yet unfulfilled promise of a world made otherwise by its abolition.

Abdalian's artwork invites us to consider how what constitutes *noise* in the *soundscape* and who has the authority to make it. Her use of the bell is not coincidental since it has long been understood to be a keynote of sonic exception, "traditionally used to announce a shift change, as an alarm or call to service, or to designate the periodization of time."¹¹³ As religious symbol, as timekeepers, as alarms, as calls to gather, the bell in Europe and its colonies announces an authoritative moment of interruption.¹¹⁴ It is one of a handful of instruments sounded to mark an occasion, a sovereign music that has the power to pause the world and demand attention and congregation. *Occasional Music*'s ringing anachronic waves of bells tolling across the city center, so soon after it had been the resonating chamber for the riotous sounds of protest and its suppression, raises the question of who has

¹¹³ Abdalian quoted in Tanya Zimbardo, "In conversation with ZAROUHIE ABDALIAN," *Zarouhie Abdalian* (San Francisco: SF MoMA, 2013), 13.

¹¹⁴ Alain Corbin, *Village Bells*, translated by Martin Thom (New York: Columbia UP, 1994); Niall Atkinson, *The Noisy Renaissance: Sound, Architecture, and Florentine Urban Life* (Philadelphia: Penn State University Press, 2016).

the power to mark the moment, to interrupt the tedium, to command that the people gather? It offers us an opportunity to raise a host of questions about what *unquiet* means in terms of democratic power.

3.0 Sacred Noise

In the pages that follow I explain why this juxtaposition of noise, power, and the soundscape signals something of fundamental importance not only to the studies of sound, but also its theorization as politics. Central to this inquiry is Sacred Noise, a concept developed by composer and ecologist R. Murray Schafer and strangely orphaned by his readers even as another of his neologisms, *the soundscape*, became a ubiquitous term to describe the sonic interplay of sound and place. I will be using Sacred Noise's exceptionalism as a means towards unlocking the relationship between noise and power, and I'll do so by discussing its implicit relationship to political theology and the figure of *the sovereign*. In discussing sovereignty, I address its normative theorization but also how this theory has given conceptual tools to philosophers whose politics are antithetical to this structure of power. I explore the affects of this radical reorientation of the world, and the disorienting process by which it unfolds. Finally, I consider the role of divine power in theories of liberation offered by abolition and the writings of Walter Benjamin. This invites a further discussion of noise and its socio-political effects in the world, building on the previous chapter's attempt to answer again not "*what is noise?*" but rather "*what does noise do?*" By providing one possible answer, I hope to change how we think about – and talk about – noise and its relationship to society, while at the same time showing that sound studies may produce important interventions in political theory.

3.1 Sacred Noise & the Soundscape

Few contributions to sound studies have had as lasting or controversial an impact as those made by Raymond Murray Schafer. A composer and music educator from Eastern Canada, in 1965 Schafer was invited by the newly constructed Simon Fraser University to help found their interdisciplinary Communications Department.¹¹⁵ Though a central figure in modern Canadian music, Schafer is better known internationally for his foundational work developing the field of *acoustic ecology*, the interdisciplinary study of sound's relationship to the environment. Much of Schafer's work on acoustic ecology was first carried out through the World Sound Project (WSP), a transdisciplinary research center he led at Simon Fraser University that included composers, acoustic technicians, and students of communication.¹¹⁶ Founded in the late 1960s, the WSP conducted studies of sound that involved capturing field recordings of human environments, urban and rural, and analyzing these recordings alongside other data for use in producing reports, publications, radio documentaries, and even commercial recordings. It approached sound as a subject of anthropology and natural history, and in these ways its project was preservationist and conservationist in character, attempting to both archive and protect "disappearing

¹¹⁵ Much of Schafer's biographic detail comes from the following: R. Murray Schafer, *My Life on Earth and Elsewhere* (Erin, ON: The Porcupine's Quill, 2012); L. Brett Scott, *R. Murray Schafer: A Creative Life* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019); Jesse L. Steward, *R. Murray Schafer and the Plot to Save the Planet: A Biographical Quest* (Toronto: Sunesis Productions, 2013).

¹¹⁶ *The World Soundscape Project* (website): <https://www.sfu.ca/sonic-studio-webdav/WSP/index.html>. Members of the WSP included Howard Broomfield, Bruce Davis, Peter Huse, Barry Truax, and Hildegard Westerkamp.

sounds” through phonographic means.¹¹⁷ Among the WSP’s dozens of publications between 1965 and 1977 were a series of pamphlets and short booklets by Schafer that began to flesh out his theories, many of which would be condensed and compiled into his most influential book, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*.¹¹⁸ A combination of literary analysis, historiography, and sociological study of noise and its abatement, *The Soundscape* prefigures many of the interdisciplinary approaches that are now common in sound studies scholarship. Schafer also introduced his readers to dozens of neologisms at a time when few common terms were available to describe the phenomena that was being studied.¹¹⁹ Of these, *soundscape* remains “the most enduring spatial figure in sound studies,” and indeed, few concepts like it have been as widely debated or have had as great an influence on art and society.¹²⁰

Though the word ‘soundscape’ makes an appearance in the early 20th Century, it was Schafer who brought the concept to prominence and gave it its popular meanings: a

¹¹⁷ “The sounds of the environment were changing rapidly, and it seemed that no one was documenting the changes. Where were the museums for disappearing sounds?” Schafer, *My Life on Earth*, 119-120; Veit Erlmann, “But what of the ethnographic ear? anthropology, sound, and the senses,” in *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening, and Modernity*, ed. Veit Erlmann (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 1–20.

¹¹⁸ Schafer, *The Soundscape*, xi. *The Soundscape* drew from Schafer’s earlier works including his booklets *The Book of Noise*, and *The New Soundscape*, his article “The Music of the Environment,” and the WSP’s first field study, *The Vancouver Soundscape*. These texts can be found at <https://www.sfu.ca/sonic-studio-webdav/index2.html>.

¹¹⁹ Several of these terms, including *sound objects*, *sonological competence*, and *soundscape* (as I explain below) were developed or borrowed from elsewhere, but Schafer’s publication helped to broaden their use. See “Glossary of Soundscape Terms” in Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 271-275.

¹²⁰ Jonathan Sterne, *The Sound Studies Reader*, 91.

sonic composition and *sounds constituting the aural environment*.¹²¹ The term first began circulating in the postwar period when connections were being drawn between painting and musicking; according to John M. Picker, the first use of “soundscape” in that period was by the abstract expressionist painter Joseph McCullough.¹²² Schafer’s use of the term was most likely influenced much later by its circulation among futurist architects such as Buckminster Fuller and Michael Southworth, though as a composer Schafer may have been aware of the word’s use to connote a spatial character in musical abstractions found in jazz and *musique concrete*.¹²³ Prior to Schafer’s taking up of the soundscape, its definition seemed to be limited to something conceptually equivalent to “sound in the landscape,” but Schafer was ecumenical, believing that soundscape could encompass “any acoustic field of study” be it musical composition, a radio program, or “an acoustic environment.”¹²⁴ This is why various phonographic and compositional practices similar to those explored by WSP members Schafer and Westerkamp continue to be described as “soundscapes” regardless of the environment in which they’re experienced. In the intervening years, the term has become commonplace in art, music, and humanistic scholarship, causing

¹²¹ See John M. Picker, “Soundscape(s): The Turning of the Word” in *The Routledge Companion to Sound Studies*, ed. Michael Bull (London: Routledge, 2018), 147-157.

¹²² Picker, “Soundscape(s),” 149-150.

¹²³ Jonathan Sterne, “Soundscape, Landscape, Escape,” in *Soundscapes of the Urban Past: Staged Sound as Mediated Cultural Heritage*, ed. Karin Bijsterveld (Bielefeld: transcript, 2013), 181-193; and Jonathan Sterne, “The Stereophonic Spaces of Soundscape,” in Paul Théberge, Kyle Devine, and Tom Everett, eds., *Living Stereo: Histories and Cultures of Multichannel Sound* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 65-83.

¹²⁴ Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 7.

some to disparage its loss of specificity, and others to celebrate its broad intellectual utility.¹²⁵

Yet in the process of defining soundscape with a spatial metaphor, and as attached to the perceptible environment, Schafer bequeathed the term many of the same problematic assumptions inherent to the word's linguistic forbear, *landscape*.

Mitchell Akiyama has suggested that soundscape, as with many of Schafer's other neologisms, merely applies visual metaphors to sonic phenomena.¹²⁶ Inevitably then, the term soundscape has been challenged for its assumptions regarding audibility, nature, and a universal listening subject, and deconstructed along the same critical theoretical lines as its visual equivalent. Some critics underscore the concept's ironic dependency on a socially constructed bias towards visual epistemology, one that can objectify, subjectify, and subjugate others cast under the dominant subject's gaze.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Ari Y. Kelman, "Rethinking the Soundscape," *The Senses and Society*, 5:2 (2010), 212-234. Despite his extended critiques of Schafer, Ari Kelman shows an investment in policing the boundaries of the term's use. By contrast, certain scholars directly engaged with historiographies of the soundscape support its expanded and proliferated use: Karin Bijsterveld "Introduction," *Soundscapes of the Urban Past: Staged Sound as Mediated Cultural Heritage*, Karin Bijsterveld, ed. (Bielefeld: transcript, 2013), 181-193; Jonathan Sterne, "Soundscape, Landscape, Escape."

¹²⁶ Mitchell Akiyama, "Transparent Listening: Soundscape Composition's Objects of Study" *Revue d'art Canadienne / Canadian Art Review* 35, no. 1, (July 14, 2010): 54-62.

¹²⁷ See for example, Timothy Ingold, "Against Soundscape," in Carlyle, ed. *Autumn Leaves: Sound and the Environment in Artistic Practice* (Paris: Double Entendre, 2007), 10-13; Stefan Helmreich, "Listening Against Soundscapes," *Anthropology News* 51, no. 9 (2010): 10; Steven Feld, "Acoustemology" in *Keywords in Sound Studies*, 12-21. The primacy of visuality, to the exclusion of a more holistic multi-sensory perception, has long been critiqued in studies of visual culture, art history, and the development of European modernity. See for example Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1993); David Michael Levin, ed., *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1993); Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992); James Elkins, Kristi McGuire, Maureen Burns, Alicia

Anthropologist Timothy Ingold, for example, insists that a phenomenological relation to sound, one that experiences sound not as an *object* of perception but as the *medium itself* of perception, might remedy those ways in which occularcentrism has reproduced itself in aurality. Ingold advocates for a greater attention to the “fluxes” of the sonic medium, allowing for sound’s contingency as an unfixed sensation rather than focusing on what he describes as “fixities of surface conformation” that frame sound as a mere reflection of another discreet object. Ingold argues for a “meteorological” understanding of sound that accounts for its non-linear movement around and inside the body. The listener, in Ingold’s understanding, is overtaken by a sound that is wholly unbounded, unsettling the listening subject as a fixed, embodied, and emplaced singularity.¹²⁸ Such relational listening shifts away from the individualistic and unitary positionality of the listener, potentially creating an onto-epistemological opening for a genuine simultaneity of experience, akin to what Eduardo Viveiros DeCastro calls “perspectivism.”¹²⁹ The implications of this shift are profound, both in terms of how a soundscape is perceived for the subjects responsible for perception.

It is important to state that this is not at all how Schafer approaches the soundscape.

Unreflexively he states his motivation for developing acoustic ecology to be in

Chester, Joel Kuennen, eds, *Theorizing Visual Studies: Writing Through the Discipline* (London: Routledge, 2013).

¹²⁸ Ingold, “Against Soundscape,” 10-12.

¹²⁹ Eduardo Viveiros De Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, trans. Peter Skafish (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

response to “the dangers of an indiscriminate and imperialistic spread of more and larger sounds” into every corner of man’s life.”¹³⁰ The notion that his own aesthetic framework is itself the product of a culture planted in the Canadian landscape by British imperialism never enters into his thinking. The soundscape is not an indifferent and objective description of a neutral environment. Rather, it refers to a highly subjective representation of the experiences of a single solitary listener, alienated from ‘Nature’ and, in the tradition of European Romanticism, a symbol of man’s supposed dominion over the Earth. It is an extension of the dualistic relation to the non-human world that produced the Western aesthetic concept of ‘landscape’ in the first place, an aestheticization of the non-human world that coincided with the modern Age of Imperialism and its domination of people and lands across the globe.¹³¹

Schafer’s concept is riven with these cultural artifacts, and unsurprisingly so given that Canada’s settler-colonial project inherited these aesthetic, economic and political relations from England. We can read into the subjectivity promoted by Schafer’s writings a settler-colonial identity that wishes to preserve the peace and beauty of its wilderness as if it were an English garden set aside for contemplation.¹³² Schafer’s lone listener is a kind of (*ear*)*witness to wilderness* styled in the tradition of Canadian painters such as Tom Thomson, F.H. Varley, and Lawren Harris, for whom the

¹³⁰ Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 3.

¹³¹ Mitchell, *The Landscape and Power*.

¹³² Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 81-103.

Canadian wilderness was a *Terra Nullian* landscape devoid of human presence, and which the artist encountered as a mythic figure of purity.¹³³ Much like the landscapes painted by these artists, the idealized soundscape is one where human presence, most especially Indigenous inhabitation, is undetectable except for the phonographer or composer who is indexed by their sonic extraction.¹³⁴

The implicit assumption made by Schafer's work is that all listeners are interchangeable, and that it is only a sound's source that determines its positive or negative effects, not the situated positionality of the listener, leaving unaccounted for *difference* in all of its manifest forms.¹³⁵ Even as the ecologically minded Schafer encourages us to listen beyond the human, soundscape as a concept "hides the work of shaping perspective" behind the presumed objectivity of the recording technologies and the attitude of the listener.¹³⁶ The problem that arises is not isolated in the personality of the listener in terms of bias and disposition, but is further complicated by conditions of relationality. The act of listening – to say nothing of recording,

¹³³ Jonathan Bordo, "Picture and Witness at the Site of the Wilderness" *Critical Inquiry* 26, no.2 (2000), 224-247. See also, Bordo, "The Jack Pine – Wilderness Sublime or the Erasure of Aboriginal Presence from the Landscape" *Journal of Canadian Studies* 27, no.4 (1992).

¹³⁴ The phonographer's role in capturing and archiving the cultural sounds of marginalized communities has already been subjected to criticism from Black and Indigenous scholars and activists whose sonic history has been acquired and narrated by outsiders: Gregory Barz and Timothy J. Cooley, *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); John Szwed, *Alan Lomax: The Man Who Recorded the World* (New York: Viking, 2011); Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020); Tara Browner, *Heartbeat of the People: Music and Dance of the Northern Pow-wow* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2022).

¹³⁵ David Samuels, Louise Meintjes, Ana Maria Ochoa, and Thomas Porcello, "Soundscapes: Toward a Sounded Anthropology," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39 (2010): 329-345.

¹³⁶ Sterne, "Stereophonic Spaces," 80.

analyzing, and composing – is an act upon the world that cannot be made asocial or isolated from its effects. The fact of our quantum entanglement with the observed world dictates that to listen to the world is to transform it.¹³⁷ We are always entering into a relation when we listen, and that relation has consequences for whatever is being audited. Our decisions about what to listen to, and what to value in the soundscape, is a determination of which sounds “matter,” and which sounds are heard as “matter out of place,” i.e. noise.¹³⁸ This differentiation between what belongs and what doesn’t is what gives birth to the soundscape concept in the first place. As Schafer makes clear early on in *The Soundscape* this differentiation is not neutral but premised on a value system that requires the forceful elimination of what is deemed to not matter. On this point, Schafer is alarmingly forceful: “Ultimately, this book is about sounds that matter. In order to reveal them it may be necessary to rage against those which don’t.”¹³⁹ This bias against certain sounds has historically been mobilized against marginalized communities who are likewise deemed not to matter, their sounds deemed to be noise as a means of policing boundaries and differentiating bodies.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Half-Way*.

¹³⁸ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge, 1966). Other sound scholars have used Douglas’s definition of dirt to describe noise; see for example Peter Baily, “Breaking the Sound Barrier” in Mark M. Smith, ed., *Hearing History: A Reader* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 23.

¹³⁹ Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 12.

¹⁴⁰ MacFarlane, “Governing the Noisy Sphere.”

Defining noise becomes a means of defining difference. The soundscape thus becomes a contested space, a site of potential exclusion, but also a space wherein marginalized and oppressed communities can audibly assert themselves as belonging. Edwin C. Hill argues that the soundscape has long served as a backdrop for colonial and imperial life. Under such condition “the meaning of human sounds emerges from and is enmeshed with an imperial history that categorizes some people as less than human, and that figures them as part of the landscape.”¹⁴¹ The sounds of the colonized subject don’t register as a signal, but rather as the background against which imperial subjects are heard. “The soundscape’s inscription constitutes a critical and epistemological gesture of inclusion and exclusion” over *what matters in a soundscape*, over which sounds must be accounted for and which preserved, a distinction “that comes to bear on bodies and populations of color” who straddle the legal and ethical boundaries of human and non-human.¹⁴² Even so, these same bodies and populations can assert themselves in the soundscape as a challenge to dominant practice of listening. Phonography has been used as a tool for amplifying Indigenous knowledge in struggles against counter-sovereign claims and extractivist development of Indigenous lands.¹⁴³ In more than one study the audible presence of Islam in some

¹⁴¹ Edwin C. Hill Jr., *Black Soundscapes White Stages: The Meaning of Francophone Sound in the Black Atlantic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 10.

¹⁴² Hill Jr., *Black Soundscapes*, 14. See Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation--An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 257-337; Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations,” *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, edited by Katherine McKittrick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

¹⁴³ As one example, sonic geographer Max Ritts collaborated with Indigenous youth in Gitga’at territory around Hartley Bay to document their traditional territories through phonography and establish an “acoustic baseline” as a defense against the potential effects of regional resource

European and North American cities, especially through the *azan* (call to prayer), has raised questions of who has the right to the city, and what sounds are heard as sacred or else considered noise.¹⁴⁴ Immigrant communities, and their linguistic, musical and social contributions to the sonic worlds of cities, rural places, and even airwaves, similarly have enacted claims for a *right to the soundscape*.¹⁴⁵ Listening, and being heard, then has particular political consequences in terms of power for differently positioned members of any community, so that *what and who is listened to* in the soundscape tells us *what and who matters*.

The soundscape then is clearly a space of contestation and conflict, yet for Schafer this tension is primarily concerned with industrial economic forces and a civic government that represents an undifferentiated population. Taken at face value, Schafer's text is a complaint against the sheer volume and disruptive character of modernity, a critique that can feel conservative, nimbyish even, while at the same

extraction. See Shayne Morrow, "Soundscape Recorded in Marine Territory Threatened by Tanker Traffic," *Windspeaker* 34, no. 5 (2016); Max Ritts, Stuart H. Gage, Chris R. Picard, Ethan Dundas, and Steven Dundas. "Collaborative Research Praxis to Establish Baseline Ecoacoustics Conditions in Gitga'at Territory," *Global Ecology and Conservation* 7 (July 1, 2016): 25–38.

¹⁴⁴ Patrick Eisenlohr, *Sounding Islam: Voice, Media, and Sonic Atmospheres in an Indian Ocean World* (California: University of California Press, 2018); Tong Song Lee, "Technology and the Production of Islamic Space: The Call to Prayer in Singapore" *Ethnomusicology* 43, no. 1: 86-100; Annelies Moors and Jeanette S. Jouili, "Introduction: Islamic Sounds and the Politics of Listening" *Anthropological Quarterly* 87, no. 4: 977-988; Pooyan Tamimi Arab, "'A Minaret of Light': Transducing the Islamic Call to Prayer" *Material Religion* 11, no. 2: 136-163; Isaac Weiner, *Religion Out Loud: Religious Sound, Public Space, and American Pluralism* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

¹⁴⁵ Josh Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race and America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Alexandra T. Vazquez, *Listening in Detail: Performances of Cuban Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013). I am very self-consciously referencing Henri Lefebvre's concept of "the right to the city" and the work of David Harvey among others under its influence. See Henri Lefebvre, *Le Droit à la Ville* (Paris: Anthropos, 1968); David Harvey, "The Right to the City" *New Left Review* 53, September-October (2008), and *Rebel Cities* (New York: Verso, 2012).

time offering progressive, forward-thinking solutions. His proposals for using technology as part of an acoustic design process to solve what he perceived to be an “environmental” problem, is exemplary of a progressive futurism popular in his time.¹⁴⁶ For Schafer the power to make noise and the power to make silence do not begin and end with noise control legislation; they reside equally in the potential for composers and educators like himself, alongside architects, communications theorists, social scientists, and artists, to intervene through their respective fields. To do so, however, rests on the authority regulate and power to enforce that are particular to government and the legal system. Schafer wants government authority to exert its powers, to legislate and to censure and to build, in order to transform society into a quasi-utopian world free of noise. Yet he never critically examines the social and political relations of power as they are, even when these relations of power produce the noise that he so badly wants to rage against.

Even in the face of this lacunae, scattered throughout *The Soundscape* is a remarkable insight into the relationship between noise and power. Schafer describes an exceptional capacity to make noise, one that seems to be outside of the enforceable domain of legislation, beyond censure, and particular to the imbalanced relationship between government and citizen. The expression of this power is what Schafer calls

¹⁴⁶ I’m thinking here of the work promoted by Buckminster Fuller, Marshall, and particularly Stewart Brand’s *Whole Earth Catalog*. See Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

“Sacred Noise”. In the glossary that Schafer appends to *The Soundscape*, he defines Sacred Noise as follows:

Any prodigious sound (noise) which is exempt from social proscription. Originally Sacred Noise referred to natural phenomena such as thunder, volcanic eruptions, storms, etc., as these were believed to represent divine combats or divine displeasure with man. By analogy the expression may be extended to social noises which, at least during certain periods, have escaped the attention of noise abatement legislators, e.g., church bells, industrial noise, amplified pop music, etc.¹⁴⁷

Given the centrality of noise abatement and noise regulation to Schafer’s work it should be no surprise that he would be fascinated by those sounds which are “exempt” from legal or social negation. ‘Sacred Noise’ becomes a code for the sound of extralegal authority, of sheer force, or utter defiance of social order. Schafer’s own antipathy towards noise makes exception for certain noises that provide “a break from the tedium of tranquility,” an interruption that occasions an event of sacred significance. Compared to the “vast sharing of silence” that Schafer says characterizes peasant and tribal life, loud sounds that would have historically registered as acts of god, or acts meant to be audible to the gods, can barely compete for attention in our modern urban environment.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 273.

¹⁴⁸ Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 51-52.

Even as the post-industrial noise floor has risen, the sounds that are permitted to compete at these unprecedented levels multiply, and with it the sacred power to break the peace. “Thus thunder, the original *vox dei* and Sacred Noise, migrated first to the cathedral, then to the factory and rock band.”¹⁴⁹ What might once have been a sublime event of interpenetration between the sacred world of the gods and the profane world of human society, has transformed through the evolution of human technology into one loud sound among many. Yet Schafer seems to believe that something of the primeval mythic power that had once been possessed by geophonic eruption still attaches itself to the anthrophonic cacophony of industrial society. “The sounds of machines took on a happy symbolism approximately two hundred years ago, when it was realized that they could release man from his immemorial bondage to the earth. Traditionally the machine represented two things: power and progress. Technology has given man unprecedented power in industry, transportation and war, power over nature and power over other men.” Certainly, it is difficult to imagine technology symbolizing a release from bondage for 18th and 19th century persons toiling in factories or the still extant institution of plantation slavery, but as a symbol of the future where such conditions would be ameliorated if not abolished, the machinic din of industry could hold these meanings, and an “enthusiasm for technological noise” might describe truthfully the feelings of corporate and government leaders. Against the profane silence of a formally pastoral life,

¹⁴⁹ Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 179.

interrupted periodically by atmospheric noises and religious ceremonies, a secular form of power—industry—has seized upon thunder’s unmitigated authority to roar.

Schafer’s attribution of Sacred Noise’s mythic origin to prehistory is speculative.

Though the concept of Sacred Noise is his own, he attributes it to a generative misreading of the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss.¹⁵⁰ In *The Raw and the Cooked*, Lévi-Strauss develops a structuralist analysis saying that all myths can be compared on the basis of an internal *armature* that expresses itself through a variety of binary codes that strongly correlate. The mutual convertibility of these codes—raw and cooked food; the sacred and the profane; silence and noise—suggests that when one code is being used it might, in terms of meaning, be treated as equivalent to any other opposition.¹⁵¹ The myths under his study present a “cautious attitude towards noise,” and seem to convey that making or responding to noise can result in death.¹⁵² Thus noise becomes a taboo, a danger, and as such it represents power.¹⁵³ In Lévi-Strauss’s analysis there are exceptions to the general taboo against excessive noise, circumstances in which “unrestricted noise is prescribed by custom,” such as the

¹⁵⁰ Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 51. In a footnote Schafer “warns” the reader that Lévi-Strauss has informed him that his theory of Sacred Noise “bears ‘little relationship, if any’” to what is contained in Lévi-Strauss’ own writing.

¹⁵¹ Claud Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked: Mythologiques 1*, trans. Doreen Weightman and John Weightman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 151. See also Maurice Godelier, *Claude Lévi-Strauss: A Critical Study of His Thought*, trans. by Nora Scott (New York: Verso, 2018).

¹⁵² Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, 149. The suggestion that there is a mortal danger invoked in either making too much noise or being unable to ignore too much noise seems compatible Schafer’s own attitude towards noise pollution.

¹⁵³ In his follow-up to *The Raw and the Cooked*, Lévi-Strauss shows that noise itself can have great variation: continuous and discontinuous, modulated and unmodulated, verbal and non-verbal. Lévi-Strauss, *From Honey to Ashes: Introduction to a Science of Mythology 2*, trans. John Weightman & Doreen Weightman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 472.

“practically universal” din made in correspondence to an eclipse of the sun or moon, or the European custom of the *charivari* where villagers gathered to harass and publicly shame someone engaging in sexual or marital relations outside the norms of their community.¹⁵⁴ These performances are attempts at mediating a disjunction of opposites that can only be repaired through the production of noise.¹⁵⁵ Thus, we can glean from Lévi-Strauss that disorder of unrestricted noise was at times issued as a corrective to the disorder of social relationships, a breaking of taboos to correct the violation of taboos. It is from this use of noise as *pharmakon* that Schafer presumably extrapolated his own notion of Sacred Noise. For Schafer, Sacred Noise is a taboo shattering force permitted to break the profane silence of everyday life in order to reestablish order on macrocosmic level.¹⁵⁶

As suggested earlier, Schafer hears industrial noise and rock music as the modern secular instantiations of Sacred Noise. Schafer attributes this profane appropriation of the sacred role of noise to the *inattention* of government, and indeed this

¹⁵⁴ Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, 286-301, quote at 300. The practice of *charivari*, also known in England as “rough music,” and has been replicated, transformed and transmitted internationally from their Anglo-Saxon and Latin countries of origin to the *escrache* and *cacerolazos* of Latin America, the *casseroles* of Quebec, and back to the edges of Europe as in Turkey and the Kitchenware revolution of Iceland. See Corbin, *Village Bells*; E. P. Thompson, “Rough music reconsidered” *Folklore* 103 (1992): 3–26; Charles Tilly, *Popular contention in Great Britain, 1758–1834* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Emma Dillon, *The Sense of Sound: Musical Meaning in France, 1260–1330* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹⁵⁵ Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, 294-295. Lévi-Strauss explains that in both these public and sanctioned noisemaking events “the function of noise is to draw attention to an anomaly in the unfolding of a syntagmatic sequence. Two terms of the sequence are in a state of disjunction.” Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, 289.

¹⁵⁶ “...placing noise in parallel with the sacred, and silence in the same relationship with the profane. [...] The profane worlds was, if not silent, quiet. [...] Sacred Noise was not only absent from the lists of proscribed sounds which societies from time to time drew up, but was, in fact, quite deliberately invoked as a break from the tedium of tranquility.” Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 51.

inattention is what seems to warrant his prescription of “ear cleaning” and education as solutions to their unabated discord. It is government’s dereliction of its responsibility to its citizenry that has allowed mundane machinic noises to be so ubiquitous it is *as if* they had some divine right to permeate every sphere. Later, he redoubled his grievances, writing about the “the schizophrenic voice” of amplified pop music in stores (“invisible but authoritative and omnipresent”) and the unrelenting torrent of traffic as examples of how modern noise is naturalized into a kind of Sacred Noise.¹⁵⁷ “Although reportedly at the top of the list of noise complaints in every modern city,” Schafer bemoans, “the power and influence of the industries behind these noises is such that they continually escape repression.”¹⁵⁸ Schafer’s analysis of the political economy that grants these industries the power of Sacred Noise goes no further. Nor does he consider how it is that this power has been extended “by analogy” or otherwise to the secular realm. This lacuna is one of the most pointed weaknesses in Schafer’s work, but it also presents us with a profound opportunity to develop his theories in ways that produce radically new tools for thinking politics and political power. In the pages that follow I intend to draw new resources for political thought out of Schafer’s writing on the soundscape and on Sacred Noise in particular.

¹⁵⁷ R. Murray Schafer, “Forward” in *Sonic Experience: A Guide to Everyday Sounds*, ed. by Jean-François Augoyard and Henry Torgue (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s UP, 2005), xv. “Schizophrenic” is another neologism, “the cutting free of sound from its natural origins” or the split between an original sound and its electroacoustic reproduction”, similar in most ways to “acousmatic.” See Schafer, *The New Soundscape*, 46 and *The Soundscape*, 273, respectively.

¹⁵⁸ Schafer, “Forward”, xv.

3.2 Profane Noise & Ambient Normativity

The existence of Sacred Noise means that the *ambient normativity* of everyday life, what Schafer calls “profane silence,” is allowed to be disrupted. Noise, in its lowercase form, is a negative disruption that breaks from the implicit arrangement that excuses the noisemaking of some and necessitates the silent submission of others. It would make sense that the noise produced by, and in some sense productive of, a personality at the center of society would be categorically different than a noise made by one at its margins. Disruptions made by the powerful have been *sacralized* (made sacred), conditioned along with the ambient normativity they disrupt to be ontologically good. The noise of Others is, of course, *bad* and requires repression. These non-sacred forms of noisemaking are unsanctioned and unsanctified, and therefore not only illicit but *profane*. Tumult as an unauthorized, insurgent noise that threatens to overthrow the authority of the dominant sonic order, is an act of *profanation*. “Sacred or religious were the things that in some way belonged to the gods [...] removed from the free use and commerce of men,” as was the power to make noise; tumult is “the thing that is returned to the common use of men” through an act of profanity, the removal of a thing from the sphere of the sacred.¹⁵⁹ If sacred forms of noise are the only noises that can be made without censure, the profane noise of the marginalized, dehumanized, and ostracized is a retrieval of noise from the limited sphere of sacralized power. This cosmological turning over of power is a

¹⁵⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 73.

political act permeated with the danger of social disruption, dissolution, and destruction.

Making a Sacred Noise signifies the very power to do so, not as a sound made by something sacred but as a capacity to act with sacred power, as something to be wielded, as a tool or weapon to be used. The Promethean descent of the Sacred Noise from the highest spiritual body to the most profane is framed by Schafer as transfer of power on a cosmic scale. “The association of Noise and power has never really been broken in the human imagination. It descends from God, to the priest, to the industrialist, and more recently to the broadcaster and the aviator. The important thing to realize is this: to have the Sacred Noise is not merely to make the biggest noise; rather it is a matter of having the authority to make it without censure.”¹⁶⁰ Schafer draws this genealogical line from the sacred to the profane as an argument that the Industrial Revolution was not a misnomer, but in fact describes an usurpation of divine power, the dethroning of the godly sovereign by industrial capitalism. Consequently, those sounds which are immune to complaint, which dominate the soundscape, and which society becomes resigned to abide, have become the Sacred Noise of secular modernity. Profane noises don’t necessarily make a competing claim for the right to yield the Sacred Noise, but rather insist that their tumult is not subject to the possessor of Sacred Noise’s power of censure.

¹⁶⁰ Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 76.

It is revealing to remember that Schafer's theories developed within the social ferment of late 1960's Vancouver and the early years of Simon Fraser University's existence. Shortly after Schafer's arrival at the newly established University, a student democracy movement had emerged, exploding into a series of major demonstrations and confrontations between students, faculty and administrators. Some of these protests centered on the near constant development and aesthetic transformations of the campus altering the original designs of architect Arthur Erickson and pushed forward without student involvement. This period of political activity is now heralded as the university's defining moment, part of a corporate brand for the "Radical Campus" that manages to also enfold the intellectual radicalism of the WSP.¹⁶¹ For Schafer the bulldozers, chainsaws, protestors, and police sirens were part of a single nexus of noise, complete unto itself. In his *Book of Noise* written in 1969, Schafer contended "it will not be irrelevant to suggest an unstudied correlation between the general chaos and noise level of [Simon Fraser] and its social disorders."¹⁶² Of course there *was* a correlation, but implicit in his claim is an argument for causation that is counterintuitive, that it was the "disorderly and confused" noise itself that was creating the social "anarchy" on campus. This proposition discharges the protesting of any rational basis. Its tumult arises reactively to the noise of industrial activity, rather than in response to the overt exercise of

¹⁶¹ Hugh J. M. Johnston, *Radical Campus: Making Simon Fraser University* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2005).

¹⁶² Schafer, *The Book of Noise*, 23.

power that this industrial noise indexes.¹⁶³ In Schafer's soundscape, noise precedes and produces social unrest; silencing noise is what will return us to a state of social equilibrium.

Noise for Schafer is an unqualified problem whose suppression is an unquestioned good. The noise of civil strife has no particularity, it is merely yet another acoustic pollutant, an ecological effect downstream of the noise of modern life. It may be that his priority is to make quiet the industrial processes that are damaging the earth and polluting the world with technological noise, processes for which protest appears as a 'symptom', yet he has no qualms advocating for the same repressive forces of abatement—the police—to quiet their tumult. Why does he hear the sounds of protest as a noise to be silenced by power, protests that ostensibly want the same thing Schafer wants, for the motors of industry to stop? For Schafer it seems this conclusion and the silence it would bring is an end that justifies itself. A fundamental flaw in Schafer's proscription of noise is the unquestioned normativity of what sounds have value and what sounds need to be eliminated. He believes that the elimination of noise can be enforced based on empirical criteria, in such a way that the violences of social inequity and bias can be avoided. Yet Schafer never imagines the intractable problems that are part of—are preconditions of—the police power. He

¹⁶³ "Noise is disorderly sound, without purpose. As such it may be compared with disorderly or confused action – i.e. anarchy." Schafer, *The Book of Noise*, 23. Of course Anarchists have argued that it has historically been hierarchical political forms that have created the disorderly and purposeless chaos of war, starvation and deprivation, and that in contrast "anarchy is the mother of order." See Percy Bysshe Shelley, "The Masque of Anarchy" (1819).

makes his appeal to the same force sent in by the state to quiet the protestors on behalf of the corporations that they are opposing, even as they are expected to make quiet these very same institutions and corporations who they've been tasked to defend. Such asymmetrical power relations go unconsidered as if they could just be constrained by a decibel meter.

As the concept of Sacred Noise suggests, society's commitment to the abatement of noise is less concerned with the strict regulation of industry and monitoring of civic institutions than it is the general repression of noisy bodies. The masses of the underclasses, the marginalized and disempowered, have nearly always been that community of subjects burdened with the complaint of noisiness. As Marie Thompson remarks, "unwanted sounds are often thought to be concomitant with unwanted sources," suggesting we can hear a correlation between the social standing of a subject and the perception that their voice, language, music, labor, or other activity is noise. Noise is the sound of bodies marked other, alien or undesirable, culturally formed concepts that become attached to sound's production and reception. Race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, neuro-typicality, and any number of other categories of difference are all shaped in part by the degree to which sounds associated with them correlate to dominate conceptions of normativity. A given sound's noisiness is situated on a spectrum from 'good' to 'bad' (or even sacred to profane). This spectrum is a variation on the *great chain of being*, an imagined spatial hierarchy of relation with some forms-of-life near the top, close to angels and heaven,

and others nearer the bottom, closer to animals, rocks, and the demonic demimonde below. Just as the imaginary social schema is constructed and reinforced sociologically, culturally, legally and, in the last resort, through violence, so too is its auditory reflection.

The ambient normativity or profane silence that Sacred Noise is permitted to rupture is maintained through noise cancellation, the enforcement of silence as a disciplinary mode, and the cultivation of silence as an aesthetic good. This valorization of silence as normative and ‘good’, a kind of *aesthetic moralism* as Marie Thompson called it, is the sonographic outline of the limits of noise and the bodies that make it. Even in the vibrational wake of rising industrial noise, society has tried to cultivate a perceived silence as a social and moral good that inevitably marks certain sounds and sound makers as ‘bad’: the socially and legally enforced silence of the Sunday Sabbath; the silencing of the domestic environment through architectural invention and acoustic design; the regulation of street noise such as music, crying, markets, and automobiles; the segregation of industry and noise pollution within the cityscape along classed and raced lines; the policing of particular music and its listening audience; the development of headphones and other listening devices as tools for isolation and conferring status. In all these instances noise, and particularly the sonic unruliness of the city and the street, are perceived and addressed as if ready to erupt through the social striations that define civilization. The privileges of wealth and property, often in concert with the privileges of whiteness and masculinity, allow

certain subjects to distance themselves from the hubbub of the city. Such material distancing only serves to reinforce the conditions upon which this segregation is based. Domestic space, the patriarch's miniature kingdom, becomes a bulwark against noise from outside, but as Schafer laments it is also as a space of vulnerability: "A property owner is permitted by law to restrict entry to his private garden or bedroom. What rights does he have to resist the sonic intruder?"¹⁶⁴ Noise is a violation, and by analogy a violent criminal, intruding upon and disrupting the conditional order of private and public space.

As Schafer's gendered defender of the rights of property indicates, it would seem that noise intensely intrudes upon masculine subjects. Sound itself has been feminized, the ear figured as a kind of passive and receptive organ, in contrast to the assertion and activity of sight. As Jonathan Sterne has suggested, Enlightenment categories of masculine reason and feminine irrationality have their *Ensoniment* equivalent, from which has derived an affinity between androcentrism and occularcentrism.¹⁶⁵ Under such terms, women, like children, are to be seen but not heard, and feminine noisiness, much like other embodied feminine expressions, is imagined to be inherently excessive and at risk of losing control. Talk is meaningless gossip, emotional expression is irrational hysteria, and bustling activity an affront to the rational restraint of masculine silence. Sound artist Rachel Devorah notes that the

¹⁶⁴ Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 214.

¹⁶⁵ Jonathan Sterne argues that coincident with the Enlightenment was a rationalization of audio perception that he terms "Ensoniment." Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 2.

conflation of *vision* with masculine traits and *hearing* with those deemed feminine also works to reaffirm social boundary policing and gender-normativity.¹⁶⁶ Devorah argues that socially constructed distinctions between seeing and listening produce a condition of “double-perceptual gender dualism” that renders masculine-visual traits as valuable, and feminine-aural traits as fundamentally less so.¹⁶⁷ Such totalizing distinctions between the senses are unfounded, and critiquing this particular form of “perceptual dualism” exposes the gender binary as equally indefensible. Yet under structural conditions of patriarchal dominance, master morality marks most forms of feminine audition and sounding as ontologically bad. Meanwhile, this gendered normativity is violently defended, through domestic partner violence, gay bashing, and the murderous persecution of transsexual men and women. The feminine voice, signifying gender’s transgression and occasional failure, as well the violence it is met with, exposes the risk that we take when sounding out gender in a fundamentally unequal society.

A similar argument can be made regarding race, a social construct which has likewise been shaped and reinforced by certain norms of listening and sounding. Because race has been nominally distinguished by skin color, and is often argued to be physiognomically self-evident, the “color line” as described by W.E.B. DuBois has

¹⁶⁶ Rachel Devorah, “Ocularcentrism, Androcentrism,” *Parallax*, 23:3 (2017), 305-315

¹⁶⁷ Devorah, “Ocularcentrism, Androcentrism,” 305. Devorah uses the list of perceptual biases enumerated in Jonathan Sterne’s “audiovisual litany” as evidentiary support. Jonathan Sterne, “Sonic Imaginations,” in *The Sound Studies Reader*, edited by Jonathan Sterne (New York: Routledge, 2012), 9.

been assumed to be visually determined.¹⁶⁸ Scholars of the senses have shown otherwise, demonstrating the dependence of racial concepts upon a full range of alleged sensual capacities, be they sight, smell, touch or sound.¹⁶⁹ These epistemological techniques are disciplined and become dominant through practices that reinforce social norms. In regard to sound Jennifer Lynn Stoever calls this “the listening ear,” an acoustemological capacity that through “surveillance, discipline, and interpretation” makes it so “certain associations between race and sound come to seem normal, natural and ‘right’.”¹⁷⁰ This accultured concatenation produces what she calls “the sonic color line,” a marker of the multiple binaries that construct an inaudible white sonic identity in contrast to the noise that is a “metonymic stand-in for people of color, and particularly blackness.”¹⁷¹ Nina Eidsheim refers to this same process as *sonic reduction* saying it reduces sounds we hear to a manageable signifier, such as race.¹⁷² Such a reduction of sound to racialized noise raises the question, “who has the right to speak,” and demands that we also ask, “who has the right to be *heard*.”

The abatement of noise, it follows, is a practice of social control that cuts across race, gender, and class, where any and all of these marks of difference can be social

¹⁶⁸ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin, 1996).

¹⁶⁹ Mark M. Smith, *How Race is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

¹⁷⁰ Jennifer Lynn Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 7-8.

¹⁷¹ Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 13.

¹⁷² Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre & Vocality in African America Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

determinants that designate one group as empowered to make noise, and the other obligated to be silent. Schafer says as much through a simple algebraic formulation:

*Noise = power.*¹⁷³ Sacred Noise denotes power; it is a sign of power, it is power itself.

If we accept this equation, we are led to two other possible conclusions:

1. *power = Noise*

Power asserts itself through Sacred Noise. Not only is it indexical of power, but Sacred Noise is a distinguishing act that validates and confirms power. It is, as I will argue, a mark of sovereignty.

2. *noise ≠ power*

A noise that is censurable cannot signify Sacred Noise or sovereign power.

Those sounds that do none-the-less break this silence are a lowercase *profane noise*. The sound-makers associated with this profane noise, despite breaking their ban on noisemaking, *do not* enjoy substantive power in society.

In these equations I am referring to “power” as something structural, diffused, and, though potentially productive (in the biopolitical sense), ultimately underwritten by access to sanctioned and licit forms of violence. Where Sacred Noise is an exceptional but normal iteration of the practice of power, profane noise marks a moment of contact between the powerful and the powerless where the absolute character of that power becomes uncertain. Both dynamics, the exceptional exercise of power and the eruption of tumult, requires critically thinking beyond the limited

¹⁷³ “Noise Equals Power.” Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 74.

and vague theorization offered by Schafer. We must listen for the resonances of his idea in the thinking and writing of others. What we will discover is that Schafer's concept of Sacred Noise is a reverberation of longstanding political and theological debates as to the absolute nature of power, ideas that have preoccupied philosophers, jurists, and authorities for centuries. We will also discover that wherever there is a figure of power there is inevitably and equally a tumult that rises up to destabilize it.

3.3 Sovereign Noise & the Exception

Readers of modern political philosophy should have noticed in Schafer's description of Sacred Noise's genealogical descent, "from God, to the priest, to the industrialist," a trajectory that maps closely to how political theology has described the movement of *sovereignty*. Political theology is a tradition of thought generally concerned with the legal and political institutions of Western civilizations and their interpenetration with religious concepts. Scholars of political theology argue that contemporary political power is the result of a movement toward immanence begun in mythological time, passing from God through the priestly hierarchies of the Abrahamic religions, and into the secular state of the present.¹⁷⁴ This diachronic progression is shared by

¹⁷⁴ Political theology has an extensive literature; excellent introductions, summaries and discussions from the 20th century onward can be found in the following, several of which I discuss in more detail below: Giorgio Agamben, *The Omnibus Homo Sacer* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2017); Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*; Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zone Books, 2017 [2010]), and *Undoing the Demos*: (New York: Zone Books, 2016); William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Jacques Derrida, *The Beast & the Sovereign* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009 [2005]); Roberto Esposito, *Two: The Machine of Political Theology*

Sacred Noise which “*in the beginning*” was world-making, then geological and climatic, but in time became the sonification of priestly and spiritual dominion, and ultimately the secular and industrialized world.¹⁷⁵ There is no citational justification for reading Sacred Noise as an expression of the political theological tradition of Western thought as Schafer makes no serious reference in his discussion of power to either the post-war philosophical tradition from Europe, or to contemporaneous theoretical debates.¹⁷⁶ None-the-less, a recourse to political theology, and its central figure, *the sovereign*, affords us a means by which we can better understand Sacred Noise, and make sense of debates over noise and silence in general. In the following

and the Place of Thought (New York: Fordham, 2015 [2013]); Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997 [1985]); Paul Kahn, *Political Theology: Four New Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (New York: Columbia, 2012); Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study In Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957); Alistair Kee, ed., *A Reader in Political Theology* (London: Westminster Press, 1974); Michael Kirwan, *Political Theology: A New Introduction* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2008); Vincent Lloyd, ed., *Race and Political Theology* (Palo Alto: Stanford, 2012); James Martel, *Divine Violence: Walter Benjamin and the Eschatology of Sovereignty* (London: Routledge, 2012); Robert Meister, *After Evil: A Politics of Human Rights* (New York: Columbia, 2011); Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity* (New York: Fordham, 2008 [2005]); Saul Newman, *Political Theology: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Polity, 2019); Elisabeth Phillips, *Political Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Continuum, 2012); Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, George Schwab, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006 [1922]); Peter Scott and William Cavanaugh, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (Blackwell, 2006); Jacob Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, trans. David Ratmoko (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009 [1947]); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 2007); Alexander Weheliye, *Habaeus Viscus* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

¹⁷⁵ “Other natural sounds, rich in symbolism, have also undergone transformations. Thus Thunder, the original *vox dei* and Sacred Noise, migrated first to the cathedral, then to the factory and the rock band.” Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 179.

¹⁷⁶ In his autobiography Schafer says that he was “sympathetic towards socialism,” particular the notion of state-funding for arts and culture, but he was disillusioned by communism after visiting Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary in 1961. Schafer, *My Life on Earth*, 61. In his writings on noise his politics are a model of Anglo-American liberalism. His project is political in as much as it is an attempt to shape society on behalf of collective well-being, but the premises which they are based on remain fundamentally individualist, similar to what Isaiah Berlin describes as a positive notion of liberty as self-mastery. Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). For more on Schafer’s politics as expressed through his work, see Scott, *R. Murray Schafer*, 39.

pages I will give a brief overview of sovereignty, primarily through an engagement with Carl Schmitt, and indicate how noise's association with violence gives us a resource for a critique of the very concept of the sovereign. I will also show how the profane noises emerge as a co-constitutive response to sacred noise.

Debate concerning the distinctions and overlaps of religious belief and civic governance appear within the Western tradition going back millennia, but the term “political theology” as a philosophical category belongs to the modern era. Today the concept is strongly associated with the writings of the German jurist, Carl Schmitt. His 1922 treatise, *Politische Theologie*, offered a “sociology of a concept” in response to the political transformations brought about by modern capitalism, secularization, and liberal democracy. His thinking was motivated as well by the very real threat of Anarchist and Socialist revolutions in Germany and elsewhere that were a source of great anxiety to him.¹⁷⁷ Schmitt's central claim was that in the secular void of the modern state, the absence of a transcendent creator with the absolute authority to create and override the law had led to a variety of substitutions and

¹⁷⁷ Carl Schmitt, *Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität* (1922, Reprinted 1935), published in English as *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. Giorgio Agamben has described this work as a response to Walter Benjamin's essay, “Toward the Critique of Violence,” which itself is a response to George Sorel's voluntarist manifesto *Reflections On Violence*. Schmitt makes passing reference to the latter but not the former. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Walter Benjamin, *Toward the Critique of Violence: A Critical Edition*, trans. Peter D. Fenves and Julia Ng (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2021); George Sorel, *Reflections On Violence*, ed. Jeremy Jennings (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Saul Newman makes a case that Schmitt's political theory of sovereignty was directly responding to the militant atheistic anarchism of Mikhail Bakunin, whose coinage of “political theology” predates the former's by half-a-century. Newman, *Political Theology*, 21-33; Bakunin, “The Political Theology of Mazzini and the International,” in Michael Bakunin, *Selected Writings*, ed. Arthur Lehning, trans. Steven Cox and Olive Stevens (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973).

compensations, and in the process had inculcated jurisprudence with theology. His argument was that the sovereign power of God, at one time personified in ancient and medieval Europe by the divine monarch and priestly hierarchy, was now manifest in the philosophies of good governance that followed the protestant revolution. These figures of sovereignty took on monstrous and mysterious shapes as Hobbes’

Leviathan, Rousseau’s *legislator*, Jefferson’s *Will of the People*, and Hegel’s *State*.¹⁷⁸

Schmitt believed that without an absolute power ruling over society the inevitable trajectory of the world was the *acephalic* condition called for by anarchists and left-Hegelians, including Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin, Stirner, and ultimately Marx and Engels. Schmitt rejected these political projects premised on what he saw as an “axiomatic thesis on the nature of man” that assumed humanity was by its nature *good*, and in light of this pessimism he believed that the return of an absolute sovereign was the only means by which to order a society that was by its very nature *evil*.¹⁷⁹ However much Hobbes’ *Leviathan* and its view of politics as a war of all against all is clearly a model for his thinking, *Politische Theologie* was not merely a reinterpretation of classic political theory; it was also part of a larger intellectual and

¹⁷⁸ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36-52. See Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C.B. Macpherson (New York: Penguin, 1985); Jean-Jacques Rousseau *The Major Political Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Two Discourses and the Social Contract* trans. John T. Scott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Thomas Jefferson, *Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 2011); G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

¹⁷⁹ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 56. Schmitt is infamous for having become a juror during the Nazi era, and his work is often seen as having been a resource for that government’s ideology of absolutist power. See Timothy Snyder, *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* (New York: Random House, 2016), 144.

political project that attempted to justify absolutist power in the nation state through its theological invocation of the figure of the *sovereign*.¹⁸⁰

The ‘sovereign’ is best understood as a representational concept whose critical role for European political theorists has been to make coherent modern structures of power, and the various revolutionary transformations that threaten to undo them.¹⁸¹

This conception of power draws its imagined genealogy from the God of the Old Testament, whose patrilineage through Adam structured his earthly representation, a substitutive arrangement between divine aniconism and human flesh. In the Christian context, divinity’s embodiment was represented through the body of Christ, by a priesthood, or else incarnated in the divine monarch who was bifurcated into both corporeal and spiritual bodies.¹⁸² Sovereignty’s power is intended to transcend the temporal or biological limits of *the sovereign* itself. Should a living sovereign be killed, or usurped, sovereignty survives: “The King is dead. Long live the king!” At once a concrete figuration and an immaterial abstraction, this representation of absolute power survives today to differing degrees as contemporary monarchs and heads of state, but also in secular and modern institutions, encompassing everything within the territorial borders of the “imagined communities” of the nation-state. In lieu of a singular sovereign figure, the nation-state represents itself in other ways. In

¹⁸⁰ Hobbes’ *Leviathan* is an obvious antecedent.

¹⁸¹ “Sovereignty” is discussed at length in all of the texts listed in reference to “political theology” in n.175 above., though its discussion extends far beyond this list and includes many contemporary and contemporaneous responses to them, to which I would add F. H. Hinsley’s *Sovereignty* [Second Edition] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

¹⁸² Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies*.

Europe following the 1649 Treaties of Westphalia, states developed the concept of *national sovereignty*, through which the state's authority over political and economic life was separated from the religious authority of the Catholic Church. Though this formal separation of church and state became widely established in the era of liberal revolutions, the theological underpinnings of sovereign power were often maintained in forms of *representational* and *popular* government.

The establishment of such nations was premised on government being a representation of what Thomas Jefferson called *the will of the people*, a sovereignty without a sovereign. Yet many political philosophers were insistent upon distinguishing between the state as a representation of the people on the one hand, and the people as a constituency itself. Hegel thought speaking of this “formless mass” as if it were a coherent whole was a “garbled notion,” suggesting that *the people's sovereignty* is a kind of noisy nonsense, excessive and lacking coherence.¹⁸³ Schmitt agreed, and he saw Germany's aestheticized, technologized, and capitalistic liberal order in the throes of economic and political uncertainty and concluded in the wake of the Russian Revolution that only a “decisionist” and absolutist leader could

¹⁸³ “The term ‘popular sovereignty’ may be used to indicate that a people is self-sufficient for all *external* purposes and constitutes a state of its own... We may also say that internal sovereignty lies with the *people* but only if we are speaking of the whole in general, in keeping with the [argument] that sovereignty belongs to the *state*. But the usual sense in which the term ‘popular sovereignty’ has begun to be used in recent times is to denote *the opposite of that sovereignty which exists in the monarch*. In this oppositional sense, popular sovereignty is one of those confused thoughts which are based on a garbled notion of the people. *Without* its monarch and that *articulation* of the whole which is necessarily and immediately associated with monarchy, *the people* is a formless mass.” Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, para. 279, 318-319.

restore certainty to the state.¹⁸⁴ It's notable that most of the eminent theorists writing on sovereignty were doing so at moments of profound upheaval and civil war: Jean Bodin during the Wars of Religion in France; Thomas Hobbes in the wake of the English Civil War; Jean Jacques Rousseau following the French Revolution; the Federalists in the midst of the American War of Independence; and Carl Schmitt in the interim of two World Wars. It would seem that in the popular disorder of revolutionary events, the missing figure of the sovereign looms large.¹⁸⁵ This may explain the turn toward sovereignty among populist political movements as (neo-)liberal democracy seems to be faltering. Sovereignty appeals to deep anxieties about disorder, promising by virtue of its authority to make certainty out of chaos and contingency.

Through its juridical and legislative authority, sovereign power promises to stabilize the amorphous and evolving boundaries of the nation. It also defines the limits of social relations within these boundaries, deciding what and who is included and excluded by imposed norms of being together. In the form of the nation, sovereignty

¹⁸⁴ Schmitt followed the thinking of Jean Bodin in defining the sovereign as he who has absolute authority over decision making, whether it be concerned with war or peace, punishment or amnesty, life or death. Jean Bodin, *On Sovereignty*, edited and translated by Julian H. Franklin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992 [1576; 1583]).

¹⁸⁵ If such a direct correlation is founded, between civil war and the impulse to theorize sovereignty anew, the renewed interest in sovereignty today might warrant concern. Contemporary populist governments have proliferated, almost universally calling for the re-enforcement of borders, a retreat from globalized economic, social and political entanglement, and a re-entrenchment of nationalist and ethnic identity, all symptomatic of “waning sovereignty” in the wake of nearly a half-century of neo-liberal denationalization. Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* [2017; second ed.] (New York: Zone Books, 2010); Saskia Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008 [2006])

“rests upon the formulation of a *rule of exclusion, of visible or invisible ‘borders,’* materialized in law and practices” that facilitate the aggregation of individuals into categories of citizen and other.¹⁸⁶ Every person within a territory is subject to the laws that give shape to that territory, every person except the sovereign, who as the embodiment of the mystical spirit of “the body politic” is the personification of law.¹⁸⁷ Whatever form it takes, sovereignty arises from “some mutually acknowledged source of legitimacy — natural law, a divine mandate, hereditary law, a constitution, even international law” and is distinguished by being “supreme,” quite literally above the same laws that justify its existence.¹⁸⁸ This is primary among a list of attributes that Wendy Brown defines as “sovereignty’s indispensable features” including: “supremacy (no higher power), perpetuity over time (no term limits), decisionism (no boundedness by or submission to law), absoluteness and completeness (sovereignty cannot be probable or partial), non-transferability (sovereignty cannot be conferred without cancelling itself), and specified jurisdiction (territoriality).”¹⁸⁹ These are qualities of sovereignty expressed through actions. If sovereign power is located in action, not a personality, we must define the sovereign

¹⁸⁶ Balibar, *We, the People of Europe?*, 23. See also Philpott, “Sovereignty”: “Territoriality specifies by what quality citizens are subject to authority — their geographic location within a set of boundaries.”

¹⁸⁷ This is a the “paradox of sovereignty” signaled by Agamben’s reading of Schmitt. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. David Heller-Rozen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 15. See also William Connolly, “The Complexities of Sovereignty” in *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life*, ed. Matthew Calarco and Steven DeCaroli (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

¹⁸⁸ Daniel Philpott, “Sovereignty”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/sovereignty/>.

¹⁸⁹ Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zone Books, 2017 [2010]), 34.

not by what it is, but by what it does, and what the sovereign does is make and break the law.

This is the primary prerogative of sovereign power, first among what Jean Bodin described as the sovereign's unique rights.¹⁹⁰ Also referred to as "marks of sovereignty," the exercise of these rights made the sovereign's power known. The act of lawmaking and lawbreaking (without consequence) is, according to Bodin, the foundation of all other marks: "This same power of making and repealing law includes all other rights and prerogatives of sovereignty, so that strictly speaking we can say that there is only this one prerogative of sovereignty, inasmuch as all the other rights are comprehended in it."¹⁹¹ Schmitt wants us to understand this as well when he defines the sovereign as "he who decides the exception."¹⁹² For Schmitt it is this, the power to decide what is licit and illicit, that defines political power itself: "the sovereign produces and guarantees the situation in its totality. He has the monopoly over this last decision. Therein resides the essence of the state's sovereignty, which must be juristically defined correctly, not as the monopoly to

¹⁹⁰ These included: the power to command, but with no obligation to take orders from any other; the power to make laws and to defy them; the power to make war and to conclude a peace; the power to tax, and to coin money; the power to seize land; the power to force a population to change its language. See Jean Bodin, *On Sovereignty*, especially Book 1, Chapter 10.

¹⁹¹ Bodin goes on to list the prerogatives he believes are included in the law making power of sovereignty: "declaring war and making peace; hearing appeals in last instance from the judgements of any magistrate; instituting and removing the highest officers; imposing taxes and aids on subjects or exempting them; granting pardons and dispensations against the rigor of the law; determining the name, value and measure of coinage; requiring subjects and liege vassals to swear that they will be loyal without exception to the person to whom their oath is owed. These are the true prerogatives of sovereignty, which are included in the power to give law to all in general and to each in particular, and not to receive law from anyone but God." Bodin, *On Sovereignty*, 58 [Book1, Ch. 10, 495].

¹⁹² Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 5.

coerce or to rule, but to decide. The decision parts here from legal norm, and (to form it paradoxically) authority proves that to produce law it needs not be based in law.”¹⁹³ Far from universal, transcendent, natural or absolute, law is situational and contingent upon either the command or acquiescence of power. It should be clear that this power of decision, what the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben reframes as the power to make the “exception,” is the same power that underlies Sacred Noise.¹⁹⁴

The Sacred Noise is in the first instance an expression of the power to determine what is noise, in the derogatory and proscribed sense of the word, and what is not. This power produces a boundary between what sounds may be included and excluded, which will be deemed acceptable and which will be deemed antisocial, which will be given permission and which will be abated through law. In other words, it is a power that decides what is noise, and therefore who and what has stepped outside the boundaries of the law. It is also the power that decides the exception, that decides which noise can be made without being silenced, and which noisemaker cannot be censured. Not only can the sovereign grant permission to others to make noise without consequence, but the sovereign can also themselves make noise (directly or through a representative) without possibility of being silenced. It being the case that no other power is above the sovereign’s supreme power, there is literally no power that can abate the sovereign’s Sacred Noise through legislation or force (“the

¹⁹³ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 13.

¹⁹⁴ Agamben, *State of Exception*.

Sovereign... is not subject to Civill Lawes").¹⁹⁵ Sacred Noise never ceases to be noise defined as a sound that disrupts, but it does cease to belong to a bad ontological schema, because it has been either produced or condoned by a power that determines the conditions of that master morality in the first place. Shafer is quite clear about this when he says, "wherever Noise is granted immunity from human intervention, there will be found a seat of power."¹⁹⁶ Put simply, Sacred Noise is a mark of sovereignty.

I hope that I have avoided naturalizing sovereignty or treating it as a concept that has any concrete facticity. Sovereignty is after all only a representational fiction given shape by the apparent effects of power. For all that the pages that I have devoted to explaining its history and legacy, I share Foucault's skepticism as to the actual utility of sovereignty for the modern state, as well his insistence that "we need to cut off the King's head."¹⁹⁷ As Foucault is well known to have argued, power no longer descends repressively from the singular sovereign (God, King, or otherwise) but rather it inhabits the interiority of the population it governs. Power exerts itself *through* people, not just upon them. This form of power is not merely repressive, preventing disorder, but also works to incite populations within a bounded territory to reproduce themselves through biopolitical processes of self-care, self-discipline, and self-management. In light of this claim, when such a power is exercised through the soundscape as Sacred Noise it should be understood as not only the power to make

¹⁹⁵ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 313.

¹⁹⁶ Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 76.

¹⁹⁷ Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Vintage, 1980), 121.

noise aided by the repressive power to make others silent. Central to the power of Sacred Noise is its normalizing effects, its ability to naturalize the violence of its disruption and to condition a *voluntary* silence in its subjects. This is the ironic conclusion we can take from Schafer when he insists that “the final power then is – *silence*.”¹⁹⁸ Such silence is conditioned by civic institutions, including schools, the courts, and of course the police, that regulate ambient normativity, defining the boundary between sound and noise. Noise ordinances are more than “catalogues of sound phobias”; they are evidence of power’s struggle to properly normalize these sonic relations.¹⁹⁹ Schafer’s response to this endemic failure is to prescribe a biopolitical solution with inducements to sousveillance, hygiene, and education as an alternative to the repressive intervention of the State. The result is that even where Sacred Noise appears as a mark of sovereignty, it is also revealed to be a contingent power requiring constant maintenance.

The syntactical oddity of Schafer’s phrase “the Sacred Noise” is a reminder that though it marks sovereignty, it remains external to it, denoting a capacity or tool. Anything that can be possessed can be appropriated, and in the case of the Sacred Noise it is effected through a refusal to be silenced. According to Schafer “there is a deep-bonded relationship between noise abatement and taboo which cannot be abandoned, for the moment we place a sound effectively on the prescription list we

¹⁹⁸ Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 202.

¹⁹⁹ Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 201.

do it the ultimate honor of making it all-powerful.” The insistence that a sound be silenced attaches to that sound an inherent power, its sanction bestows a sacredness which is transferred to whosoever chooses to violate that taboo. The word sanction, derived from *sancīre*, means “to render sacred or inviolable, ordain, decree, ratify,” to transform some mundane *thing* into a sacred object.²⁰⁰ Thus, the sanctioning of a sound produces the very category of Sacred Noise. Having created a sound outside the limits of law, the law’s limits are revealed, which leads Schafer to despair that “it is for this reason that the petty proscriptions of the community by-law will never succeed, indeed must never succeed.”²⁰¹ Naming a sound noise and placing it outside the limit of what is permitted designates that noise as dangerous to social order which only attracts agents of social disorder.

To produce and maintain the harmonic sonic order, the normative ambience of so-called silence, only the Sacred Noise of the powerful can be allowed to rupture the soundscape. All other disturbances must be excluded and repressed. This top-down act of silencing is an exercise of violence in pursuit of that order. Much like the “*monopoly of legitimate physical violence*” that Max Weber once said defined the State, so the monopoly of legitimate noise is also an expression of hierarchical power and domination.²⁰² Power’s monopoly on noise is accepted because it is justified, like physical violence, as defense against a greater threat to social order, the death of

²⁰⁰ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “sanction (*n.*), Etymology,” March 2024.

²⁰¹ Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 202.

²⁰² Max Weber, *The Vocation Lectures*, David Owen and Tracey B. Strong, eds, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2004), 33.

social order itself. Just as the monopoly over violence by the State claims to prevent the uncontrollable violence of social disorder, so the noise of the State is meant to do the same.²⁰³ In the metonymic relation between the unruly crowd and its noise that tumult describes there is a threat of both physical violence and noise. Thus, we are confronted with a paradox wherein the price of keeping a certain kind of peace requires not only being silent but abdicating to a form of sovereignty the exclusive power to disrupt that peace, reproducing the fundamental tension between the liberal passion for individual freedom from imposition by others and the sense that violent coercion is an acceptable means of achieving it. Yet many inevitably refuse this pact, some through an outright appropriation of the authority to make noise without censure. This suggests something important though not immediately obvious about profane noise. If the Sacred Noise is a mark of sovereign power's monopolistic capacity to commit violence, even outside of the limits of law, then profane noise has its own relationship to violence, one that is always outside the limits of the law.

3.4 Abolitionary Noise & Divine Violence

Noise is a phenomenon through which we can know something about the nature of power itself. Rather than ignoring certain sounds as mere artifacts of struggle, conflict, or war, they can be understood as the way in which "relations of forces are

²⁰³ "Keep the noise down, says he, without perceiving that he has monopolized all the noise, without understanding that he thus becomes the head of all the fury." Michael Serres, *Genesis*, 131.

deployed and given concrete expression” as vibrating matter.²⁰⁴ Noise’s indexicality means that *where there is noise, there we will find a performance of power*. My focus on Sacred Noise has thus far attended to how hegemonic authority operates within the soundscape – affirming and performing its power as a constitutive force. Yet by virtue of Sacred Noise having made this distinction between the licit and illicit, there must also be its other, the noisemaking of people in their everyday lives resisting that authority through sonic expressions. This might be a mundane and absolutely ordinary noise making, incidental to everyday activity and functionally apolitical, the ordinary anthrophony of the modern soundscape. There is something else to be heard here: the sounds of resistance and refusal. Such noises might be the muffled murmurs of restless rebellion, subtle sonic acts of disobedience hidden from power, but it is also audible as tumult, the congregation of bodies riotously insisting on their right to public space. The tumultuous hurly-burly of protest is Sacred Noise’s profane opposite, an operation against power that struggles to escape its containment within the sovereign system of regulated silence and noise. It is noise as a politics continued by other means.

Everyday noises are at least nominally contained within the same field of law and authority that first names it as noise and second has the power to censure it. This minor, quotidian noise making is not *profanity*. Profanity is a category of

²⁰⁴ This is in reference to a definition of “power” given by Foucault in “Two Lectures” in Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 90.

noisemaking that exceeds its containment but does not do so as an expression of a counter-sovereign claim. Profane noise is entangled in the sacred, but it is a noise that has been transformed into a common. Agamben describes this process in a short essay called “In Praise of Profanations.” He suggests that ‘the sacred’ fundamentally describes a property relationship: what is sacred is that which belongs to the gods, and which has thus been removed from the sphere of human law.²⁰⁵ This process of removal, of making something sacred, a process called *sacrifice*, produces a “caesura between sacred and profane,” the boundaries that determine human life, its borders and limits.²⁰⁶ This gap allows for two worlds, the sacred and the secular, to coexist with different rules, different obligations, and different states of being. The profane is not just what’s left, the everything else of human life that is not sacred, but is in fact that which, having been made sacred, is now removed from the sphere of the divine. It is through its appropriation for common use that the Sacred Noise becomes profane noise. Yet, “a residue of profanity [remains] in every consecrated thing and a remnant of sacredness in every profaned object.”²⁰⁷ This suggests that profanity is not merely Sacred Noise’s opposite but retains something of Sacred Noise’s power.

This sacred remainder that profane noise appropriates from the Sacred Noise has effects on what we imagine to be *the possible*. Where Sacred Noise in its role as a mark of sovereign power helps to maintain the boundaries of what is permitted,

²⁰⁵ Giorgio Agamben, “In Praise of Profanations,” *Profanations*, translated by Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 73-92.

²⁰⁶ Agamben, *Profanations*, 81.

²⁰⁷ Agamben, *Profanations*, 78.

profanity dismantles, unsettles, and undoes those same borders. Profanity's political force comes from its capacity to undo, however momentarily, the wall erected between the sacralized realm of the powerful and the mundane sphere afforded all the rest. This is the immediate possibility of tumult, its capacity to erupt into space a world otherwise than what it is. To understand this claim, we must put aside for the moment the varied political orientations, or organizational lack, that might make such social disorders politically limited, or even deeply problematic. Tumult is a politics without guarantees. Rather it is an explosion of profane noise that momentarily opens up other possible worlds, even if we cannot know in advance to what end.

Immediately, it is a phenomenological experience of existing structures and systems abolished, a way of imagining and quite possibly prefiguring 'the political' outside the limits of sovereign relations.²⁰⁸ However paradoxically, sovereignty already exists outside of its own limits. It confirms the Law as a limit through the act of breaking it. By insisting that only the maker of laws can decide under exceptional circumstances to defy the law, the sovereign circumscribes the limits that determine who is within and outside the law's domain. Sacred Noise is a sonic form of this exception that makes the rule; profane noise is the exception that breaks it.

²⁰⁸ "Otherwise" is in reference to Ashon Crawley's work in *Blackpentecostal Breath* describing sound's capacities for enacting "alternative modes, alternative strategies, for organizing, performing and producing thought," which I discuss in more detail in the following chapters. "Otherwise, as word – otherwise possibilities, as phrase – announces the fact of infinite alternatives to what *is*." Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 2-3.

Profanity as I've described it does not try to redraw these lines as a counter-sovereign claim. It is not an attempt to reproduce sovereignty under new management. Rather, profane noise makes unclear if these boundaries meant to delimit the possible remain in place. It makes the limit imposed by the powerful on the powerless unstable, ambiguous, and threatens to make it disappear altogether. Profane noise *disorients* sovereign relations, destabilizing their givenness in a moment of deep phenomenological disturbance. Sarah Ahmed's "queer phenomenology" conveys something of this effect, an orientation to the world that "*acts out of line with others*," a making *oblique* our relations to people and things. Profane noise "queers" orientations to power by breaking the Cartesian determinates of social relations by cutting this metaphorical grid crosswise with otherwise modes of being in relationship. "Disorientation could be described here as the 'becoming oblique' of the world, a becoming that is at once interior and exterior, as that which is given, or as that which gives what is given its new angle."²⁰⁹ This simultaneous relation of "interior and exterior" unfolds from the abolition of distinct boundaries between the disoriented subject and the world, and a feeling that what senses is also sensed ("what touches is touched").²¹⁰ Noise produces this exact sensation, where the hearing

²⁰⁹ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 107. Ahmed is drawing on the likely etymology of "queer" as borrowed from the German word for "crosswise," *quer*. See *ibid*, 161; "queer, adj." OED Online. March 2019. Oxford University Press. In *Queer Phenomenology* Ahmed is considering "orientation" in its homonymic diversity, including in reference to spatial, phenomenological, and sexual relations. Queer in Ahmed's work becomes another example of a word best defined not by *what it is*, but *what it does*: "If the sexual involves the contingency of bodies coming into contact with other bodies, then sexual disorientation slides quickly into social disorientation, *as a disorientation in how things are arranged*." Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 162.

²¹⁰ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 106. Ahmed is referring to the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty who says "My hand, while it is felt from within, is also accessible from without, itself tangible, for my

subject is simultaneously submerged within sound's atmospheric envelope and at the same time saturated internally by its vibrations, creating a slippage between boundaries of self and other, and a reorientation towards the world that has onto-political significance.

The disorienting sensation of constantly losing ground, described by Sarah Ahmed as one aspect of queer phenomenology, invites allusions to *nausea* and its association with seasickness.²¹¹ This unsettling, vertiginous fall from the stability of the straight line into a roiling sea of queer objecthood invites a speculative link between noise and one of its (possible) etymological roots.²¹² In everyday language, nausea describes the affect induced by any abject, disgusting, or loathsome thing. The billowing waves of sonic pressure released by loud sounds in the lower auditory register can literally shake our guts, but the phenomenological event of noise more generally can induce a kind of nausea that reflects our disorientation between what is material and psychological, external and interior in character. Noise touches us as if we were mere objects among other objects, indifferent to our subjectivity, and most disturbing of all, without consent. It is an omnidirectional atmospheric force that comes upon us, violates us, and takes on the character of an intimate violence. Nausea is the vivid affect of our exposure to noise as form of violence, a trauma response that uncoils

other hand, for example, if it takes its place among the things it touches." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 133.

²¹¹ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 162-165.

²¹² "noise, n.". OED Online. March 2019. Oxford University Press.

<http://www.oed.com.oqa.ucsc.edu/view/Entry/127655> (accessed March 12, 2019).

along our auto-sympathetic nervous system like an electric shock. This nausea is the sensation of physical violation as an open-ended phenomenon, of the walls between us and the world disappearing, and our territorial self being overrun by everything all at once.

Noise's objecthood, alluded to by the ontologists mentioned in the previous chapter, seems to be the source of this affect of dread and the fear of being touched by other objects as if they were animate. Ahmed turns to Jean-Paul Sartre's 1938 novel, *Nausea*, as exemplary of the disorientating effects she hopes to describe. Sartre provides a thick description of a man becoming conscious of the physical contact of the world upon his own skin, the disorientating sensations of being awakened to a new relation to the world and being overwhelmed by immanence. What begins for the novel's protagonist, Antoine Roquentin, as "a sort of nausea in the hands," extends to a sensation of total undifferentiation between his body and the world, and an encounter with a form of "nature without humanity."²¹³ His ontological distinctions between self and other are undone by a sensation of sickness spreading in response to the alien agency of things: "Objects should not *touch* because they are not alive. You use them, put them back in place, you live among them: they are useful, nothing more. But they touch me, it is unbearable. I am afraid of being in contact with them as though they were living beasts."²¹⁴ This rupture of distinction starts as a localized

²¹³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, translated by Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions, 1964 [1938]), 11, 18.

²¹⁴ Sartre, *Nausea*, 10. See a counter argument in Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*.

affliction, but it eventually becomes metastatic, totalizing, the very definition of existence: “I realized there was no half-way house between non-existence and this flaunting abundance. If you existed, you had to exist all the way...”²¹⁵ To exist is to be in relation without limit.²¹⁶ Noise, sacred and profane, induces terror because it is a relation without limit, uncontained and relentless. Yet where Sacred Noise orients us to power, profanity, and tumult most especially, disorients and dislocates the center of power and the perimeter of what is permitted.

This moment of nausea inhabits a caesura in time, the gap between what is and what might be, out of which radical possibility might emerge. Sound’s atmospheric objecthood allows it to permeate these gaps, like the nausea that consumes Roquentin. Greg Hainge points to a seeming paradox in *Nausea* where, even as the protagonist’s tactile and visual world becomes indistinct and unintelligible, auditory noise “serves not to disrupt but, rather, to provide a sense of fixity and stability”—it appears to *orient*.²¹⁷ As Roquentin descends into his sensations of nausea, he discovers that sound in general, and noise in particular, continues to operate in ways that feel familiar, resonating within the interstices between self and other. If we depend on touch and sight to phenomenologically affirm our distance from others, our boundaries and distinctions, sound by contrast has the habit of making our boundaries more ambiguous, vibrating within all of the vestibules of liquid, gas and matter that

²¹⁵ Sartre, *Nausea*, 126.

²¹⁶ “Now I know: I exist – the world exists – and I know that the world exists. That’s all.” Sartre, *Nausea*, 122.

²¹⁷ Hainge, *Noise Matters*, 73.

share the qualities of inside and outside: *ear, lungs, skull*, etc.²¹⁸ As Roquentin's relation to the world dissolves into a radical form of *agnosia*, and the vibrant materialism of things begins to be perceptible, the noise of the world *makes sense*.²¹⁹ This condition of unsettled possibility, of permeability, of indistinction is the normative condition of noise. The disruptions of Sacred Noise and profanity catapult us into this condition.

The affective power of profane noise is a result of the sacred remainder that adheres to this unquieted noise even through its appropriation from sovereign power. That sacred remainder can serve a radical politics if that politics can maintain a connection to the religious sphere without resorting to sovereign power. Many democratic movements have found ways to secularize their religiosity, through religious freedom, or deism, or through subsuming their religiosity within other tropes. The modern revolutionary imagination has had to negotiate its own relationship to sovereignty to assert its legitimacy in the eyes of other sovereigns, often restoring sovereignty in spirit but in a different form as *the People, the Party*, or simply *the Nation*.

"Sovereignty secularized for political purposes does not lose its religious structure or bearing, even as it ceases to have the direct authority of God at its heart... the religious modality of the authority persists."²²⁰ To actually abolish sovereignty as a

²¹⁸ "I'm suffocating: existence penetrates me everywhere, through the eyes, the nose, the mouth..." Sartre, *Nausea*, 126.

²¹⁹ See Sigmund Freud, *On Aphasia: A Critical Theory* (Madison, CT: International Universities Press, 1953 [1891]).

²²⁰ Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, 82

logic of power means to find an alternative that bypasses human structures of power by appeal to something greater. This appeal to a greater power is a paradox for materialist politics—it is in effect an atheistic recourse to God. What would it look like to assert a divine authority over which political sovereignty must acquiesce, but in such a way that does not install a representative body in its stead as a divine mediator on earth? This is one way to interpret historical revolts that are coded in religious rhetoric that emerge from below and, in some sense, are communistic in practice.²²¹

Abolitionist struggles against North American slavery offer a useful and foundational case. Those wishing to abolish the institution itself found support in the proposition that the cruelty of that institution was not evidence that God was dead, merely distant, and that God had not in fact abdicated supreme authority. An “antimetaphysical” appeal to God could be made a resource to liberation – not because an “imperious, authoritative, historically determinative” God could be depended upon to intervene in the world, but because for abolitionists the moral and political force of such rhetoric had power.²²² As a historian, W. E. B. Du Bois was agnostic (“I do not believe that there is a personal conscious King of the world who will, upon fitting petition from me, change the course of world events to suit my needs or wishes”), and yet all the

²²¹ Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millenium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961)

²²² Jonathon S. Kahn, “There Are No Clean Souls: The Promise and Perils of Political Theology in *The Souls of Black Folk*,” in *Race and Political Theology*, edited by Vincent Lloyd (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2012), 113.

same would regularly invoke the language of the Black church in his histories of abolition, Emancipation, and Reconstruction.²²³ Such recourse to an authority that went over the heads of the slave-master, that superseded the sovereignty of white supremacy and its political and cultural armatures that reinforced it, was itself an act of insurrection. This unmediated communion had a sonic dimension that takes the form of what has been dubbed *antiphony*, a technique of polyvocal communication, rooted in the praise meetings and spirituals of enslavement and still integral to Black American culture.²²⁴

Shana L. Redmond argues that the “politico-theological basis for the composition and performance of anthems” is directly connected to struggles by unsovereign people against the limits of their exclusion from a world of *Right* and *Law*: “Within the ancient Western traditions of the *anti-phon* from which the word ‘anthem’ derives, the call-and-response that lies at the center of Black musics was used as a response to a sovereign body, initially the godhead. The word of God was recited to the congregation, who in turn answered with their anthem, a song style that by the nineteenth century was delivered by a nation in response to their government.”²²⁵ She goes on to point out that the antiphonal anthems of Black cultural practice, though potentially heard as performances of obedience as a technique of survival, also acted as a challenge to domination itself through “the politico-sonic decentering of a

²²³ W.E.B. DuBois quoted in *Ibid*, 113.

²²⁴ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), 79.

²²⁵ Shana L. Redmond, *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 3-4

governing subject of response (the Godhead/nation).”²²⁶ In other words, the enslaved entered into a direct dialogue with God, an act of mutual recognition, that not only bypassed the master, but made hallow the master’s claim to sovereignty. This acquiescence to a power higher than the enslaved, but outside the master-slave relationship, meant that mastery itself could only be restored through mean and forceful coercion. “There is a democratic, communitarian moment enshrined in the practice of antiphony,” Paul Gilroy tells us, “which symbolizes and anticipates (but does not guarantee) new, non-dominating social relationships.”²²⁷ What he calls an “ethic of antiphony” is a praxis that prefigures this new democratic community.

Du Bois hears in the sorrow of these same songs a lament for the world as it was and is, but also a prophetic heralding of a future world. The music of the enslaved, as well as the freed for whom freedom was “a real thing and not a dream,” prophesized an unfathomable change in the political economy and social construction of a nation utterly dependent upon millions of enslaved people.²²⁸ This unfathomable change, what Du Bois called “the vision of the damned,” has as its proper name *abolition*.²²⁹ It is *this* tradition that contemporary abolition movements inherit as they not only attempt to eliminate social institutions of violent repression (prisons, policing, I.C.E., border regimes) but also to institute new forms of social organization that are

²²⁶ Redmond, *Anthem*, 4.

²²⁷ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 79.

²²⁸ DuBois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 170.

²²⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *John Brown*, (New York: Modern Library, 2001 [1909]), 67.

fundamentally incompatible with force, violence and coercion.²³⁰ All of these ambitions require not simply a reform of policy or habit, but a nearly unimaginable alteration of social relations and the paradigmatic assumptions that underlie them. As one group of self-identified abolitionists wrote recently, “abolitionist politics is not about what is possible, but about making the impossible a reality,” and this insistence on imminent impossibility is why the radical antebellum abolitionist crusade is an ongoing resource for radical thought almost two centuries later.²³¹ The profane noisemaking that heralds and prefigures such otherwise possibilities, that opens up a phenomenological encounter with such possibilities, is an *abolitionary noise*.

Abolitionary noise heralds a radically *other* world, what Walter Benjamin meant when he talks of “a real state of exception.”²³² This qualified condition, which was a rebuke of Schmitt’s *sovereign* state of exception and the rise of fascism it anticipated, insists that there remains a divine power outside of and above sovereignty. Where Schmitt feared that the end of the world was only ever kept at bay by the security of a sovereign figure, “the restrainer” or *katechon*, Benjamin saw in the coming of the *eschaton* a possibility for a world radically transformed in favor of the oppressed.²³³

²³⁰ See Angela Davis, *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture* (Philadelphia: Seven Stories Press, 2011).

²³¹ Abolition Collective, “Manifesto of the Abolition Journal,” *Abolition: A Journal of Insurgent Politics* 1 (December 2018): 4-7.

²³² Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 2007), 257.

²³³ Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, trans. G. L. Ulmen (Candor, NY: Telos Press, 2003), 59-60; Jacob Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, 19-20.

Benjamin related to history through an *apocalyptic* frame that imagined revolution as a messianic force that undermines political power, but in its totality rather than the replacing one sovereign for another.²³⁴ Thus even as Benjamin could see in the wake of history the catastrophe that had established the state of exception as the rule, he had faith that this would pass. Reconsidering Benjamin and Schmitt's thinking half-a-century later Agamben claimed that our world now persists in a constant state of exception, under "a law without signification" or a *form of law* that is no longer distinguishable from life.²³⁵ He argued that this condition creates a dialectic where law making and law breaking are indistinguishable.²³⁶ However, Benjamin is anticipating something different, an abolition of this condition that does not merely replace the law (sovereignty) but produces a new condition of law *without signification* that itself has no beginning or ending (what he called 'messianic time'). Sacred Noise is exactly this prior signification of power that, in moving beyond censure, has become a "form of law" unrecognizable from its exceptionalism. Profane noise, then, is the sound of its abolition, of the erasure of law, and the creation of an utterly new condition.

²³⁴ Benjamin, "Theses on History;" Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*.

²³⁵ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 55.

²³⁶ In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben tries to explain what it might mean for the Schmittian state of exception to have become the norm, a condition in perpetuity. "We have seen the sense in which law begins to coincide with life once it has become the pure form of law, law's mere being in force without significance. But insofar as law is maintained in pure form as a state of virtual exception, it lets bare life subsist before it. Law that becomes indistinguishable from life in a real state of exception is confronted by life that, in a symmetrical but inverse gesture, is entirely transformed into law. The absolute intelligibility of a life wholly resolved into writing corresponds to the impenetrability of a writing that, having become indecipherable, now appears as life. Only at this point do the two terms distinguished kept united by relation of ban (bare life and form of law) abolish each other and enter into a new dimension." Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 55, cf. 50-57.

Benjamin describes the violence of sovereign power as ‘*mythical*’, a form of material and metaphysical violence that serves either a law *making* or law *preserving* purpose. It is essentially synonymous with the ‘sacred’ as I’ve discussed it here. This mythical violence has its radical *other* in a kind of violence that Benjamin described as ‘*divine*,’ a “pure and immediate violence” that extirpates all law. “If mythic violence is law-positing, divine violence is law-annihilating; if the former establishes boundaries, the latter boundlessly annihilates them.”²³⁷ The Sacred Noise is a sound signifying that same mythic violence which makes and preserves the law, and contra this, profane noise signifies the attempt to abolish law and the figure of the sovereign that represents it *en tout*.²³⁸ Tumult’s profane noise is a means by which the emptiness of sovereignty as an idea can be exposed, a means by which “this form of representation can be hallowed out... allowing its representational failures to be rendered legible.”²³⁹ Such a hallowing out is not only the destruction of the Leviathan-like figures that symbolically embodies sovereign power; it also suggests the appropriation of sovereignty’s symbolic power in service of political freedom.

²³⁷ Benjamin, *Toward the Critique of Violence*, §17.

²³⁸ “Mythic violence is blood-violence over mere life for the sake of violence itself; divine violence is pure violence over all life for the sake of the living. The former demands sacrifice; the latter assumes it.” Benjamin, *Towards a Critique of Violence*, §17.

²³⁹ Martel, *Divine Violence*, 7-8. Martel is alluding to Jean Luc Nancy’s claim that sovereignty is shaped “around a hallow.” Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World, or Globalization* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007), 106. Martel is fairly critical of sovereignty’s relationship to freedom. His definition of the sovereignty is “a system of authority that usurps power from the very people in whose name it is fomented.” Martel, *Divine Violence*, 2.

The abolition of sovereignty, realized through profane noise, through tumult, is thus an act of creative destruction.²⁴⁰

Schafer's acoustic ecology was an attempt to point out the negative effects of this conflict, between different noisemaking that refused to be silenced. For his own peace and in accord to his own form of aesthetic moralism, the composer never differentiated between the riot of industry and the cacophony of amplified music, nor the clamor of police and the tumults that they were trying to silence. All of it was noise, and all noise that refused to be silent was an expression of power and domination through a kind of sonic violence. His myth of Sacred Noise's fall from the heavens to the earth gives us insight into the sacralization of new noises brought about by the secularization of sovereign power, but it falls short of understanding how Sacred Noise's appropriation might suggest other kinds of power. The appropriation of the Sacred Noise by its profanation, while removing it from the realm of the sacred, still maintains a relationship to the world creating and world destroying power, a sacred remainder. In the chapter that follows I will show how this is made audible in the conflict of forces between the tumult of protest and the efforts by power to police that protest. These law-breaking and law-preserving forces both use noise as a weapon, as a medium of communicative violence, one in violation of the

²⁴⁰ "If the telos of the revolutions collapses, so that the revolution is no longer the means but the sole creative principle, then the destructive desire becomes a creative desire." Jacob Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, 11.

law and the other sanctioned by it. The Sacred Noise and profanity both index a kind of violence that make an otherworldly power audible through a *sacrificial noise*.

U.A.W. Noise Demo, Berkeley, 2022

Four thousand students gathered underneath UC Berkeley's campanile bell tower in the chill air of November 2022, the sun arching southwest in the late afternoon, a rock band belting out a faithful rendition of the Beatles' "Revolution" from atop the steps leading from Sather Tower to South Hall Road. The crowd was a steady churn of shouted conversation, the noise ceiling pitched to match the distorted power chords blowing with the wind across the mass of bodies and through the campus grounds. As the band played its final number, the carillon hammered out its 3:00pm signature, syncopated yet oddly in time with the band, their key almost pitched to the 61-belled, five octave instrument. The performance finished and the microphone gave way to union leaders and allied organizers incanting the ethical and material demands and justifications that explained why this localized iteration of the largest academic worker's strike had gathered. The ritualized speeches complete, the crowd was directed on its preannounced journey through the East Bay hills towards the mansion home of University of California President Michael Drake. This march was the culmination of the first week of striking by academic workers represented by the United Auto Workers.²⁴¹

Immediately upon embarking the procession exploded in polyphonic cacophony. Chants rolled over the crowd like waves, sometimes wholly distinct and

²⁴¹ Iris Kwok and Ally Markovich, "Thousands of UC Berkeley employees go on strike for better wages, benefits," *Berkeleyside*, November 14, 2022.
<https://www.berkeleyside.org/2022/11/14/thousands-uc-berkeley-employees-strike>

competing for space, sometimes a mismatching same akin to choral rounds. Hand-held megaphones directed and misdirected the crowd, fighting for the unifying force of amplified voice over the enthusiasms of small affinity groups. The noise of these mishandled megaphones punctuated every other minute – the click-clack of the handle’s trigger activating the mouthpiece momentarily, swirls of feedback, the “siren” function blasting for a few seconds. Instruments from protests-past appeared like memorabilia long stuck in storage dusted off for the occasion – vuvuzelas, bucket drums, pots and pans. A person in front of me lays into a heartbeat on a talking drum. A small ensemble behind me plays Nirvana’s “Smells Like Teen Spirit” on saxophone, trumpet, bagpipe, and tambourine. A mobile PA system is wheeled past me blasting Rhianna’s “Bitch Better Have My Money.” All of this is within the first five minutes of walking in a battalion-sized midsection of the brigade-sized march.

We procession past university buildings, fraternity houses, dormitories, commercial storefronts, drivers stopped in their cars (at times laying on their horns in support), and eventually into the gated Claremont neighborhood that sits above the northeastern-most edge of Oakland. To what communicative purpose might our meander past Drake’s 6.5-million-dollar home, a home paid for by the same pot of money from which the union was trying to negotiate non-poverty wages, possible have aspired. *Attention*, perhaps... The incoherence of tumult never fails in its disruptive character to draw the ears of power towards the rupture of social norms. As much as the strike is pedagogical act to remind the boss that workers are needed, the march also means to educate Drake as to the existence of a crisis that needs attending.

Shame, perhaps... The march reenacted a centuries old tradition of *charivari*, noisemaking outside the home of a community member who has committed an immoral act.²⁴² This was one of multiple inspirations for the *manifests casseroles* (or “pots and pans” protest) that became synonymous with the Quebec student strikes of 2012.²⁴³ *A threat*, perhaps...

²⁴² Emma Dillon, *The Sense of Sound: Musical Meaning in France, 1260–1330* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), chapter 3.

²⁴³ Jonathan Sterne, “Quebec’s #casseroles: on participation, percussion, and protest” *Sounding Out!* [blog] (June 4, 2012); <https://soundstudiesblog.com/2012/06/04/casseroles/>

4.0 Sacrificial Noise

Early in this project I made the claim that the metonymic chain that conflates the crowd and its noise is not an accident. The pages that followed have been an attempt to unpack why this is and what it tells us about the political relationship between *noise* and *power*. I have explored noise's moral negativity as an ontological foundation, one whose social position is grounded in its metonymic relationship to the crowd. I have addressed past and current attempts at defining noise, with particular focus on R. Murray Schafer's derogatory definitions, as well as contemporary debates over noise's materiality and cultural specificity, and without denying materialist theorizations of noise, I contend that it is unavoidably a matter of social relations. From this position, I ask what is it that makes noise ontologically bad and conclude that it is a consequence of a Nietzschean "master morality." Which is to say that a sound's designation as noise is an index of unequal power relations. This ought to give insight into why noise is semantically synonymous with large crowds expressing anger at their subjection; the sounds of protest are noisy exactly because they threaten social order. This is borne out when we survey the literatures of crowd theory and notice that words like *tumult*, *riot*, and *protest* are used to describe both the unruly crowd and its sound. As I stated earlier, *noise is both an index of political struggle and a means by which those struggles are enacted*. To further this argument, I intend to look at the power relations that produce noise and that are affected by

noise, demonstrating the extent to which an understanding of *what noise is* requires an understanding of how noise is produced by power.

In the previous chapter I turned to a thinker often credited with establishing the interdiscipline of sound studies, R. Murray Schafer, in order to note the role that sovereign power has in delimiting what is noise and what isn't, or to be more exact, who can make noise without censure and who cannot. That limit sacralizes certain sounds, and the power to decide this limit is a mark of absolute power. Yet, as the very existence of the word *tumult* implies, that power is constantly called into question by the uprising of contentious crowds. The chapter that follows accounts for tumult, and for how it is integrated into a system of power through its regulation, beyond suppression. To think through this dialectic between power and tumult I turn to the French economist Jacques Attali whose 1977 book *Bruits* is often considered another foundation of the study of sound.²⁴⁴ Attali's original hypothesis is that music acts in a radical inversion of base and superstructure, *anticipating* changes in political economy rather than being shaped by them as a consequence of material changes in production. It is a wholly unconventional theory that combines political anthropology, Marxist political economy, and a structuralist musicology to argue that, at the time of his writing, an emergent socialism was audibly imminent. Key to his argument, though rarely addressed in secondary literatures, is a claim that "*noise is*

²⁴⁴ Jacques Attali's *Bruits* was translated to English by Brian Massumi and published as *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. To avoid confusion with my promiscuous use of the word 'noise,' I'll be using '*Bruits*' when stating the title of Attali's publication, but all quotes and citations reference the English edition.

violence.” He is certainly referring to a physical and material violence, but he is also speaking to a metaphysical violence, an attack on the present order of society by a revolutionary future that can be prophetically anticipated by noise. Power must channel that noise that is both a sound and an imminent event of social violence, transforming it into a kind of *sacrifice* in order to discharge its potential to expand out of control.

In the following pages I explore this instrument of *sacrificial noise* through different epistemic frameworks: *anthropology*, *sociology*, *penology*, and *phenomenology*. Noise is an instance of the crossing of boundaries, between the sacred and secular, the powerful and powerless, the licit and illicit, the self and the world. In contests over power, noise is heard as the epiphenomena of human turmoil and yet Attali suggests it might be a force that can shape human society. I take Attali’s claim seriously and use it to further my analysis of noise and power. Attali suggests that noise is a force that anticipates the reordering of things, the transformation of one social order into the next. Through a focus on the crowd’s noise, I show how this force, often synonymous with the revolutionary crowd, becomes audible as an inchoate threat. I argue that just as noise is channeled into a form compatible with dominant political economies, i.e. music, tumult is channeled into politically acceptable forms of protest. Power makes a space where it can safely be contested, a zone of freedom that can tolerate a *pharmakon*-like dose of noise and violence. Yet this managed expression of *sacrificial noise* always threatens to exceed its containment. The role of policing in

crowd control reveals to us, through their modulations of permissiveness and shocking violence, how the noise of the crowd is already understood by power to be operating as a form of anticipatory violence. As an instrument of the Sacred Noise, the police both censure and dispense with noise as a form of violence, making quiet and letting be noisy in a constant shifting of the boundary or limit around what is permitted. Tumult erupts in this shifting interstice, in the ambiguous in-between of noise's border crossing, opening up a rupture in social order and relations of power that lets in through our very bodies the radical possibility of those orders and relations being abolished.

4.1 A Political Anthropology of Noise

Since its 1985 publication in English translation as *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Attali's theory of noise has often been cited but rarely explored in any detail.²⁴⁵ The canonicity of *Noise* in the field of sound studies is partly a consequence of the extent to which it was seized upon by the "New Musicology" of the 1980's and 1990's which found in this text a fearlessly poetic critical theory of music and

²⁴⁵ Significant departures from this tendency include Douglas Collins, "Ritual Sacrifice and the Political Economy of Music," *Perspectives of New Music* 24, no. 1 (Autumn-Winter, 1985): 14-23; Eric Drott, "Rereading Jacques Attali's Bruits," *Critical Inquiry* 41, no. 4 (Summer 2015): 721-756; Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*, 49-53; Robin James, "Neoliberal Noise: Attali, Foucault & the Biopolitics of Uncool," *Culture, Theory and Critique* 55, no. 2 (2014): 138-158; Sterne, *MP3*, 122-127.

politics.²⁴⁶ Attali, however, was not a musicologist; he was at the time a Professor of Economics at the *Ecole Polytechnique* and advisor to the *Parti socialiste* leader, and future president of France, François Mitterrand. Attali embodied what one of his critics called “the myth of the French intellectual,” someone who is a “brilliantly facile, awesomely prolific, highly politicized, media-hip, publicly unembarrassed discipline-hopper contemptuous of the modesties of academic divisions of labor, whose name and face have national visibility, and who is at least offered the illusion of being taken seriously by those with real political power.”²⁴⁷ The timing of *Bruits*’ publication in the U.S. was fortuitous, both because of French theory’s emergent influence on musicological study and its waxing influence in North American academia generally.

Yet reading *Bruits* as pure musicology is a mistake. Throughout the text Attali makes explicit that he is using music to unlock a code, to expose a structural order that links political economy and cultural expression. Theorist Eric Drott asserts that *Bruits* is better understood as a continuation of the claims made in *La Parole et l’outil* (“The Word and the Tool”), Attali’s cybernetically informed treatise on political economy published only two years earlier.²⁴⁸ In Drott’s reading, *Bruits* is a propagandic valorization of intellectual labor, an appeal to the very constituency that would be

²⁴⁶ Eric Drott’s critical reappraisal of Attali’s *Noise* includes a helpful list of ways this work has been taken up by the “new musicology”: Drott, “Rereading Jacques Attali’s *Bruits*,” 723-724.

²⁴⁷ Collins, “Ritual Sacrifice,” 15.

²⁴⁸ Drott, “Rereading Jacques Attali’s *Bruits*”; Jacques Attali, *La Parole et l’outil: Economie en liberté* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1975).

needed to actualize *Parti socialiste*'s grasp on political power. Attali's claims about social transformation were positivistic appraisals of the already existing economic changes to which the *Parti socialiste* were both responding to and directing. This change, deindustrialization and the emergence of intellectual labor, would occupy "an increasingly important place within the social, economic, and cultural life of France" and has only continued to do so in the decades since.²⁴⁹ Drott also claims Attali conflates the commonplace definition of *bruit* with one Attali discussed previously in *La Parole et l'outil*, a definition of noise specific to information theory.²⁵⁰ This investment in cybernetic thinking applied to social theory was an articulation of a broad intellectual movement that had gripped French theory at the time.²⁵¹ Thus, Attali's theories about the effect of noise being introduced from outside of a closed system, though read in the North America as a critique of music and culture, functions simultaneously as an allegory for an emerging networked society that makes "order by noise" and the coming socialist government.²⁵²

²⁴⁹ Drott, "Rereading Jacques Attali's Bruits," 74.

²⁵⁰ It should be noted that "*bruit*" does not hold the same generally derogatory connotation in French that "noise" does in English. *Bruit* can reference the pleasurable sounds of bird song as much as the disturbing sound of an aircraft, chainsaw, or air-raid siren.

²⁵¹ Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan, *Code: From Information Theory to French Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023)

²⁵² Drott, "Rereading Jacques Attali's Bruits," 73. Jonathan Sterne affirms the utility in Attali's framework for the entanglement of technology and ideology but sees his utopian predictions for the era of composition as ironically missing the fact at the exact moment of his writing *Noise*, technology and communication was moving towards a condition where noise was no longer being repressed or neutralized but harnessed for the purposes of greater clarity of audition and effective management. Sterne, *MP3*, 125.

Though the noise in *Bruits* may be operating analogically in service of an emerging post-Fordist political economy, Attali's text is much more than a program for social democratic neoliberalization. *Bruits* presents us with a theory of power, and a theory of noise's role materially, culturally, and spiritually in its usurpation. Noise as Attali describes it can be understood as a sonic flux, as a constant hum of the world, and therefore an uncontrollable force free from power's constraint. Power's response to this force is two-fold: to either organize noise into "music" or else silence it as means of social control. Already we can hear an echo of Attali's contemporary R. Murray Schafer. Like the constraint of noise into realms of the sacred and profane, the licit and illicit, transforming noise into music is an attempt to constrain the always-possible disorder of noise and its inherent violence. Each of Attali's orders describes a historical, though overlapping, attempt by power to produce political and economic stability through new forms of musical production. These orders are made audible through formal changes in the creation, distribution, and consumption of music, representing a dialectical "structure of interferences and dependencies between societies and its music."²⁵³ What Attali theorizes as "the political economy of music as a succession of orders" demonstrates how music is both constituted by and constitutive of "the ideologies and technologies of its age."²⁵⁴ We can read these

²⁵³ Attali, *Noise*, 19.

²⁵⁴ Attali, *Noise*, 19. Schafer also attaches a significance to social conditions and the forms of music it produces but sees this as symptomatic rather than prophetic. Borrowing his structure from Herman Hesse, Schafer suggests that a stable society produces well-ordered music, an unstable one produces a music of chaos and noise, and a that society in decline produces a sentimental and nostalgic music. He suggests that music is "an indicator of social conditions" in the present but posits that it "may tell us much about the trending and evolution of that society," something close to Attali's more definitive structural claim. Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 7.

descriptions as a theory of History, a telos of cultural emergence, but they also offer a structure that might indicate in advance—*prophesize*—the arrival of a new political and economic order.

The first of Attali's four orders, that of "*sacrificial ritual*," refers to a musical era prior to modernity during which music went unrecorded, its knowledge maintained by memory, oral traditions, and ritual. Sacrificial music was an attempt to create order out of the existential threat heralded in the noises of nature and, much like the ritual act of sacrificial murder, music acted as a displacement of the actual violence that society needed to keep at remove to survive. In the order of *Representation*, coincident with the rise of the capitalist mode of production between the 16th and 19th centuries, music became specialized, spectacularized, and commodified as a material, saleable object in the form of the score. Its performances were *re*-presentations of the creative act of composition, held at a physical and social remove in a theatrical setting. The subsequent order of *Repetition* is characterized by mechanical reproduction, transduction, and transmission, where music is valued for its collectability and the fidelity of its reperformance. This is the age in which Attali was living when he wrote *Bruit*, but he also claimed he could hear the approach of a new era, an order of *Composition* in which techniques very similar to *musique concrète* would become commonplace, allowing consumers to become artistic producers in ways that retroactively seem to describe a coming wave of audio-visual experimentation from hip-hop DJs to electronic music producers to the ubiquitous

sonic appropriations of the social media age. However descriptive they may be, these “orders” are not necessarily meant to be taken as a strict chronological progression, but rather as overlapping, phased social transformations that have achieved moments of relative stability throughout history.

Attali’s orders describe both the conditions of music’s exploitation by power and its dialectical overcoming of the order that precedes it. Each respective order has a corresponding strategic function by which power makes use of music: conditioning the *forgetting* of generalized violence through ritual; “mak[ing] people *believe* in the harmony of the world” through representation; and an effective *silencing* of dissonance “by mass producing a deafening, syncretic kind of music, and censoring all other human noises.” Attali describes these as three functions or *tools of power*: “of ritual power when it is a question of making people forget the fear of violence; of representative power when it is a question of making them believe in order and harmony; and of bureaucratic power when it is a question of silencing those who oppose it.”²⁵⁵ All of these tools are designed to repress noise, yet it is through noise that these tools of power are overcome: “*representation against fear, repetition against harmony, composition against normality.*” It is because the ends and beginnings of these orders are synchronic that theoretical concepts and immaterial forms (such as music) can “mirror” one another and herald a change far in advance of

²⁵⁵ Attali, *Noise*, 19. Italics my own.

“concrete production.”²⁵⁶ The noise of new musical forms thus acts prophetically, announcing a disorder that will abolish an existing order even as it creates a new one.

The emergence of noise from within social order exposes the fact of power’s tenuous grip. It becomes imperative for power to “analyze, mark, restrain, train, repress, and channel primitive sounds of language, of the body, of tools, of objects, of the relationships to self and other” – in other words to monitor, surveil, and record noise.²⁵⁷ In totalitarian orders, the possibility that the powerful might hear the sounds of dissent before they become contagious ear worms provokes the widespread creation of apparatuses of audioveillance. “The powerful imagine knowing everything; the police dream of recording everything.”²⁵⁸ This Benthamite machinery of discipline gives way in a later work, *Les Trois Mondes*, to Attali’s concept of *autoveillance*, in which the State’s biopolitical ordering, recording, and recoding becomes a practice of *autogestion*.²⁵⁹ Frederic Jameson’s idea that this self-generated data accumulation could “be used for a collective political project of emancipation” seems naïve at best from the perspective of our present-day, socially networked synopticon.²⁶⁰ In hindsight, one could argue that the *compositional order* that Attali thought was the herald of socialism and individual freedom was really the sound of

²⁵⁶ Attali, *Noise*, 9.

²⁵⁷ Attali, *Noise*, 6.

²⁵⁸ Jacques Attali, “Forward,” translated by Elizabeth Marshman in *Music and Marx: Ideas, Practice, Politics*, Regula Burckhardt Qureshi, editor (London: Taylor & Francis, 2002), x.

²⁵⁹ Jacques Attali, *Les trois mondes: Pour une théorie de l’après-crise* (Paris: Fayard, 1980)

²⁶⁰ Frederic Jameson, “Foreword,” in Attali, *Noise*, xii. And yet this sentiment remains a core article of faith for the techno-utopians of Silicon Valley and beyond. T.J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocen: Visual Culture and Environment Today* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017).

the new spirit of capitalism reborn as a noise-proof neoliberal economic regime. Reading *Bruits* decades after Jameson, philosopher Robin James points out that neoliberalism accounts for noise, *produces it even*, as a modulating means of controlling populations. James says, “deregulatory processes regulate and adjust themselves so that any potential irregularities can be fed back into the system without unduly disturbing it.”²⁶¹ Thus the contemporary economic system, much like the popular music that it produces, takes dissonance, noise, and disruption, and capitalizes on it as an opportunity to introduce new mechanisms of growth and accumulation.²⁶²

In *Bruit*, this dialectical critique of culture as a form of instrumentalized production and mediation, one only intensified through its own supposed innovations, seems an extension of an Adornoian claim that the structure of this process is audible in music. Attali certainly read Theodor Adorno (he refers to him as “a musician and a pessimist aristocrat”), and there is a clear similarity between the former’s analysis of noise and the latter’s concept of “dissonance”, but it is unclear to what extent *Bruit*’s structural anthropology of music is premised upon the late German philosopher’s critique.²⁶³ Where Attali could hear in modern music the possibilities for a liberatory reorganization of society, Adorno refused to consider these sounds – jazz, modern classical, and rock and roll among them – as being among the “dissonances” that he

²⁶¹ Robin James, “Neoliberal Noise: Attali, Foucault & the Biopolitics of Uncool,” *Theory and Critique*, 55, no. 2: 138-158, at 143.

²⁶² Eric Drott, *Streaming Music, Streaming Capital* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2024).

²⁶³ Attali, *Noise*, 43.

claimed could counter capitalist hegemony. They both claim that prior to being transformed by capitalism's commodifying and alienating powers music's social origins lay in myth. Adorno believed that it was only in the act of applause, "the distant descendent of ancient, long-forgotten ritual sacrifice," that the sacred circuit between performers and audience was momentarily restored to modernity.²⁶⁴ Adorno opposed this sacred applause to the profanity of booing, something he heard as a betrayal of the pact formed between audience and performer upon admittance to the scene of the theater. Attali reaffirms Adorno's claim that applause is a sacrificial form of violence, but Attali suggests that this sacrificial noise was also a threat, "that applauding is a confirmation, after the channelization of the violence, that the spectators of the sacrifice could potentially resume practicing [their] essential violence."²⁶⁵ For his part, Adorno believed that liberation couldn't come by means of an audience's participation in this tumult—he disdained the theater riot as mob violence and accused avant-gardists such as Stravinsky of instigating just such debased reactions.

Here emerges a significant break between Adorno's pessimism and Attali's sense that the noisome violence of the crowd might herald revolutionary transformation. Adorno championed the compositional production of *dissonances*, exemplified by the twelve-tone technique introduced to him by his teacher Alban Berg, which he viewed as the

²⁶⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Quasi Una Fama: Essays on Modern Music* (New York: Verso, 1998), 65.

²⁶⁵ Attali, *Noise*, 28.

only sonic force capable of throwing the listener into an awareness of their alienation while offering a negative critique of capitalist society. “Dissonance is the truth about harmony,” Adorno would claim, a dialectical shadow that spooks capitalist industry into excising it from music.²⁶⁶ Attali’s writing retains an echo of Adorno, arguing that it is the relations of production, “the economic organization of capitalism,” that has set the limits of music and that “was able, until Schoenberg, to hold back dissonances, the expression of the suffering of the exploited.”²⁶⁷ Here is an Adornoian account of music and noise as materials organized by a political-economic structure that relies on occluding its participation in cultural production as a means of repressing revolt. Attali takes this further, however, insisting that internal to such structures is the inevitable destruction of such political-economic orders by the noise of the order-to-come. Dissonances that might awaken one from the current order may all the same be moot in the face of the unchanneled noise produced by whatever lays over the horizon. Attali’s fascination with the tumultuous musicking that announces it suggests an openness to the kinds of profane noise that seems to disturb Adorno, a willingness to embrace the entanglements of noise, violence, music, and power.

In *Bruits*, Attali claims that “*noise is violence*,” not as a metaphor but an actual psychic and material violence that has the capacity to cause harm. Noise is a form of violence because “in its biological reality, noise is a source of pain,” that “beyond a

²⁶⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Robert Hullot-Kentor, trans. (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 151.

²⁶⁷ Attali, *Noise*, 43.

certain limit becomes a weapon of death.”²⁶⁸ He argues that noise accrued its lethality “with the advent of industrial technology,” and that “since it is a threat of death, noise is a concern of power.”²⁶⁹ Here Attali is in accord with Schafer, arguing that power’s investment in maintaining an established harmonic order leads it to monopolize noisemaking, which it does in part by containing noise as music. Yet the violence which Attali attaches to noise is not limited to its capacity for physical harm. Just as Adorno suggested that applause was a substitute for the ritual act of sacrifice, Attali argues that music serves this same purpose, channeling the unleashed social violence for which *noise* is metonymic. Music, Attali claims, is “a simulacrum of the sacrifice of the Scapegoat,” a pharmakon-like displacement of uncontrollable violence through an organized act of violence.²⁷⁰ In effect, he proposes a radical syllogism: if *noise* = *violence*, and *music* = *organized noise*, then *music* = *organized violence*.²⁷¹ This suggests that the organized noise reflective of each order takes part in an antiphonal push and pull between power and the revolt against power, and that new music is a sacrificial noise developed to contain that revolt.

²⁶⁸ Attali, *Noise*, 27.

²⁶⁹ Attali, *Noise*, 27.

²⁷⁰ “In order to show that [...] music is a simulacrum of the sacrifice of the Scapegoat, and that it shared the same function, we must establish two things: First that *noise is violence*: it disturbs. To make noise is to interrupt a transmission, to disconnect, to kill. It is a simulacrum of murder. Second, that *music is a channelization of noise*, and therefore a simulacrum of the sacrifice.” Attali, *Noise*, 26.

²⁷¹ The definition of music as ‘organized noise’ is generally attributed to Edgard Varèse. Chou Wen-Chung, “Varèse: A Sketch of the Man and His Music,” *The Musical Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (1966): 151–70.

Attali's conception of sacrifice's role in society is obviously influenced by the writings of French political anthropologists, including Georges Bataille, Pierre Clastres, Georges Dumézil, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and in particular René Girard whose theories of religious violence permeate *Bruit*.²⁷² Girard regarded ritual sacrifice as a prophylactic against social chaos, specifically "the internal violence—all the dissensions, rivalries, jealousies, and quarrels within the community that the sacrifices are designed to suppress."²⁷³ Sacrifice was essential for interrupting the spiraling repetition of what he called 'mimetic violence'. Drawing implicitly on Alexandre Kojève's reading of Hegel's phenomenology, Girard's thesis is that the innate human desire for the desire of another instigates a mimetic rivalry to appropriate or consume the object of desire, a "positive feedback" that continually escalates and inevitably leads to violence, domination, even murder.²⁷⁴ Religion creates taboos and prohibitions in an effort to prevent this mimetic rivalry from devolving into "the

²⁷² See also, Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Functions*, trans. by W. D. Halls (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2021).

²⁷³ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1979), 8. Douglas Collins argues for Girard's influence on Attali in Collins, "Ritual Sacrifice and the Political Economy of Music," *Perspectives of New Music* 24, no. 1 (Autumn-Winter, 1985): 14-23.

²⁷⁴ René Girard, "Mimesis and Violence," in *The Girard Reader*, ed. By James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 8. Kojève understood this mimetic desire to be essential to both becoming consciousness as such, and as a necessary step in the process of overcoming bondage: "Desire directed toward another Desire, taken as Desire, will create, by negating and assimilating action that satisfies it, an 'I' essentially different from the animal 'I'" Alexander Kojève, *Introduction to a Reading of Hegel* (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 5. Kojève's course on Hegel's *Phenomenology* is arguably the origin of the French reception of Hegel in philosophy (as well as psychoanalysis and anthropology). His influence can be traced through his students, which included Georges Bataille, Andre Breton, Jean Hippolyte, Jacques Lacan, Claude Levi-Strauss, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Raymond Queneau, Jean-Paul Sartre, and through their writing and teachings. See Alain Badiou, "The Adventure of French Philosophy," *New Left Review* 35 (September/October, 2005). For a reading of how Kojève transformed Hegel, see Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

undifferentiated reciprocity of mimetic conflict,” the violence that is “a by-product of mimetic rivalry.”²⁷⁵ Yet these prohibitions are bound to fail, particularly in a moment of crisis, and it is only through a “decisive reordering that occurs [...], normally through the mediation of sacrifice” that peace is restored.²⁷⁶ Through the ritual act of sacrifice a community “purifies itself of its own disorder” by *encouraging* mimetic violence “and by bringing it to a climax.”²⁷⁷ This displacement of violence through an organized ritual form is how Attali thinks music functioned in the premodern world: as organized noise, displacing the violence immanent in the disorder of the sonic flux.

In drawing out this correspondence, between noise and violent social disorder, between music and sacrifice’s role in restoring order, Attali seems to be using Girard’s theory to explain the aftermath of the failed social and cultural revolution of the 1960’s. The noise of rock and soul that seemed to anticipate the arrival of youth revolt had instead been contained by “a music industry that takes the channelization of desire into commodities to such an extreme as to become a caricature,” while State socialism had become “simply the successor to capitalism, slightly more efficient and systematic in its normalization of men and its frantic quest for sterilized and monotonous perfection.”²⁷⁸ The project of reorganizing social democracy which the *Parti Socialiste* was about to embark on would have its own sound, a sacrificial noise that would first consume the old order in order to create the necessary conditions for

²⁷⁵ Girard, “Mimesis and Violence,” 10, 12.

²⁷⁶ Girard, “Mimesis and Violence,” 11.

²⁷⁷ Girard, “Mimesis and Violence,” 11, 13.

²⁷⁸ Attali, *Noise*, 10-11.

the new. Girard was apparently disinterested in the upheavals of the Long Hot Summer of '67 or the explosions of May '68, yet his writings on violence and the sacred published only a few years after is haunted by the riotous Crowd and its tumult, that critical moment when “the community turns into a mob under the effect of mimetic rivalry.”²⁷⁹ Attali can clearly hear in these events an exemplar of what Girard called the “sacrificial crisis.” In the moment when distinctions that might otherwise structure and maintain a society dissolve into disorder, distinctions between the sacred and profane, the licit and illicit, the violence of sacrifice and the base violence of excess, society spirals into a cycle of mimetic violence.²⁸⁰ This sacrificial crisis is what music attempts to help contain, and what noise threatens to unleash.

Had he wished, Girard might have employed a sociological method to address the social unrest around him, showing how the protest and riots that surrounded him signaled a sacrificial crisis in Western democracies. Instead of naming current events

²⁷⁹ Girard, “Mimesis and Violence,” 12. Cynthia L. Haven, Girard’s biographer, describes him as “not there” regarding the political tumult on U.S. college campuses. Though perhaps the stronger influence on his theory of sacrifice was his trying to make sense of fascism in the France of his youth and the horrors of the Holocaust, it seems difficult to imagine even someone as politically disinterested as Girard would not have been impressed by news of the Parisian revolt, or the arrest of his students and colleagues at the SUNY Buffalo campus, and the gruesome police repression that accompanied it, or the dramatic rioting in Baltimore, so close to his other appointment at John Hopkins University, that followed the murder of Martin Luther King Jr and the enormous military presence sent in to suppress it. Cynthia L. Haven, *Evolution of Desire: A Life of René Girard* (Ann Arbor: Michigan State University Press, 2018); Richard A. Sigglekow, *Dissent and Disruption: A University Under Siege* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1991); Jessica I. Elfenbein, Thomas L. Hollowak, Elizabeth M. Nix, eds., *Baltimore '68: Riots and Rebirth in an American City* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011).

²⁸⁰ “The *sacrificial crisis*, that is, the disappearance of the sacrificial rites coincides with the disappearance of the difference between impure violence and purifying violence. When this difference has been effaced, purification is no longer possible and impure, contagious, reciprocal violence spreads throughout the community.” Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 49.

as such, he does so indirectly through literature and myth, as when he discusses Euripides' *The Bacchae*. In stated contrast to modern romantic associations between Dionysus and viniculture, Girard claims that "the god has no proper being outside the realm of violence." This realm encompasses prophecy as well, "because prophetic inspiration is part of the sacrificial crisis," suggesting that the future's approach is itself an act of destructive violence against the present.²⁸¹ The catastrophe that is the sacrificial crisis, the eruption of cycles of mimetic violence in lieu of ritualized and contained violence, provokes the god's epiphany. Describing this relationship, Girard tries to distinguish between the Sacred Noise of the natural world and the profane tumult of the crowd: "Under the name *Bromios*—the Noisemaker, the Earthshaker—Dionysus presides over disasters that have nothing to do with the thunderstorms and earthquake beloved of the nineteenth century scholars that in fact always involve a mob impelled by the sheer panic to the performance of extraordinary acts."²⁸² These extraordinary acts performed by *Dionysus Bromios*, his instigation of radical antisocial violence, is a literal description of Nietzsche's "primordial phenomenon of Dionysian art," an art expressed equally through social upheaval and the making of noise.²⁸³ It seems that Girard used the churning tumult of the *Bacchae*, audible by their excessive noise and inseparable from the violence that accompanies it, to conjure the riotous turmoil of the campus upheavals that surrounded him but of which he had nothing else to say.

²⁸¹ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 133.

²⁸² *Ibid.*

²⁸³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in Walter Kaufmann, ed., *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York: Modern Library, 1992 [1872]), 141.

Girard's ambivalence finds good company with Adorno and Schafer, all three giving a sense in their post-Sixties writings that the tumult of protest that had surrounded them provoked consternation and anxieties about the noisiness of disorder, its interruption of rational thought, and the role that Dionysian dissonance had in instigating and indexing social crisis. Each in their own way defends an aesthetic moralism that comports with their own idiosyncratic forms of conservatism and, in the case of the latter two, musical tastes. Only Attali seems hopeful that noise's prophetic violence can bring about a change he desires and intends to be a part of. Attali seems to embrace the Dionysian art of tumult, understanding that "there is only one direct way to make it intelligible and grasp it immediately: through the wonderful significance of *musical dissonance*"—through noise.²⁸⁴ Yet Attali has no intention of abandoning the future to the sacrificial crisis. His aim is a balance between destruction of the old world and the creation of the new, and thus in the end he embraces a *sacrificial noise* that is capable bringing about the transformation of history, "a staggering conception of history, a history that is open, unstable, in which labor no longer advances accumulation, in which the object is no longer a stockpiling of lack, in which music effects a reappropriation of time and space."²⁸⁵ The notion of simultaneously invoking and controlling tumult is a cybernetic fantasy, a belief that noise can be allowed to organically move along a circuit in a feedback loop, where

²⁸⁴ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 141.

²⁸⁵ Attali, *Noise*, 147.

“stability, in other words, differences, are perpetually called into question” without either resolution into static or running away, becoming out of control.²⁸⁶

Attali's *sacrificial noise* extends the theory of power embedded in Schafer's Sacred Noise. If Sacred Noise contains social disorder by determining noise's limit, deciding who can make noise and who cannot, it is always under threat from profane noise, the insurrectionary noise of the powerless who refuse to remain so. Music is a code for understanding what power must do: “primordially, the production of music has as its function the creation, legitimation, and maintenance of order. Its primary function is not to be sought in aesthetics, which is a modern invention, but in the effectiveness of its participation in social regulation.”²⁸⁷ Organized violence and organized noise, sacrifice and music, both attempt to police internally the forces of disruption which might otherwise bring about the abolition of the world power struggles to maintain. Only acts of sacrifice can properly abate this threat. As in the mythic time of Attali's *order of sacrifice*, steps must be taken to propitiate the forces which might unleash mimetic violence. *Sacrificial noise* intervenes, permitting a discharge of profanity through riot, pogrom, or protest, in order to regulate and stabilize social order. “Music-pleasure in the spectacle of murder, organizer of the simulacrum masked beneath festival and transgression - creates order.”²⁸⁸ This moment of release is two-sided: it is a simulacrum of violence that removes violence from society, sacralizes it,

²⁸⁶ Attali, *Noise*, 147.

²⁸⁷ Attali, *Noise*, 30.

²⁸⁸ Attali, *Noise*, 30.

and if power is successful, those forces are abated and order is restored, but it is also a moment of betweenness and bothness, an interstice where the disordered Crowd signals its potential to overcome its containment, to become a force of pure excess, of unbridled tumult.

4.2 The Noise of the Crowd

Attali's theory of noise is a theory of power. It is a theory that noise is a kind of violence both in its immediacy and as an indication of a further violence to come. The channelization of noise through music, both practically and symbolically, is a simulacrum of the channelization of violence, what political anthropologists have described as *sacrifice*. To sacrifice is to remove something from the mundane world and to make it the property of the sacred. Attali suggests that music is the sacralization of noise, just as sacrifice is the sacralization of violence, and that both are necessary to maintain social order. What happens when the property of the sacred is appropriated and returned to the mundane sphere? This act of profanation preserves an element of the sacred's power, imbuing this profaned noise or violence with an ordering effect. This order is not the order of power as it exists, but something new and otherwise. *The Crowd* is the agent of these profanations. Attali's insight regarding noise and violence returns us again to the word's original meanings. Though "bruit" has other more placid connotations, it none-the-less belongs to the same lexicon that combines metonymically noise and the unruly crowd that

produces. The violence of noise, the violence that is noise, is the violence of the crowd, of *tumult*. That tumult can potentially be contained, channelized into a form of cathartic discharge that releases the crowd's energies before they can accumulate to the point of completely overwhelming the existing order. If the sovereign's imposition of silence and submission of the powerless to Sacred Noise isn't able to prevent the crowd's profanity, then these passions must be channeled into a *sacrificial noise*. To prevent riotous insurrection and civil war, power must contain tumult, and where pure repression has failed, nothing has served this sacrificial purpose more effectively than protest.

I have made two claims about noise that have significant bearing on the scene of protest. First, I have argued that the derogation of noise is directly a consequence of a moral parsing between 'good' sounds and 'bad' sounds that finds its justification in the social position of the makers and auditors of the sounds in question. In other words, sounds made by those with status or power in a social relationship are 'good' while sounds made by those who lack status or power in a social relationship are 'bad,' or simply 'noise.' Secondly, I've suggested that what makes such allegedly bad sounds noise is the sense that those sounds have crossed a boundary or limit. These limits may be a pure construct, a politeness or deference imposed by social norms, but they can also have physical delineations. The formal divisions of space produced by architecture and property, and the physical separations of bodies, are all vulnerable to the migrations of sound. This boundary crossing is not only a concern because of

the infraction it performs, but also because it can produce a collective experience of that boundary's material facticity being fundamentally unsettled, perhaps illusory. Noise's crossings prefigure an otherwise possible world in which these limits melt into air. The utility and purpose of noisemaking in protest, so often a contest of both social and material barriers, should be self-evident.

As a precaution, I acknowledge up front that even if my claims imply that noise ought to be emancipatory, I am aware that there are no guarantees that the worlds noise makes possible are the ones we want. Noisemaking that could be mobilized for liberation can just as easily be used as a tool of repression and reaction. I consciously choose to emphasize moments when noise makes possible transformations that I'm desirous of, but I am none-the-less interested in the ambivalences contained within these noisemaking gestures. Nothing in *protest* or in *noise* as such is necessarily given towards the ethical or political aims to which I orient, and these words, 'noise' and 'protest,' name phenomena that are not a private property of any ideological position. Those who produce them must orient themselves towards a particular ethical end, and those who encounter them are forced to identify within them an ethical character that they either identify with or don't. For the political Left, nothing has made noise and protest's ambiguity more obvious than the Trump-era with its boisterous MAGA rallies, the deadly clamor of Charlottesville, and the insurrectionary riot at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. The Left may have an affective attachment to 20th century protest tactics associated with labor movements

and various campaigns for suffrage, peace, civil rights, and social justice but these are cultural practices to which it can make no exclusive claim. Methods of protest are, like noise, *ferae naturae*, ignoring property lines, circulating promiscuously through embodied and mediated social networks, finding their way across oceans and national borders, and just as easily crossing ideological borders as well. Thus, whatever I claim is true for the liberatory practices that I amplify below, profanity may just as surely be a resource available to forces that seek radically opposing ends.

When we think of protest our first thought may be of a gathering crowd, a mass of people, drawn together by shared passions, and there is perhaps a sense that noise is merely an inevitable epiphenomenon of any such gathering. Modes of protest scale up from the individual voice to the sonic tumult of protesting crowd in the tens of thousands, but protest is socially embedded and relational in character no matter the size. We know that acts of protest can be performed by an individual actor, one person ethically responsible for-themselves, a singular heroic voice rising out of the sonic flux. The mattering of such a gesture is that it belongs to a common of collectively held experience. Even the silent withdrawal, sabotage, and secret antagonisms that James C. Scott famously described as “weapons of the weak,” the personal if not wholly private act of refusal of a Bartleby who “prefers not to,” or the sometimes-invisible insurrection of what Saidiya Hartman calls “wayward life”

yearns for a shared existence of resistance and fugitivity.²⁸⁹ A proper definition of protest may include such private acts of refusal, yet even so I insist that the noisiness of protest necessarily is felt as a relation to others. As a politics proper, as acts towards which *social* relations are transformed, protest is a performance that must have an audience.

Without ignoring then the significance of individual acts of protest, tumult arises from protests that manifest in the form of large, often anonymous gatherings of crowds. These crowds may emerge by their own spontaneous initiative, but when they are organized, they are called in scholarly literature “social movements.” This implies that their convocation has a certain telos driving it, that they are a non-static process oriented towards a defined political goal. This need not be the case. Protest crowds, propelled by raw feeling and existential necessity can be inchoate, analogous to *noise* in their apparent lack of an intelligible demand or a coherent platform. This is perhaps why riotous or insurrectionary gatherings, tumultuous assemblies enacting symbolic or even destructive violence against society, are depoliticized by politicians and the press, and delegitimized as inherently criminal, as a “mob” whose actions are presumed to be irrational, animalistic, and lacking ethical consciousness. This irrational body is “*the crowd*” of sociological scholarship, a mad crowd driven by a

²⁸⁹ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Have: Yale University Press, 1990); Herman Melville, “Bartleby the Scrivner: A Story of Wall Street,” *Tales, Poems, and Other Writings*, edited by John Bryant (New York: Modern Library, 2002); Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019).

prerational drive it is “always unconscious, but this very unconsciousness is perhaps one of the secrets of their strength.”²⁹⁰ Protest is that same crowd ethically and politically conscious of itself.

Already, as we try to parse a difference between the intentionality of a protest and the mindless crowd, we are conceding to the ontological badness imposed by power on this mass of people. Elias Canetti’s classic typology would suggest, crowds form affective communities around any number of concerns including sport, religion, feasting, and fear.²⁹¹ Whatever the reason for its convocation, “the Crowd” has continually been figured as an imminent threat to social order, an agential unity with a proclivity for violence, riot, and insurrection. This figure haunts Canetti’s other categories of congregation, a specter of the latent potential to become *the Crowd*. History reverberates with the shouts and cries of those exceptional moments when sporting assemblies, musical concerts, and religious celebrations have exploded into riotous, even revolutionary excess. Unlike these other crowd formations, a protest possesses the self-conscious anticipation of the *event* of overcoming its own constraints, of catapulting into the unruly excess that in all these other instances is interpreted, perhaps wrongly, as an accident of contingency. Though this marks a

²⁹⁰ Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (New York: Viking Press, 1960 [1895]), 7. In Gustave Le Bon’s infamous late 19th century study on the psychology of Crowds he argued that in an age of urbanized modernity the “conscious activity of individuals” was invariably substituted for the “unconscious action of crowds.” Elsewhere in his study Le Bon is even more explicit about the social Darwinism that undergirds his raced and gendered analysis of crowd psychology.

²⁹¹ Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. by Carole Steward (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1962).

protest as different from other gatherings, its appositional relation to the spontaneous explosion of the Crowd hints at why any mass mobilization of bodies already bears within itself the potential to become a political force that threatens social order. Crowds by nature of their unruliness are always dangerous, and this is why the noise of the crowd – and by this, I mean both the noise that the crowd makes and the noise that the crowd *is* – heralds an incipient violence to come.

This latent violence and threat are why Crowds have been a continual concern for modern Western political thinkers. The popular masses formally became the political agent known as *the Crowd* during “the era of popular sovereignty, industrialization, and urbanization [which] saw the rise of a constellation of new forms of mass assembly and collective social action.”²⁹² This was what Gustave Le Bon called “the Era of the Crowd,” yet these were not new forms. Popular revolt, the strike, and the riot within urban centers could be traced back to the Ancient Mediterranean, yet during the Renaissance they comprised a new political subject that required both new means of social control and a reinvigorated political theory of rule and unrest. In Machiavelli’s *Discourses on Livy* that novel theory of the political mob is also a theory of noise. He makes repeated reference to the *tumulto* that upended the political orders of Rome, “tumult” being a polyseme for both social unrest and the noise of social unrest. Machiavelli’s estimation of these disorders is not entirely negative, and

²⁹² Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (New York: Viking Press, 1960 [1895]), 14; J.S. McClelland, *The Crowds and the Mob: From Plato to Canetti* (London, Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989); Jeffrey T. Schnapp and Matthew Tiews, ‘Introduction: A Book of Crowds’, in *Crowds* ed. Schnapp and Tiews (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), x–xi.

he admonishes those who criticize these manifestations saying that freedoms under the Republic, such as they were, are the direct result of struggles between different classes, something that critics of social disorder fail to grasp.²⁹³ Yet fear of the mob, of the unruly crowd, is merely an exaggeration of a more general ambivalence towards democratic power.

Even though the ancient Greeks are credited with giving birth to the idea of democracy, many of its celebrated philosophers were deeply skeptical of rule by the people.²⁹⁴ This fear of democracy gave rise among Greek and Roman philosophers and historians to arguments for political checks and balances to preserve republican forms of government from the dangers of popular rule. This theory of mixed constitutions was favored by Aristotle, Cicero, and Polybius whose histories of the Roman Republic influenced not only Machiavelli but Enlightenment thinkers in France and America. Polybius called the corrupted character of popular rule *ochlocracy*, a self-interested, self-destructive form of anarchy.²⁹⁵ According to Polybius' schema, *democracy* and *ochlocracy* are one of three paired state-forms which cycle in and out of conditions of just rule and disorder, a "rotation of polities"

²⁹³ Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, Book I.4

²⁹⁴ "The government of the multitude is weak in all respects and able to do nothing great, either good or bad, when compared with the other forms of government, because in this the powers of government are distributed in small shares among many men; therefore of all these governments when they are lawful, this is the worst, and when they are all lawless it is the best; and if they are all without restraint, life is most desirable in a democracy, but if they are orderly, that is the worst to live in." Plato, *The Statesman*, edited by Julia Annas, translated by Robin Waterfeld (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 303a-b.

²⁹⁵ Polybius, *Histories*, translated by Evelyn S. Shuckburgh (London, New York: Macmillan, 1889) Reprint Bloomington 1962. Written in the 2nd century, Polybius' forms of polity are an elaboration of a concept already discussed by Plato in *The Statesmen* (302c-303b) and Aristotle in *Politics* (1289a-b).

effected by a natural cycle of genesis and decadence, each previous form being the necessary origin of the one that follows. Thus, *Kingship* succumbs to *tyranny*, and consequently an *aristocracy* must arise to replace it, itself destined to become an *oligarchy*, by which necessity produces *democracy*, which “by its violence and contempt of law becomes sheer mob-rule,” thus requiring a singular leader to bring the polity out of its disorder.²⁹⁶ “For the mob, habituated to feed at the expense of others, and to have its hopes of a livelihood in the property of its neighbors, as soon as it has got a leader sufficiently ambitious and daring, being excluded by poverty from the sweets of civil honors, produces a reign of mere violence. Then come tumultuous assemblies, massacres, banishments, redivisions of land; until, after losing all trace of civilization, it has once more found a master and a despot.”²⁹⁷ In Polybius a “semantic history” of the Crowd is already taking shape, wherein how we speak about crowds interacts with the conceptual structure of society and shapes the possibilities of popular political practice.²⁹⁸ Crowds are spoken of as dangerous *a priori*, as ontologically bad. The crowd is badly constituted, made up of people who lack the epistemic potential to make decisions in their own best interest, much less in the interest of those they threaten to depose. Fear of popular rule makes palpable a hatred of democracy.²⁹⁹ It is a failure to imagine the radical mutualism and volunteerism of *anarchia*, instead adhering to a vision of *ochlocratia* with its

²⁹⁶ Polybius, *Histories*, 6.4.

²⁹⁷ Polybius, *Histories*, 6.9.

²⁹⁸ Christian Borch, *The Politics of Crowds: An Alternative History of Sociology* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

²⁹⁹ Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, translated by Steve Corcoran (New York and London: Verso, 2006).

manipulation of legal forms and political machinery in service of a debased kind of factional interest.

This distrust of democratic power and the levelling effects of popular rule was seized upon and appropriated along with other classic forms in the 17th and 18th century revolutions. Notwithstanding famous advocates for popular sovereignty like Montesquieu, Locke, Jefferson and others, a critical view of popular rule was widely shared among Enlightenment-era political theorists who saw themselves as partisans of *Reason, Virtue, and Wisdom*. In the wake of the French Revolution, Edmund Burke excoriated France's popular assembly as compositionally incapable of such values as were necessary to rule. "No name, no power, no function, no artificial institution whatsoever can turn the men who compose any system of authority into something other than what they have been made by God, nature, education, and their habits of life."³⁰⁰ To its detractors, democracy was always *ochlocracy*, having "no constitution, except that which may be formed and re-formed from hour to hour by the hasty legislation of the masses, following impulse or the voice of the popular leaders."³⁰¹ To such reactionary philosophers, the ruled-over are a distinct "subspecies" that, biologically ordained to be incapable of self-rule, a racialized division in the sense

³⁰⁰ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France, and on the Proceedings in Certain Societies in London Relative to that Event: In a Letter Intended to Have Been Sent to a Gentleman in Paris* (Ireland: J. Dodsley, 1791), 58-59.

³⁰¹ "OCHLOCRA'TIA," *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, William Smith, LLD, William Wayte, and G. E. Marindin, (London: John Murray, 1890). In this description we see something more like a proto-fascist populism, one that gives logical credence to the ancient's claim that out of this form must necessarily arise a prince or tyrant.

that Foucault spoke of it, as “a way of fragmenting the field of the biological that power controls [...], a way of establishing a biological type caesura within a population.”³⁰² Even after the triumph of liberal revolutions in Europe and the Americas, these logics turned the world against the revolution in Saint Domingue, militated against Black enfranchisement in the United States, and drove the white counter-revolution during reconstruction after the American Civil War.³⁰³ Thus the birth of Le Bon’s theory of crowd psychology as a form of madness is born out of events in the late 19th century—post-American Civil War reconstruction, the Paris Commune, striking trade unionists—that threatened to realize actual democratic rule.

Of course, not all popular political imaginations *are* democratic and the openings in the social structures forced open by the unruly crowd can allow in all sorts of monsters. Tumult has given birth to the “rude barbarian energy” of the fascist crowds at Nuremberg and Charlottesville, while the ruptures of Left revolution have unleashed terror, repression, and violence from Paris to Leningrad.³⁰⁴ This risk, that a rupture of order in pursuit of greater freedom may collapse into violent discord, is

³⁰² Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, translated by David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 255. Though he doesn’t say so explicitly, Foucault is extending the insight of Nietzsche’s genealogy of master and slave morality to say that racism’s primary purpose is to make into a biological fact what he calls “caesuras within the biological continuum,” an ontological badness produced through relations of power. (255)

³⁰³ W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1998); C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963); Ta-Nehisi Coates, *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy* (New York: One World, 2018).

³⁰⁴ J.S. McClelland, *The Crowd and the Mob: From Plato to Canetti* (London, Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 282. McClelland makes a strong argument that the revolutionary specter that had always presumed a left socialist mob in modern crowd theory was in fact realized by the “triumph” of National Socialism.

perhaps more persuasive a constraint on revolt than police or tanks, an argument justifying to *ourselves* why we should endure existing unfreedoms.³⁰⁵ Rebellion is a risk, or in the language of George Bataille, a game at play, a kind of gambling with existential stake. An emancipatory rebellion must transform this game by changing its rules, from a struggle of Hegelian mastery and servility to one in which the rebel steps outside of this closed circuit of power relations and distinguishes themselves by refusing its reproduction. To accomplish this, the rebel cannot simply dominate those who rule, they must (again, following Bataille) conduct themselves as a “master” would while refusing to perpetuate the rule of mastery as a social relation.³⁰⁶ Emancipation were it to become just another form of domination would be nothing more than the “reversal” of the social order that Canetti diagnosed in his study of crowds or that Julia Kristeva unearthed in the etymological “turn” within revolt.³⁰⁷ This turning over of power relations without abolishing domination itself is not the only danger in this game. Even more disastrous is the foreclosure of possibility, the tragedy of a rebellion that, unable to know in advance what world it is creating, insists that its choices are either submission to the world *as it is* or death.³⁰⁸

³⁰⁵ Ward Churchill, *Pacifism as Pathology: Reflections on the Role of Armed Struggle in North America* (Winnipeg: Arbiter Ring, 1998); Peter Gelderloos, *How Nonviolence Protects the State* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2007).

³⁰⁶ George Bataille, “Nonknowledge and Rebellion,” *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, ed. Stuart Kendall, translated by Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

³⁰⁷ Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. by Carole Steward (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1962), 58-59; Julia Kristeva, *Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt: The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis vol. I*, translated by Jeanine Herman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996/2000), 1-3.

³⁰⁸ “He must proceed up to the end of his rebellion, he cannot be a rebel in order to perfect submission.” Bataille, “Nonknowledge and Rebellion,” 131.

The turning over of existing systems of order is the event that Attali claims noise prophesizes, that tumult signifies, that strikes terror in the heart of those who want to preserve the order that is. The tradition that hates democracy doesn't reject a democracy that *is* but rather fears the unknown *democracy to come*. While the powerful fear loss of their position of dominance, the powerless fear the destabilization of a known world.³⁰⁹ Rebellion is the act of overcoming this fear. Theologian J. Leavitt Pearl describes rebellion as a war between 'partisans of the whole' and 'partisans of rupture': "to the partisan of the rupture, this destabilization is precisely the point. What the rupture offers is risk, precisely because it offers an opening toward [...] the unforeseeable."³¹⁰ He goes on to note that partisans of the whole are haunted by "specters" of revolt, of the levelling of society by "a crowd, if not masses, the horde, or society, or else some population of ghosts with or without a people, some community with or without a leader."³¹¹ Partisans of the whole fear that any popular manifestation without leadership or organization might succumb to Le Bon's "Mental Unity of the Crowd," a mind with none of the rationality or natural beneficence of the ontologically good and noble. Rioting has long been synonymous with the madness of crowds, a tumult brought about by people's innate inability to self-govern. Le Bon warned that anytime people come together *en masse* those rational individuals who consented to be governed would be pulled into a primitive

³⁰⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2005).

³¹⁰ J. Leavitt Pearl, "He Saw the Heavens Torn Open" *Political Theology Network* (online), <https://politicaltheology.com/he-saw-the-heavens-torn-apart/>.

³¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *The Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*, translated by Peggy Kamuf, edited and introduction by Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenburg (New York, London: Routledge, 1994), 3.

Hobbesian state by group psychosis.³¹² This theory of psychological infection continues to justify a pathologizing of insurrection, a sense that *the people* are not capable of knowing what they want or how society should be ordered and that the degeneracy of the riot with its property destruction, popular violence, and disrespect for the police simply prove as much.³¹³

The riot is tumult at the peak of civil disorder, at its noisiest, what law and policing strive to quiet and abate. Opposite the riot is not submission but the well-ordered protest contained within the boundaries of the sanctioned and the acceptable. “Civil disobedience” is, as Bernard Harcourt has pointed out, a law-affirming act which “aims not to displace the lawmaking institutions or the structure of legal governance” but intentionally breaks specific laws to highlight their injustice. Harcourt contrasts this with “political disobedience” which is not primarily concerned with persuading existing structures of law and governance but rather “resists the very way we are governed.”³¹⁴ If riot is pure unmediated noise, peaceful protest is a channelization of that noise. Yet these channels are unstable, and however well organized a protest might be, however much its intention to remain “peaceful” and within the bounds of legal and social norms, disobedience can spontaneously cross those bounds from *civil* to *political*. Elias Canetti talks about the well-ordered protesting crowd as “stagnate,” willing to wait for its permitted moment to release its pent-up energies. By

³¹² Clark McPhail, *The Myth of the Madding Crowd* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1991).

³¹³ Benjamin S. Case, *Street Rebellion: Resistance Beyond Violence and Nonviolence* (Chico: AK Press, 2022).

³¹⁴ Bernard Harcourt, “Political Disobedience”, *Occupy: Three Inquiries in Disobedience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 46-47.

comparison the illicit crowd quickens to its moment of discharge: “[...] the spontaneous and never quite predictable outcry of a crowd is unmistakable, and its effect enormous. It can express emotions of any kind; *which* emotions often matter less than their strength and variety and the freedom of their sequence... they can also, however, be so violent and concentrated that they immediately tear the crowd apart.”³¹⁵ Anyone who has participated in protest will recognize the sensation when a permitted protest has become unsanctioned, the tension that builds as some boundary, explicit or not, is crossed, and the moment of its pouring over into the illicit. The intensity of tumult itself is so powerful that it can unleash an act of self-immolating violence. To Canetti, the discharge of the crowd, its outcry, is the central act that constitutes the crowd even as its release exhausts the crowd of its vigor. This discharge is the Girardian sacrifice that channelizes violence and restores social rupture to a state of social order.

Protests, particularly when they are in some respect disordered or poorly contained, constitute themselves as a kind of noise full of the potential to incorporate property destruction, physical violence, and even greater transgressions. For both those who are part of the crowd and those who encounter it from a perceived outside, the affective force of this proximity to societal and material boundaries arouses an anticipation of their being crossed, of laws and norms being cast aside, and the unknown other of existing social order coming into being. The anachronic noise of

³¹⁵ Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. by Carole Steward (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1962), 35.

the crowd *anticipates* the sound of this crossing, recalls a history of this crossing, and *is* this crossing all at once. This is why there is a homonymous relationship between the name of the crowd, what the crowd does, and the sound it makes while doing it. The crowd *is* its noise. Scholars sympathetic to the crowd grasp for proof of the crowd's "mental unity" as a conscious collective subject. There is a desire to distill protest into a singular message, a legible demand, a statement from which order can be rescued from the impossible heterogeneity of the assembly.³¹⁶ Perhaps this is the reason such primacy has been placed on slogans, speeches, and "protest songs" as aural artifacts and movement anthems.³¹⁷

The stories we tell about protest are overwhelmingly shaped by their sonic expressions, and yet in isolating the speeches, chants, music, anthems, musical instruments and specific noisemaking devices that become symbols of these events, we are masking the inchoate sonic world that these sounds punctuate. Out of the whole sonic flux that constitutes the protest from start to finish, most of its sounding

³¹⁶ This is the reason partisans of rupture took up the Situationist International inspired slogan "Demand Nothing; Occupy Everything" and for the (possibly) ironic invitation from Adbusters Magazine to occupy Wall Street in the Fall of 2011 in order to formulate "our one demand."

³¹⁷ Shana L. Redmond, *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora* (New York: New York University, 2014); Work covering the history of protest music and political music making includes Courtney Brown, *Politics in Music: Music And Political Transformation From Beethoven To Hip-Hop* (Atlanta, GA: Farsight Press, 2008); Dorian Lynskey, *33 Revolutions Per Minute: A History Of Protest From Songs, From Billie Holiday To Green Day* (New York: Ecco, 2011); Mark Mattern, *Acting In Concert: Music, Community, And Political Action* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Eric Porter, *What is This Thing Called Jazz?: African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); William G. Roy, *Reds, Whites, And Blues: Social Movements, Folk Music, And Race In The United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); James Sullivan, *Which Side Are You On?: 20th Century American History In 100 Protest Songs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), Dick Weissman, *Talkin' 'Bout A Revolution: Music And Social Change In America* (New York, NY: Backbeat Books, 2010).

is relegated to the background, a bed upon which only a few sonic events of consequence can be perceived. Doing so serves memory and the narratives of history even as it obscures the discordance that might be at the very heart of the disruption to social relations. To privilege these signals is to evade the danger of the noise of protest. To understand that danger, and its relationship to power, we must reclaim space for the tumult that is the crowd, the mob, the rabble, the riot, the monstrous insensibility of restrictive order turned over to the opening up of the unknown. For partisans of the rupture, the *spontaneous* appearance of the collective will to destroy an existing order cannot be reduced to a mindless, purposeless riot. It is an immediate act of changing the world. Given this, we are confronted with the fact that power has no desire to see its status changed and will pursue whatever tools are required to maintain that status quo. This is why tumult is channeled into songs, slogans, and mementos, to defend against the noise of the past as a means of defending against the tumult of the future.

4.3 The Noise of the Police

Any theory of noise's relationship to power must account for how noise is exercised both against and in defense of power. Even as I've tethered noisemaking to revolutionary and emancipatory potential, it is important to acknowledge here some ways in which noise is deployed as a technology of domination. In the following pages I will show how a penology of noise is made audible in the practices of noise

control and the use of sonic weapons. This penology does not describe exceptional forms of policing but rather ordinary expressions of the police power as the singular moral and legal authority that can commit acts of violence. Here we find an oscillation between the dynamics of power characterized by Schafer's Sacred Noise and the profane noise of rebellion. Where power tries to maintain its monopoly on noise, it does so as a mark of its sovereign claim to political power. Where it fails to maintain that monopoly in absolute terms it compensates with an Attalian *sacrificial noise*, a discharge of profanity meant to channel the tumult that threatens to overthrow its authority. Its means by which it establishes a boundary and defends it is the police. If Attali's equation of noise and violence theorized above can be transferred to a study of police power, then it can be said that the police, as a critical point of contact between the State and those who it claims to govern, are the State's purest demonstration of its monopoly on violence, but also its monopoly on noise. As I showed in the previous chapter, this monopoly is a mark of sovereignty, a political power to make noise and to make silent.

Modern policing in the United States has a genealogy stretching to its foundation and development as a nation, one tied to the surveillance of urban populations, the regulation of property in the form of Black bodies, the maintenance of compulsory regimes of labor, and to the lethal enforcement of emergent borderscapes along its

interstitial territories.³¹⁸ Yet, evidence of the police as a social form predates this history by millennia.³¹⁹ Rather than a distinct institution with a narrow history and form, policing is as a range of practices and formal techniques. Policing's primary role is the constraining and containing of a population's activities, determined in some way by a boundary established by laws, custom, economy, or social relations. Circular though it may be, the precise boundary may only be delimited by the practical enforcement of those boundaries by a police power. Diverse persons and institutions take part in policing, but the modern militarized police forces that manage populations internal to the State are today the most widespread and visible enforcer of the police power.³²⁰ This form of police derives its authority from the Law as an expression of the state's sovereignty, but historically the police power is not necessarily produced by, or even *in service of*, modern legal regimes.³²¹ In societies without any tradition derived from Law, in the sense inherited by Roman *juris*, we still find groups designated with the exclusive authority to use coercive violence to limit behaviors and punish violations of authority.³²² We can also find forms of policing in extralegal groups who claim a penal power alongside, or in spite of,

³¹⁸ Histories of the police include Alex Vitale, *The End of Policing* (New York: Verso, 2021); Bryan Wagner, *Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police Power after Slavery* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2009); Kelly Lytle Hernandez, *Migra! A History of U.S. Border Patrol* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2010); Laura E. Gómez, *Manifest Destinies: The Making of the Mexican American Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

³¹⁹ Stephen David Engel, "The Deep History of Police" *ROAR* [website] (August 7, 2020).

³²⁰ Tia Trafford, *Everything is Police* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2024).

³²¹ Mark Neocleous, *A Critical Theory of Police Power: The Fabrication of Social Order* [second edition] (New York: Verso, 2021 [2000]).

³²² Indigenous cultures historically have had their own designated groups empowered to preserve social order in their communities, even while enduring the colonial imposition of a European/American model of police as an institution. We can find examples of *nonpenal* modes of policing in anthropological records as well: see Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*.

dominant legal regimes, from the violent social-regulation of criminal enterprises to the terrorism of possies, lynch mobs, and paramilitary groups. Yet at the intersection of power and powerlessness that is the focus of this study, the boundary's limits are overwhelmingly shaped by licit forms of penal action.

The history of policing in the United States has multiple points of origin, nearly all of them involving the normalization of extrajudicial organizations intent on maintaining a racially defined status quo on behalf of the settler state. In the Southern states groups of mostly white men formed "slave patrols" to capture alleged fugitives, a formation that became police forces empowered by the State to enforce racial codes regulating movement, employment, and sociality following Emancipation.³²³ In the northern cities, beginning with Boston's night watch, town officials kept public order by walking the streets and surveilling nocturnal activity, "on the lookout for fires, bears, thieves, Indigenous people and runaway slaves."³²⁴ American policing also has roots in its imperial project of westward expansion, with organizations like the Mounted Guards, Texas Rangers, and the early-American Sheriff imported from England. These groups were later formalized into entities like Border Patrol, I.C.E., and County Sheriffs as tools for controlling migrant labor, establishing racialized order in newly appropriated Mexican territories, and suppressing Indigenous

³²³ Sally E. Hadden, *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

³²⁴ Engel, "The Deep History of Police"; See Nicole Breault, "The Night Watch of Boston: Law and Governance in Eighteenth-Century British America," (PhD dissertation, University of Connecticut, 2022).

resistance to the violent expropriation of sovereign Native land.³²⁵ Though these iterations of institutional policing can seem distinctly American, a remarkably similar “range of policies, projects and practices” also appear around this same time in England and on the European continent, as well as in their respective colonies.³²⁶

There are ancient antecedents for modern policing that likewise place an emphasis on bordering practices. One such example includes the *tresviri capitales* (founded 291 BCE) who organized night patrols in search of fires but who also had authority to arrest and punish runaway slaves.³²⁷ In fact there are many formal and political similarities between slave-catchers in the U.S. and Sparta.³²⁸ As much as in the U.S., borders in ancient Rome become an essential mechanism for worlding the spatial domain of police power. Policing was limited by the *pomerium*, the sacred boundary that distinguished the city as a place free from militarized activity; being outside the city exposed one to enslavability and conscription into war.³²⁹ This distinction between organized state violence within and without its borders is the generic

³²⁵ “Border Patrol History,” U.S. Customs and Border Protection, <https://www.cbp.gov/border-security/along-us-borders/history>; Hernandez, *Migra!*; Benjamin Madley, *An American Genocide: The United States and the Californian Indian Catastrophe, 1846-1873* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); Drew Magary, “The Case Against Sheriffs,” *GQ Magazine*, February 16, 2018. <https://www.gq.com/story/history-of-sheriffs>.

³²⁶ Neocleous, *A Critical Theory of Police Power*, 67; Alan Williams, *The Police in Paris, 1718-1789* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979); Marieke Bloembergen, Emmanuel Blanchard, and Amandine Lauro, eds., *Policing in Colonial Empires: Cases, Connections, Boundaries (ca. 1850–1970)* (Brussels: P.I.E. - Peter Lang, 2017).

³²⁷ On the *tresviri capitales*, see Wilfried Nippel, *Public Order in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 22-26.

³²⁸ Grégoire Chamayou, *Manhunts: A Philosophical History*, translated by Steven Rendell (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

³²⁹ Nippel, *Public Order In Ancient Rome*, 4; Chamayou, *Manhunts*, 16.

difference between the category of *police* and *military* and determines who is vulnerable to violence. Law must be spatialized in order to be enforced, and thus boundaries, borders, and explicitly delineated territory become essential to ordering any ambiguities between within and without.³³⁰ Yet, far from creating an absolute separation between citizen and non-citizen, city and wilderness, police and military, the modern *pomerium* multiplies the ambiguity and insecurity of these promised distinctions.

The distinction between a military and a police force is only marginally meaningful in the 21st century, and it is justifiably disturbing for many Americans to experience the tools and tactics of counterinsurgency directed at their friends and neighbors. These tools which have been deployed in order to “preserve the peace” within U.S. cities, and increasingly within suburbs such as Ferguson, were first developed in service of U.S. imperial activities abroad and then imported through training and the dissemination of military surplus into cities and towns across the U.S.³³¹ It should come as no surprise then that sonic weaponry developed in international warfare would accompany the State’s regifting of armored tanks, chemical weapons, drones,

³³⁰ Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, or the Multiplication of Labor* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Stuart Schrader, *Badges Without Borders: How Global Counterinsurgency Transformed American Policing* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019). See also Nick Estes, *Out History Is the Future: Standing Rock Versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (New York: Verso, 2019); Mike Gouldhawke, “A Condensed History of Canada’s Colonial Cops,” *The New Inquiry* (March 10, 2020); Micol Seigel, *Violence Work: State Power and the Limits of Police* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).
³³¹ Schrader, *Badges Without Borders*; David Correia and Tyler Wall, “Militarization,” *POLICE: A Field Guide* (New York: Verso, 2015).

high-powered assault weapons, and advanced surveillance technology to police departments. Traditional war has always used sound for psychological effect, striving to produce affective terror through ferocious vocalizations, drumming, and instrumental accompaniments such as bagpipe and bugle. Many of these sonic technologies would become instruments of popular music, a transfer that has only accelerated.³³² Over the last century these technologies of war, including radio, PA systems, and so-called ‘sonic cannons,’ have grown in range, amplitude, and intensity, and they have migrated to everyday policing as basic features of crowd control.

Most sonic weaponry does not directly enact physical harm, but the Long-Range Acoustic Device (LRAD), whose alleged purpose is to transmit commands across distant and sonically dense spaces, has also been used for pain compliance.³³³ The LRAD was developed in the context of the “War on Terror,” where it was used defensively onboard ships initially, but quickly found its way into the counterinsurgency policing of the U.S. occupation in Iraq.³³⁴ The LRAD first appeared in the U.S. as a means of dispersing protestors during a 2009 meeting of the G20 in Pittsburg, and video evidence makes clear that the effect of the cannon is both

³³² Friedrich Kittler, “Rock Music: A Misuse of Military Equipment” in *The Truth of the Technological World*, translated by Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 152-164.

³³³ Daphne Carr, “Understanding the LRAD ‘Sound Cannon’ and How to Protect Yourself From it,” Pitchfork, June 9, 2020; William Cheng, “Sound Cannons Versus Black Lives,” Huffington Post December 6, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/sound-cannons-versus-black-lives_b_11653218;

³³⁴ James E.K. Parker, “Toward an Acoustic Jurisprudence: Law and the Long-Range Acoustic Device,” *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 14, no. 2 (2018): 202-218.

physiological and psychologically disorienting.³³⁵ The LRAD can produce a continuous sound at a maximum volume of 162db, well over levels considered harmful (140db) and sufficient to burst human eardrums, justifying its commonsense description as a “weapon” even as *acoustic jurisprudence* has shown a general disinterest in categorizing it as such.³³⁶ When conveying dispersal orders, one feels the acousmatic voice of police power launched into one’s body in defiance of any spatial logic. As with any noise it disrupts and disorients, but in doing so it cleaves the individual’s attention from the entrainment of the collective and isolates the auditor in their experience of inexplicable vulnerability. Sonic warfare is in this way both material and affective. The terror of imminent injury or death is delivered by gunfire, bombs, or engine roar suggest their use is as concerned with the production of “dread” through belliphonic transmission as it is the actual death of its given target.³³⁷ Likewise, the turn of the police siren, the scattering of tear gas and flash-bang grenades, the whorl of helicopter blades overhead, the announcement to disperse and the reading of the riot act are ultimately “Shock and Awe” attempts to “seize control of the environment and paralyze or so overload the adversary’s perceptions and understanding of events that the enemy would be incapable of resistance at the

³³⁵ Long Range Acoustic Device (LRAD) G20 Pittsburgh (26 September 2009). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QSMY3_dmrM. Having been subjected to the use of an LRAD as a tool of crowd control I can attest that it produces a confusion as to the where and how of the sound’s transmission. It feels both incredibly close to the body and far from the speaker, creating an acousmatic gap that, borrowing from Schafer’s parallel term, I would call *schizophonic*.

³³⁶ Parker, “Toward an Acoustic Jurisprudence.”

³³⁷ J. Martin Daughtry, *Listening to War: Sound, Music, Trauma and Survival in Wartime Iraq* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

tactical and strategic levels.”³³⁸ Noise policing relies on the police’s noise to dominate the soundscape of protest.

For the partisans of order there can be no more volatile circumstance than the appearance of the Crowd. While not all crowds are equivalent, all crowds hold the potential to become uncontrollable, a riot, to transform into a locus of revolt. The management of this tumult, of the riot as an unformed potential of revolt, requires the police to preempt, modulate, and ultimately disperse the crowd. With this in mind, the production of a crowd itself can be its own form of crowd control. This is an example of the sacrificial order imposed upon the crowd to contain or channel its tumultuous energies. This crowd can be ‘allowed’ to form as an unofficially sanctioned riot, but more often it is made through spectacular forms of entertainment, festivals, tournaments, and other mega-events that have become economic engines of “late” capitalism. Yet periodically the managers of the “bread and circus” lose their grip and the Crowd emerges in its fully violent and destructive capacity. Suddenly the appearance of crowd control changes from one of paternal protection to one of repressive violence. In this transition, from the mediated sacrifice of entertainment to the sacrificial crisis, the police’s performance of control and their displays of violence demonstrates a continuity, one that connects the suppression of the entertainment riot to the containment of protest and the repression of revolt. The latent violence inherent

³³⁸ Harlan K. Ullman and James P. Wade, *Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 1996).

in all crowds is why policing, from the incitement to “move along” before a crowd even forms to the order to disperse when the Riot Act is read, makes legible an *antepolitics* in each and every contact that the governed have with power. A crowd doesn’t need to express a self-conscious politics to be a political threat to power. This is why, in effect, all policing is crowd control.

Domination of the audio-world of protest, the limiting of what can and cannot be sounded, is a technique for suppressing the latent possibility of riot within protest. Yet any distinction between protest and riot begins with the preliminary orientation between the crowd and power. The protest knows that it is addressing power, it constitutes itself as a group for this purpose, and whatever ideology undergirds it, or outcomes are presupposed by it, the protesting crowd is performing with that audience in mind. Protest is an aesthetic form of the crowd, one that deploys a repertoire of performative gestures that makes it legible. This performativity is both symbolic and instrumental. The protest is expressive, communicative, and it attends to a multivalent audience: those who share in their contentious political claim, those against whom the claim is made, imagined allies in the struggle, and entities understood to be monitoring (and potentially intervening) in these politics.³³⁹

Sociologists Charles Tilly and Leslie J. Wood describe the performance of protest as self-representations that display *worthiness*, *unity*, *numbers*, and *commitment*.³⁴⁰ The

³³⁹ Charles Tilly and Leslie J. Wood, *Social Movements 1768-2008 [second edition]* (Boulder, London: Paradigm Publishers, 2009), 3. Tilly and Wood believe that when speaking of social movement protest as a *contentious politics*, government is likely to play at least one of those audience roles.

³⁴⁰ Tilly and Wood, *Social Movements 1768-2008*, 4.

protest that turns to riot does not necessarily abandon these characteristics completely. In fact, with its expressions of unity, large numbers of participants, and an obvious commitment to action displayed by the shattering of rules, laws, and norms, there is a strong argument following Tilly and Wood's schema in favor of interpreting riot as a form of protest. What riot most clearly lacks is a commitment to performing "worthiness," even if sympathetic commentators often attempt to retroactively attribute to it this quality, as when Martin Luther King Jr. famously described riot as "a language of the unheard."³⁴¹ If King is correct, we might ask what causes participant's voices to be "unheard," whether their "language" is *unhearable*, inaudible because they have been silenced, or because their voice is already unintelligible noise, and the greater noise of riot is needed to convey something essential about their demands.

Naomi Waltham-Smith critiques such politically deterministic ways of hearing as being an operation of power itself. She claims what liberal commentators perceive as a failed capacity is actually an active practice of listening, a kind of biopolitical decisionism that she traces back (through the writing of Jacques Rancière) to Aristotle's definitional distinctions between human and animal.³⁴² In his *Politics*,

³⁴¹ To be clear, King was not advocating for riot, merely explaining it as the inevitable consequence of America's postponement of historical justice. Martin Luther King Jr., "The Other America," speech given at Stanford University, April 14, 1967. <https://www.crmvet.org/docs/otheram.htm>. Some more contemporary defenses of rioting as acts of civic resistance include, Case, *Street Rebellion*; Vicky Osterweil, *In Defense of Looting: A Riotous History of Uncivil Action* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2020); Delio Vasquez, "The Poor Person's Defense of Riots," Counterpunch, December 26, 2014.

³⁴² Naomi Waltham-Smith, *Shattering Biopolitics: Militant Listening and the Sound of Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021); Jacques Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*,

Aristotle claims that animals possess a “mere voice” only capable of making noises to indicate pleasure or pain, while the capacity for “speech” as a means to communicate concepts, such as “the advantageous and the harmful, and therefore also the right and the wrong,” is unique to humanity. Though Aristotle means this to be understood as an exercise of *logos*, such moral judgements are clearly constitutive of a political economy, in service of deciding what “makes a household and a city-state.”³⁴³ For Waltham-Smith, as with Rancière, this distinction between “speech” and “mere voice” (mere noise, *bruit*) is critical to the practice of police power over these domains, over the household and the city-state, and for the exercise of *biopower*: “The decision on who and what is (in)audible is thus simultaneously a decision on life – on the distinction between human life (with rational speech) and animal life (which emits only a noisy cry) and by analogy, between the law-abiding, rational citizen, on the one hand, and the refugee, the Palestinian, and the criminal, whose only crime, perhaps, is to be poor or non-white, on the other – in the ancient Greek context, between the inside and the outside of the polis.”³⁴⁴ Listening thus is a method to distinguish the difference between ‘human’ and ‘animal,’ a reductive analog for the differential inclusion and exclusion that defines the State.

translated by Julie Roe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), and *The Philosopher and His Poor*, translated by John Drury, Corrine Oster, and Andrew Parker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

³⁴³ Aristotle, *Politics*, translated by H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library 264 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932), 1.1.10-11; Christian Kietzmann, “Aristotle on the Definition of What It Is to Be Human” in *Aristotle's Anthropology*, edited by Geert Keil and Nora Kreft, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 25–43.

³⁴⁴ “The politics of listening – a distribution that proceeds through a process of cutting and re-cutting (*découper*) – thus gets to decide whose life enjoys a protected status and whose is exposed to the full violence of the wounds and blows of state violence.” Waltham-Smith, *Shattering Biopolitics*, 12.

Waltham-Smith is also saying that listening does biopolitical work by partitioning and, in the language of Rancière, constituting the distribution of the sensible.³⁴⁵ This differentiated status organizes the effects of biopower, determining who is made to/allowed to live and who is allowed to/made to die.³⁴⁶ Listening in this way “shatters” social relations, enacting “the self-destructive tendency that is secretly at work in power from the start” and, as Waltham-Smith tells us, committing a violence that “tears lives asunder, wrecks livelihoods, frays nerves, and dashes spirits.”³⁴⁷ If sounding is typically positioned as active in opposition to listening’s passive receptivity, Waltham-Smith says otherwise, that listening actively divides the world. Therefore, whether a form of protest is listened to, and how that is made demonstrable, is not only a promise of satisfying the demands of a political constituency, but also the active inclusion of that constituency within the social. To find a group unlistenable is to derogate their voices as mere noise and, as such, exclude them from social relations. The dignity afforded one group and not the other by power’s performance of listening to one and finding the other unheard is not entirely determined by the conduct of the group. The spaces set aside for permitted speech afford the illusion of social inclusion, of the possibility of being heard, in order to exhaust the tumult that might otherwise arise.

³⁴⁵ Jacques Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, translated by Julie Roe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); *The Philosopher and his Poor*, translated by John Drury, Corrine Oster, and Andrew Parker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

³⁴⁶ Waltham-Smith, *Shattering Biopolitics*, 13.

³⁴⁷ Waltham-Smith, *Shattering Biopolitics*, 21-22.

After the upheavals of the 1960s, the Crowd was reimagined, no longer mindless but, rather, an essential form of civic participation. A normative form of protest was codified, one that was tolerable to power, while all other forms of protest and political crowd formations were marked as illicit and bad. The desire to be “heard,” to convey worthiness and gain the respect of power, compels many organized protests to acquiesce to being policed, or to police themselves. This requires a faith in the effective force of truth telling and in a rational commitment to the liberal ideals of justice and rights on the part of governors, or faith in a supreme sovereign authority that can compel government to act in accordance with both law and morality. One needn’t try hard to discover evidence that power is fully capable of ignoring appeals that are rational, righteous, or both. Power performs the act of listening to the extent that it satisfies the crowd’s need for catharsis, an act of pseudo-deference to popular voice that, following the logic of sacrifice, pantomimes the ritual murder of the divine king.³⁴⁸ Yet veterans of protest will just as often have experienced its opposite: the performance of listening as an act of total containment. Perhaps nothing epitomizes this more clearly than the “Free Speech Zone,” fenced in sites designated as permitted spaces of protest often inappropriately small and comically distant from the entity being addressed.³⁴⁹ These specifics of *time, place and manner* are predetermined by

³⁴⁸ James George Frazier, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*.

³⁴⁹ These zones began to appear in the late 1980’s, generally surrounding presidential nomination conferences and economic ministerial meetings by groups such as the WTO, FTAA and IMF. They became especially common during the George W. Bush administration. See James Bovard, “‘Free-Speech Zone’ – The administration quarantines dissent,” *The American Conservative*, December 15, 2003.

organizers in collaboration with the very institutions being protested. Such “zones” are hardly lacking density or intensity of sound, even tumult, but every effort is made to ensure that its noise never threatens to exceed what can be tolerated.

Protest policing is almost always driven by power’s desire to maintain a status quo, if not specific to that which is being contested, then at least the balance of force and the social hierarchies that guarantee the status of those attempting to enforce it. Thus, the violence of the police, and the process by which this in effect criminalizes protest, is central to how we understand the legitimacy of protest. Penological theories, particularly since Michel Foucault’s work in *Discipline & Punish*, have tried to account for the violence of the policing and carceral apparatus that consumes certain classes of lawbreakers. Foucault’s history suggested a transformation from sovereign rule over life and death into a system of managing populations through disciplinary institutions ranging from families to schools to the prison.³⁵⁰ Decades later, Gilles Deleuze pointed out that traditional spaces of enclosure through which the individual passed had been radically reconfigured with the advent of neoliberalism, and that the use of violence (virtual or actual) no longer served to conform or reform but rather modulated itself according to the needs of productivity.³⁵¹ A “new penology” has emerged on its heels that treats policing as an extension of the bureaucratic mechanisms inherent to neoliberal governance, one that attempts to manage risk in

³⁵⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

³⁵¹ Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (Winter 1992): 3-7.

aggregate instead of preventing individual crimes.³⁵² With the end of the 20th century, the policing of protest has become oriented towards the “strategic incapacitation of protesters” which is part of a broader risk management determination to incapacitate the unruly.”³⁵³ Police confront protestors not as individuals who have broken a law but as a collective risk.

At its basest level, policing serves to enforce social order through the threat or use of violence. It is unsurprising then that the social order it attempts to preserve is one that rests upon historical violences, economic inequality, hierarchy, and (re)enforced cultural and spiritual values. As some sociologists have argued more recently, yes, social disorder is a real crisis, but it is a crisis that liberal capitalism has no answer for other than policing and carceration.³⁵⁴ There is ample evidence of social orders capable of operating by consent, promoting egalitarianism, and cultivating heterodoxy.³⁵⁵ As the classic argument for political anarchism often asserted, “anarchy is the mother of order,” which is to say that the enemy of libertarian

³⁵² Malcom N. Feely and Jonathan Simon, “The New Penology: Notes on the Emerging Strategy of Corrections and its Implications,” *Criminology* 30, no. 4 (November 1992): 449-474.

³⁵³ Paul A. Passavant, *Policing Protest: The Post-Democratic State and the Figure of Black Insurrection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 64.

³⁵⁴ Matias Dewey, Cornelia Woll, and Lucas Ronconi, “The Political Economy of Law Enforcement,” *MaxPo Discussion Paper* 20, no. 1 (2021): 1-28; David Garland, “Penal Controls and Social Controls: Toward a Theory of American Penal Exceptionalism,” *Punishment & Society* 22(3) (2021): 321-352.

³⁵⁵ This is the argument of anarchist anthropologists including Pierre Clastres, David Graeber, James C. Scott, among others. See Clastres, *Society Against the State* (New York: Zone Books, 1987); Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2004); Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*; James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). These social orders have also formed within the context of the modern state: Linebaugh and Ridker, *The Many Headed Hydra*; James Koehnline and Ron Sakolsky, eds., *Gone to Croatan: Origins of North American Dropout Culture* (New York: Autonomedia, 1993); Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

socialism was not *order* but, rather, the social chaos brought about by the arbitrary exercise of authority through violent domination and exploitation.³⁵⁶ Rather than arguing for the existence of an *eutopia* in which social order is maintained without effort or friction, this principle is an insistence that we take precautions not to allow the preservation of social order become an end that justifies all means. More than this, our definitions of exactly what relationships constitute order are in need of critique before we resort to violence to conform social norms to them. Therefore, whatever form resistance takes to the violent and repressive apparatus of the state seeking its self-preservation, we can neither assume that the new order it brings about is the one we want, nor that this new social order won't itself require its abolition.

4.4 A Phenomenology of Noise

The violence that, according to Attali, noise *is*, is a material and immediate physical violence, but it is also a metaphysical violence. The churning tumult that power wishes to repress, or at least contain, is a real and immediate threat of violence that includes the noise of material acts of vandalism and destruction. That soundscape of unrest also includes the sounds of the police and the sonic weaponry used to enforce crowd control. Tumult is the sound of social dissolution in time and space. Yet it also lets into our sensibilities something beyond the physical. The violent noise of tumult

³⁵⁶ “Not the daughter, but the mother of order.” The phrase, popularized by the masthead of the anarchist journal *Liberty* (Benjamin Tucker, editor, 1881-1908), is derived from Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's *The Solution of the Social Problem* (1849). See Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *Property is Theft!: A Pierre-Joseph Proudhon Reader*, edited by Iain McKay (Chico: AK Press, 2011).

is a rupture in time, the arco of a chronotone that sounds its emergence through the temporal strata. It is a radical interruption in the telos of history, an opening up of possibility that contains a potential world unknown in the present. This is the prophetic phenomena that Attali attributed to noise, its ability to signal in advance the form and shape of the order to come. Power inevitably resists these changes and transformations, wishing to conserve in place the existing order of things, but will try to modulate its response to channel the energies being unleashed by tumult to reform social relations in such a way as to maintain its fundamental balance. To understand Attali's claim that noise is violence it is not enough to consider the moments when tumult produces the belliphonic echoes of combat. The metaphysical violence of tumult, its promise to transform the givenness of the world as it is, to abolish that world, is just as central.

The repertoire of tumult can certainly include the belliphonic, the sonic waves of excited molecules released by munitions, shattering windows, shaking bodies, and all the diverse sounds effected by civil war. Sound enters our bodies as vibration, violating the boundaries of our skin and refusing our distinction between self and world. Our sense of relation to the world is shattered and our minds are filled with dread. The soundmarks of urban unrest and its policing, of civil war, are an onomatopoetic cacophony; to try and describe them is to succumb to the non-sensibility of DADA. *Crack, clack, bam, pow, whomp, whrrrr, snap, whap, tck*. The failure to match textual or linguistic signs to the embodied sensorium of violence is

the fault of trying to disentangle the phenomenology of violence and the phenomenology of noise, as if these aren't one and the same. Noise is the terrible thing itself. This dread inducing violence is not limited to bodily harm. It is an ontological violence that signals the possibility of our world destroyed, of a world being laid waste. We find a suggestion of this in the final chapter of Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, in which the German philosopher denotes the cannon fire of the Battle in Jena. For Hegel, this bellephonic noise was epistemological proof not only Napoleon's triumph, but the culmination of the movement of "History." For Hegel, the Battle of Jena is the ultimate realization ("the dialectical overcoming") of a 'History' that began with a primordial battle to the death, a battle that in stopping short of murder created the first relationship of mastery and servility. The noise of the cannons announces the realization of History as the conclusion of a mimetic violence that has reproduced itself until this moment—History's end.

The Hegelian struggle between 'master' and 'slave' shapes our normative conception of protest and is embedded in the narratives that structure social movements for radical change. It is probably true that most phenomenon we call "protest" is in fact primarily a demand for recognition expressed in the form of equitable redistribution, reform of the law, inclusion in certain spheres of work, and political or cultural platforms from which to be 'heard.'³⁵⁷ Sound has an elevated status in such struggles,

³⁵⁷ Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?: A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Verso, 2003).

since power already has the right to look and *to be seen* is too often already the privilege of over-seers and surveillants.³⁵⁸ What is demanded instead is a right to speak *and be heard* by those in power. Yet even as such protests aspire to democratic self-determination, in practice they often affirm a slavish dependency upon a state or sovereign power which is capable of granting such conditions. Commitment to a continuity of this relation to power is why protest and dissent can be tolerated – even facilitated – in liberal democracy, and why even in authoritarian states opposition parties can be usefully managed. Auditions ask for attention and performative gestures of concession, but not power. Consequently, protest is at times little more than a reenactment, a reperformance of the master-slave dialectic which just like any other dramaturgic reproduction of a historic battle guarantees in advance the original resolution of the fight between mastery and servility.

This preconditioned relation to power explains why so-called “peaceful protest” regularly enforces peace among the protestors but not the police. No matter how much admonishment or shame is heaped on the state, the violent demonstration of police power would seem to be a necessary scene in the theater of reenactment. To stage revolution, a turning over of the order of things, would require an entirely new and unmanageable element. Revolutionizing this relationship – for the ‘Slave’ to attain a real non-abstracted freedom – would require protest to transgress the given

³⁵⁸ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

arrangement that precede it. It is not enough for the ‘Slave’ to become conscious of their unfreedom; they must abolish slavery itself.³⁵⁹ Kojève called the abolition of slavery “the conscious and voluntary transformation of given existence,” an effective transformation of a whole system of relations, not only individual relationships to that system. That is to say that it is not individuals who are made free, it is *the world* itself.³⁶⁰ In real historical terms, the need to abolish the unfreedom of the world was transparently the case for the enslaved whose bondage was invoked in the abstraction of Hegel’s so-called “Master-Slave dialectic.”³⁶¹ In his 1975 book, *God of the Oppressed*, the Black theologian James H. Cone situates America’s historical slave in the same Hegelian “History” as the Battle of Jena:

There is no true liberation independent of the struggle for freedom in history. History is the immanent character of liberation; it is the project of freedom. There is no liberation without transformation, that is, without the struggle for freedom in this world. There is no liberation without the commitment of revolutionary action against injustice, slavery, and oppression. Liberation then is not merely a thought in my head, it is the sociohistorical movement of a people from oppression to freedom.³⁶²

Thus, for Cone, liberation is the act of enslavement’s abolition, which itself is the very meaning of History, a simultaneously abstract and material event brought about by struggle.

³⁵⁹ Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 49-50.

³⁶⁰ Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 49.

³⁶¹ The translation, and referent, of “*Herr*” and “*Knecht*” is a matter of controversy. See Biko Mandela Gray and Ryan J. Johnson, *Phenomenology of Black Spirit* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), especially at 27-35.

³⁶² James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 152.

When contemporary abolitionists talk about abolition it is as a social condition at which we arrive only after a prolonged period of struggle. Abolition is an end. Thus, decarceration, defunding, opening, redistribution, and reparation are the processual steps taken on the path to the abolition of prisons, police, borders, capitalism, property. This slow march through history was not the abolition that people in the streets were imagining when they burned down the 3rd precinct in Minneapolis on May 28, 2020.³⁶³ For them, Abolition means puncturing history with the present. Abolition is the world made otherwise, without mediation, without gradualism, a means without ends. For these partisans of rupture, abolition is an apocalyptic event. To Cone, this is the very meaning of freedom, of liberation as the historical abolition of enslavement but also liberation from “the white system of injustice” that has perpetuated racial capitalism’s asymmetric relations of economic and juridical domination.³⁶⁴ “Liberation as a future event is not simply otherworldly but is the divine future that breaks into their social existence, bestowing wholeness in the present situation of pain and suffering and enabling black people to know that the existing state of oppression contradicts their real humanity as defined by God’s future.”³⁶⁵ Abolition is a real claim for justice and not merely a demand for recognition of injustice, a terrifying demand backed by its imminent world-creating/world-destroying power.

³⁶³ Anonymous, *The Siege of the Third Precinct* (Crimethinc., 2020).

³⁶⁴ Cone, *The God of the Oppressed*, 160.

³⁶⁵ Cone, *The God of the Oppressed*, 159.

Abolition (was) is an interruption in History, a disruption to chrononormativity that leaves us in a world made suddenly otherwise. The radical imagination of a world destroyed produces terror, because to the “Master” abolition promises only nothingness, a slave society reduced to waste and void. The powerful are no longer agents of History but, according to Kojève, “only the ‘catalyst’ of the History that will be realized, ‘completed’ and revealed by the Slave or ex-Slave who has become a Citizen.”³⁶⁶ However, the abolitionary imagination does not satisfy itself with the powerless being afforded inclusion (recognition) into a system that continues to be structured on its differential exclusions. Revolutionary struggle for Kojève exists within Hegel’s narrow attribution of History to a particular Modern European form of emancipation, the realization of each individual as a constituent in a sovereign republican state. This is not the emancipation abolitionists are fighting for. Abolition is not a war over sovereignty between sovereigns; it is a war against sovereignty itself. Abolition is not a struggle for inclusion in a system that tolerates or, worse, necessitates domination. It is a struggle to exit that system and leave it destroyed.

As Attali has already shown us, for a sovereign power to remain absolute it must silence the sound of revolt before it becomes, as with the guns at Jena, a herald of the world’s destruction. To the powerful, any refusal of its dominion is a contest that attempts to appropriate for the powerless the objects of power which differentiate society. It is a profanation. Protest then is a threat, but also can be a means of

³⁶⁶ Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 47.

modulating, through ritual, the contradictions and antagonisms that aspire to abolish power. René Girard identified this struggle, what he called a “mimetic rivalry” though nearly the same as what Kojève called ‘Fight,’ as the very foundation of ritual. It was for Girard a universal theory, one that reconciled the seeming necessity of prohibition and taboo and its apparent impotence. He claimed that Law as prohibition can only suppress this rivalry up to a point, beyond which the ritual of protest becomes necessary, as people are compelled to find a sacrificial substitute through which to expend the excess of potential violence produced by this rivalry. This “sacrificial immolation” is meant to resolve the “mimetic crisis” that the rivalry has induced, returning the world to an equilibrium which allows it to continue.³⁶⁷ In effect, “there is no difference of purpose between prohibitions and rituals” as both serve to avoid the dissolution of society and its attendant chaos and disorder.³⁶⁸ The eruption of protest can be understood as a theater of catharsis that, when organized properly, facilitates the reenactment of struggle without ever approaching true exorbitance, excess, or ungovernability. The noise of protest is the sacrificial immolation that discharges the potential violence of tumult, its abolitionary capacity, and preserves a structure of sovereign power, including the power to determine the time, place, and manner of revolt within its sphere.

³⁶⁷ Girard, “Mimesis and Violence,” 11.

³⁶⁸ Girard, “Mimesis and Violence,” 13.

The police understand their role in this dialectic of struggle better than anyone. The consistent efforts by the police to regulate and repress the noise of protest is not petty or incidental to their policing of social order. It directly corresponds to their understanding that noise has a bearing “on violence, on mimetic behaviour, and on the potential objects of mimetic rivalry.”³⁶⁹ The sound of protest – the yelling, the chanting, the taunting of police, the songs – are a substitution for violence, an affective release that stops short of actual property destruction or physical assault, remaining safely within the limits of the Law. When the sounds of protest indicate that this social limit has been crossed – the shattering of glass, the *thud* of cobble stones, the *barbarous cries* of street combatants, the *crackle* of cars or buildings on fire – that noise is no longer a sacrifice, no longer a substitute for a possible future violence. That noise *is* the real revolutionary violence of insurrection, a sonic event that prefigures, indexes, and antiphonally recalls the turning over of order. This interstitial and precarious moment on the “precipice” between one world and the next, induces *vertigo*, what Jean Paul Sartre described as a fear of fear, the apprehension of the possibility of being helpless in the face of one’s situation, of being “an object that does not contain within itself the origin of its future disappearance.”³⁷⁰ Noise propels us into a set of radical possibilities, of *situations*, and in doing so confronts us with the horrific possibility of losing control, of not being the sole agent responsible for throwing ourselves over the precipice. The police regulate noise as a guardrail,

³⁶⁹ Girard, “Mimesis and Violence,” 10.

³⁷⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), 30.

knowing that tumult always retains within itself the desire to launch itself over that same precipice.

In this way and in so many others, noise exceeds. Noise is that which approaches the limit of bounded space and moves beyond. Noise *punctures, spills, envelopes, eludes, seeps, busts, ruptures, overflows, rends*, and explodes. The contingency of the boundary is a contingency of our very being, of our futurity, the source of vertiginous terror made audible in tumult. Derrida claimed that a contingent future “can only be anticipated in the form of an absolute danger... can only be proclaimed, *presented*, as a sort of monstrosity.”³⁷¹ The future’s monstrosity emerges from society’s inability to imagine for itself anything more hopeful than a mere temporal extension, a perpetuation of the present with minor aesthetic adjustments. That which undoes the present, which radically reorganizes its very structure, is necessarily an abolition of such futures. The future that follows abolition is strange, alien, unknowable, without referent, and untranslatable to our present. It might seem reductive to say that people fear change, that people fear the unknown, but given the choice between an unbearable present and an unknowable future, many choose to endure the former. It is the paradox of this slavish toleration of unrealized freedom that drove philosophical critique in the previous century. The Hegelian dialectic, articulated as a “fight to the death” by Kojève and expanded upon through the “adventure of French Philosophy”

³⁷¹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), 4.

of which Attali was a part, has served as one model for speculating the phenomenology of revolution as radical becoming.³⁷² It has provided materials for understanding a movement towards the future as a form of radical freedom. The abolitionary imaginary offers another idea, a fight to abandon the fight, and in so doing so abandon the future, becoming itself “a sort of monstrosity.”³⁷³

Attali’s political anthropology of noise was an attempt read the codes of the past in order to anticipate the future’s liberation. His promise of an emergent era of *composition*, when music “emerges as an activity that is an end to itself” (what Benjamin called “pure means”), is the promise of a world removed from the orders of sacrifice, representation, and repetition which trap us in unfreedom and capitalist reproduction.³⁷⁴ In his role as a prophet of noise he saw “emerging, piecemeal and with the greatest ambiguity, the seeds of a new noise, one exterior to the institutions and customary sites of political conflict.”³⁷⁵ This audio-vision shares in the emancipatory anticipations of a long line of political freedom dreamers, revolutionaries and abolitionists who sensed the destruction of the old world and the creation of a new one as always imminent. The new noise that this near horizon of freedom promises should be anachronistically audible in the new music. Hearing that music should fill us with a sensation of disorientation, a nauseous slipping of boundaries between the self and the world. “What practice of music should be read as

³⁷² Alain Badiou, *The Adventure of French Philosophy*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (London: Verso, 2012).

³⁷³ Andrew Culp, *A Guerrilla Guide to Refusal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022).

³⁷⁴ Attali, *Noise*, 135; Benjamin, *Toward the Critique of Violence*.

³⁷⁵ Attali, *Noise*, 133.

the real harbinger of the future?” Attali asks.³⁷⁶ He points to the work of free jazz as “the first attempt to express in economic terms the refusal of the cultural alienation inherent in [the order of] repetition, to use music to build a new culture.”³⁷⁷ It is significant that Attali hears the music of radical autonomy emerge from a community of people who have experienced “one of the most powerful cultural and economic colonizations.”³⁷⁸ Attali feels that the political struggle enacted by free jazz “subsided, after being contained, repressed, limited, censored, expelled, [but] after it failed to win real political power, it adopted new forms of creativity and cultural circulation.”³⁷⁹ It failed to take political power but revealed a promise of radical possibility, rooted in local conditions of musical production and circulation, a new noise inaudible to power but emergent in the music of the near-future-present, the sound of hip-hop being born in the same year *Bruit* was published.

³⁷⁶ Attali, *Noise*, 136.

³⁷⁷ Attali, *Noise*, 138.

³⁷⁸ Attali, *Noise*, 138.

³⁷⁹ Attali, *Noise*, 140.

Black Lives Matter, Santa Cruz, 2020

Several hundred people gathered after dark in front of the Santa Cruz Police Headquarters on June 4, 2020, rowdily antagonizing the officers presumably sequestered inside. Uniformed police were out of sight apart from brief appearances by a sniper attempting to evade notice on the rooftop. Only a few hours earlier a legally permitted gathering of thousands had come together on scenic West Cliff outside the historic lighthouse to express sympathy and solidarity in response to the recent murder of George Floyd and other Black Americans. This earlier demonstration drew together community members who wanted to be witnessed witnessing an event that aspired to “amplify the black and brown voices of this community,” which in practice combined testimony from young local activists and admonitions directed at the mostly white crowd to “make a meaningful change and systematically change.”³⁸⁰ As the crowd dispersed, some who had attended made their way to the downtown police station harboring their own ideas of what *meaningful* and *systematic change* might look like. When I arrived, the station’s courtyard was already overflowing with a crowd and the building’s walls covered with graffiti: “BLM”; “SAY THEIR NAMEZ”; “FUCK 12”; “No Justice No Peace...”

As the crowd scrawled, shouted, and milled, unsure of what they might do next, Santa Cruz’s mayor Justin Cummings approached to mediate. Black, young,

³⁸⁰ Nicholas Ibarra, “Vandals hit police station, downtown Santa Cruz after larger rally stays peaceful,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, June 4, 2020.

local, and in some vague sense politically Left, Cummings was well positioned to deescalate a crowd that would have happily engaged with riot police before turning their vengeance on downtown. The image of Minneapolis' 3rd Precinct burning to the ground a few nights earlier hovered like phantoms, reminding us that even though the uprising after George Floyd's murder was about race this wasn't the only repressed antagonism that had now burst out into the open. A rejection of antiblackness had indeed mobilized masses into the streets, but so did a hatred of the police power and how it deployed itself on marginalized people irrespective of race. No-one needed to *be* Black to feel the urgency of this uprising, but the centrality of antiblackness gave leverage to Black politicians like Cummings, politicians who supported a liberal politics of recognition and social justice but rejected revolutionary, militant, or abolitionist demands. It enabled some to create a specious color line between respectable and destructive protest. You couldn't hate the police without hating antiblackness, but it seemed you could hate antiblackness without disavowing the police.

In comments printed in the next day's paper, the mayor divided the protests and their constituents in two, one group implicitly committed to justice and the other pursuing chaos for its own sake, one intelligible and communicative and the other mere noise. "What happened early yesterday afternoon I felt is reflective of the people of Santa Cruz and how they want to come out and how they want their voices to be heard," suggested Cummings regarding the permitted protest at the lighthouse. He went on to say: "What I saw happen last night at the police station, and then what

happened after that, is a hijacking of a movement that is really asking for equal rights and justice.”³⁸¹ The polyphony of desires and motives, of experiences and traumas, of urgencies and necessities that constituted both crowds became reduced to a unitary abstraction, a message audible in the peaceful protest earlier in the day but lost amid the tumult outside the station.

In its headline, the newspaper article named that crowd “Vandals,” and though clearly this was in reference to the station’s defacement, the literalness of the insinuation is stark. The term refers to the infamous Germanic tribe that pillaged Rome in 455 CE. This was the quintessential barbarian horde, and as “*barbaros*” they were both the antonymic *other* of the “citizen” and etymologically those who speak unintelligible nonsense, who stammer, who babble.³⁸² *The people of Santa Cruz* (citizens) wished to be heard, *asking for equal rights and justice*, while the vandals *last night at the police station* (barbarians) had nothing to say that wasn’t noise. Such arbitrary and subjective nominations once again follow a *master morality*. This assertion of what is intelligible and what is not is an act of distinction, of bordering, of making the fracture in service of power. This political audition doesn’t just decide which sounds are noise—*unwanted, unlistenable, unbearable, unintelligible*—it decides which people are.

³⁸¹ Ibarra, “Vandals hit police station”

³⁸² “barbarous, adj.”. OED Online. March 2023. Oxford University Press.

<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/15397> (accessed June 26, 2023). “The Greek word had probably a primary reference to speech, and is compared with Latin *balbus* stammering. The sense-development in ancient times was (with the Greeks) ‘foreign, non-Hellenic’, later ‘outlandish, rude, brutal’; (with the Romans) ‘not Latin nor Greek’, then ‘pertaining to those outside the Roman empire’; hence ‘uncivilized, uncultured’, and later ‘non-Christian’, whence ‘Saracen, heathen’; and generally ‘savage, rude, savagely cruel, inhuman’.”

5.0 Black Noise

In the pages above I have argued for hearing noise as a metonym for the tumult of social disorder; in what follows I argue for hearing noise as a metonym for the world altering possibilities of the abolitionary imaginary. I've argued that noise is an act of profanity that attempts to claim for itself an otherwise sacred and sovereign power to make a disruptive sound without censure. The contest over this very power is at the heart of political protest and the policing of sound. In this chapter I argue that this struggle over soundmaking has been central to Black modernity, to its artistic and cultural expression, and to its methods of freedom struggle. As in the previous chapters with Schafer and Attali, I turn to and expand upon the thinking of a canonical scholar of sound studies, in this case Tricia Rose, and read her not simply as a theorist of audio culture but also as a theorist of power. Here I take Rose's field-defining work on hip-hop, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, as a crossroads from which another sound studies has formed.³⁸³ If Schafer and Attali can be said to have formed the foundations of the mainstream of sound studies as a scholarly field, *Black Noise* models an analytic that conjures Black cultural studies, historical materialism, and media theory to articulate a continuum of struggle against racial capitalism through sound, a *Black sound studies* that has both a long history and is still emergent at the same time.³⁸⁴

³⁸³ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994).

³⁸⁴ Maurice O. Wallace says that early Black sound studies, by which he means writings by W.E.B. Du Bois and Zora Neale Hurston among others, form "a shadow archive of black sonological and

Published in 1994, coincident with the republication of Schafer's *Soundscape* and a decade after Attali's *Noise* appeared in translation, *Black Noise* made an enormous impact as one of the first scholarly monographs on hip-hop to treat it as a serious artform and a subject worthy of academic study.³⁸⁵ After half-a-century of the artform's development, hip-hop studies has become widely, if not unreservedly embraced in the academy, with Rose's work regularly cited as foundational.³⁸⁶ *Black Noise* thoughtfully places the culture of hip-hop within a social world shaped by race, class and gender, reading hip-hop for both its content and its process of constitution. Rose includes producers and rappers as interlocutors, both ethnographically and as contributors to a hip-hop epistemology. She forgoes the conservative musicological bias that sees artists, especially Black artists, as naïve and intuitive creators, and

acoustical thought largely submerged beneath and between the lines of the history of modern aural experience." See Wallace, *Kings Vibrato: Modernism, Blackness, and the Sonic Life of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 7.

³⁸⁵ The literature on Hip-Hop is at this point vast and, as Gail Hilson Woldu points out, extensive among not only academics but also cultural critics, journalists, fans, and creators. For a historiographic account of these different literatures see Woldu, "The Kaleidoscope of Writing on Hip-Hop Culture" *Notes* 67, no. 1 (September 2010): 9-38. While Rose was not the first scholar to write about Hip-Hop, "Black Noise" was key to the formation of Hip-Hop studies' as an academic discipline of Hip-Hop studies in the 2000's and after. Early scholarly works on Hip-Hop include: Houston A. Baker, *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Michael Eric Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Russell A. Potter, *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995). An important collection of writings on Hip-Hop at the turn of the millennium is Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal, eds., *That's the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004). For reflections on the state of hip-hop studies in 2014 and 2022, respectively, see Monica Miller, Daniel White Hodge, Jeffrey Coleman, and Cassandra D. Chaney, "The Hip in Hip-hop: Toward a Discipline of Hip-hop Studies," *Journal of Hip-hop Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014), and Travis Harris, Scott "lyfestile" Woods, Dana Horton, M. Nicole Horsley, and Shayne McGregor, "Funk What You Heard: Hip-hop Is a Field of Study," *Journal of Hip-hop Studies* 9, no. 1 (2022).

³⁸⁶ Woldu, "The Kaleidoscope."

instead takes them seriously as organic intellectuals, “arbiters of cultural tastes and cultural politics.”³⁸⁷ The result is a book that approaches hip-hop as a legitimate means by which relations of power can be explored, through performance, language, artistry, and the production of space.

Though her work is highly respected by disciplines concerned primarily with hip-hop and African American culture, in the field of sound studies the substance of her scholarship barely engaged, rarely cited, and Rose herself does not typically get read as an actual theorist of sound.³⁸⁸ I intervene in this aporia by taking Rose seriously as a scholar of noise, focusing on how Rose uses “noise” to understand hip-hop’s relationship to aesthetic and affective experience, and what she understands to be the “blackness” of noise. I also show that the themes of power, violence, political theology, and the production of space through which I’ve explored Schafer and Attali above are likewise developed throughout her text. As with the work of these other two scholars, explicitly laid out in her text is an overlooked political theory of noise, an argument that noise is an index of power relations in conflict. Rose extends this theory further by grounding it in the racial capitalism of late 20th century U.S. society, showing how abstract concepts of power can become concretized in a place and time.

³⁸⁷ Eric Porter, *What is This Thing Called Jazz?: African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), xiv.

³⁸⁸ Perhaps the only philosophical engagement with Rose’s work in *Black Noise* can be found in Robin James, *Sonic Episteme: Acoustic Resonance, Neoliberalism, and Biopolitics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

Through this reading, I deconstruct what is the *noise* in ‘Black Noise’, and perhaps what is *Black* in noise itself.

Black Noise functions as an intervention into the racist and classist exclusions of hip-hop from the mainstream discipline of musicology, charting its own interdisciplinary course alongside Black scholarly contributions to cultural studies and a renewed American studies. The book also contains an element of autoethnography, as Rose herself is a longtime ‘rap fan’ who was raised in the Bronx, New York City’s northernmost borough and the birthplace of hip-hop.³⁸⁹ What makes *Black Noise* distinct from a traditional musicological study is its attention to the material circumstances that produce the music and its role as a proxy in other socio-political battles. Rose places the creation of Hip-hop in the cultural context of its afro-diasporic roots, but also as a product of the spatial conditions of late-1970’s New York and the divestments and dispossessions that had transformed the Bronx into an apocalyptic zone of urban decay. Rap is revealed to be a part of a wider struggle over public space, over what is sayable in public, over exactly which bodies can occupy that space and under what conditions. Through an analysis of the discourse of “violence” surrounding Rap, amplified by Reagan-era culture wars and racial panics, as well as the subsequent policing of artists and fans, Rose shows that the contested geographies of Rap’s origins continue to be reproduced in other spheres, even as the music becomes more a ubiquitous element of American culture.

³⁸⁹ Rose, *Black Noise*, xi-xii.

Most historians of hip-hop situate the culture's birthplace in the ground level recreation room of 1520 Sedgwick Avenue, an 18-story housing unit located in the West Bronx at the crossroads of the Major Deegan and Cross-Bronx expressways.³⁹⁰ The surrounding borough had evolved over many decades to be a place of mixed multi-cultural residences, schools, and businesses, initially home to immigrants from Ireland, Germany, and the Jewish diaspora, and in the years following World War 2, home to a growing number of Puerto Rican and Black Americans.³⁹¹ In many ways the building is a monument to the post-War transformations imposed upon the Bronx. In the mid-1940's the infamous "power broker" and city planner Robert Moses orchestrated the construction of a network of roadways that included the Cross-Bronx Expressway, "a huge trench gouged across a city" that would run 6.5 miles East to West through densely packed residential neighborhoods in the south Bronx.³⁹² In spite of fierce resistance by local residents, the road was completed in 1965, and the transformation of the Bronx into a site of dispossession, displacement, and economic depression continued unabated. By the time 1520 Sedgwick opened in 1967 many of the Bronx's 'white' residents had departed for the suburbs or gathered in remote

³⁹⁰ Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (Picador), 68-72. Chang's book is still the definitive history of hip-hop's emergence. See also, Michael A. Gonzalez, "The Holy House of Hip-hop," *New York Magazine*, September 22, 2008.

³⁹¹ Evelyn Gonzalez, *The Bronx* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

³⁹² Robert A. Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Knopf, 1974), 839.

housing projects such as Co-op City.³⁹³ By the late '70's, the City of New York was destroying four city blocks a week, displacing tens-of-thousands of residents into isolated public housing towers and emptying out the commercial and social core of once thriving neighborhoods.³⁹⁴ The Bronx became synonymous with urban decay and blight and, in a recursive logic perfectly suited to the emergent era of neoliberal austerity, the city responded by removing services, including seven Bronx-based fire companies, even as a contagion of conflagrations blossomed across the borough.³⁹⁵ Projects like 1520 Sedgwick were a partial though fundamentally inadequate solution to decades of formal and informal "slum clearance" and its attendant loss of housing.³⁹⁶

It was within this transforming urban environment that the culture of hip-hop appeared at a house party in 1520 Sedgwick's basement. While it did not spontaneously arrive with its "elements" fully formed, the Jamaican-born Clive Campbell, who hosted the party as DJ Kool Herc, is often credited with innovations

³⁹³ Gonzalez, *The Bronx*, 148-149; Rose herself grew up in Co-op City after moving from Harlem in 1970: Felicia R. Lee "Class with the 'Ph.D. diva'," *The New York Times* (18 October 2003). See also Rose, *Black Noise*, 30-31.

³⁹⁴ Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, 10-15.

³⁹⁵ "Between 1973-1977, 30,000 fires were set in the south Bronx alone." Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, 14-15; Deborah Wallace and Roderick Wallace, *A Plague on Your Houses: How New York was Burned Down and National Public Health Crumbled* (New York: Verso, 2001).

³⁹⁶ 1520 Sedgwick is still paradigmatic of the economic brutality visited upon the Bronx. Despite efforts to recognize the building as a historic landmark, and thus preserve its status as rent-controlled low-income housing, its longtime owner sold the building to private equity backed developer that had hoped to profit from removing its rent-controlled status. Community organizing and the late-oughts' subprime mortgage crisis set this plan back for the time being. Sam Dolnick, Brent McDonald, and Jigar Mehta, "A Building in Decline," *The New York Times*, January 19, 2010 [video], <https://www.nytimes.com/video/nyregion/1247466533739/a-building-in-decline.html>.

that signal the origin of hip-hop.³⁹⁷ He had developed a unique approach to mixing records that relied on the repetition of drum breaks, cutting back and forth between two vinyl records to extend the polyrhythmic breakdown in service of his audience of dancing b-boys and b-girls. Herc drew on his experience of *soundclashes* in his former hometown of Kingston, Jamaica, combining home electronics and repurposed public address systems to build a “monstrous sound system” that “murdered the Bronx opposition with his volume and shattering frequency range.”³⁹⁸ He was joined by Coke La Rock who’s vocal improvisations, echoing the practice of radio DJs like Frankie Crocker, Jamaican toasts, and the *phonopoetics* of artists like Gil Scott-Heron and the Last Poets, became a model for future Rap performances.³⁹⁹ For a brief handful of years, hip-hop was a public secret, an itinerant social phenomena appearing in house parties, rec rooms, and the public open-air spaces of the Bronx. Eventually it would become popular culture, with hip-hop’s ‘golden age’ inaugurated by the commercial success of Run DMC and arguably brought to a close by record buyers’ transition from the East Coast Black nationalism of Public Enemy to the West Coast’s performance of racialized criminality exemplified by N.W.A.⁴⁰⁰

³⁹⁷ Hip-hop’s four foundational “elements” include DJing, graffiti, break dancing, and MCing, with “knowledge” sometimes included as the fifth. By the time Rose was writing *Black Noise*, the other elements had become so eclipsed by MCing that the music and its culture became generically known as ‘rap’.

³⁹⁸ David Toop, *The Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip-Hop* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), 18-19. For Jamaican Sound system culture see Julian Henriques, *Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques, and Ways of Knowing*, (New York: Continuum/Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011); Norman C. Stolzoff, *Wake the Town and Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2000).

³⁹⁹ Anthony Reed, *Soundworks: Race, Sound, and Poetry in Production* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).

⁴⁰⁰ Ben Duinker and Denis Martin, "In Search of the Golden Age Hip-Hop Sound (1986–1996)," *Empirical Musicology Review* 12, no. 1–2 (September 26, 2017): 80–100.

One of Rose's principal arguments is that in the face of its growing popularity, rap music endured an ongoing project of containment, one that didn't simply operate on the bodies of artists and fans, but also in economic, social, political, and cultural realms. She enumerates the obstacles placed against live performances where large crowds of young people of color would gather, which included conditions not generally placed on other musical performances, such as requirements to pay exorbitant insurance rates and fees for hiring added security.⁴⁰¹ The above costs were at times used as a pretext for barring rap music from certain venues, and, but just as common was the rejection of rap based on its classed and racially coded (non)musicality.⁴⁰² This was also the case with mainstream radio (Black music stations included) and music video broadcasting formats such as MTV.⁴⁰³ Rose reminds us that the social policing of Rap also took on a moral character, with cultural figures, journalists, religious leaders, and politicians alike seizing upon the hyper-sexualized and violent lyrical content of some performers as justifying interdiction and censorship. While still acknowledging the real harm that misogynistic, homophobic, and racially discriminatory language might cause, Rose shows us that the attention paid to these lyrics acted first and foremost as a form of cultural boundary keeping and a justification for legal intervention in the lives of Rap artists, their business partners, and their audiences.⁴⁰⁴ Despite enormous controversy

⁴⁰¹ Rose, *Black Noise*, 132-133.

⁴⁰² Rose, *Black Noise*, 80-84, 132-135.

⁴⁰³ Rose, *Black Noise*, 8.

⁴⁰⁴ Rose, *Black Noise*, 149.

over the practice, judges and prosecutors still use rap lyrics as evidence, arguing that they are evidence of *mens rea*, or even confessions to criminal activity.⁴⁰⁵

The policing of rap that Rose details resonates with a longer history of policing Black bodies and assembly. As I detail below, this has been inscribed into law as far back as the very beginnings of the transatlantic slave trade. Undergirding these forms of containment and control is what political theorist Paul Passavant calls “the spectral figure of black insurrection.”⁴⁰⁶ Passavant traces this ghostly presence in the increasingly militarized policing in New York and elsewhere that responded to and conditioned three crises from the 1960’s and ‘70s—a *crime crisis* that increasingly targeted crime’s aesthetic impact rather than root causes, an *urban fiscal crisis* characterized by neoliberal austerity and the cutting of services, and a *democratic crisis* that perceived political demonstrations as civil disorder in need of suppression—all three of which were spurred on by conservative reaction to movements for Civil Rights and Black Power.⁴⁰⁷

In what I detail below I give a deeper history to this specter, and its policing, by tracing its expression through sound and the suppression of what Edwin C. Hill calls the *tumulte noir*, the Black noise of colonial slavery and postcolonial Black cultural

⁴⁰⁵ A.L. Dennis “Poetic (in)justice? Rap Music Lyrics as Art, Life, and Criminal Evidence,” *The Columbia Journal of Law & the Arts* 31 (2007): 1-41; Erik Nielson, *Rap on Trial: Race, Lyrics, and Guilt in America* (New York: The New Press, 2019); Adam Dunbar, “Art or Confession?: Evaluating Rap Lyrics as Evidence in Criminal Cases,” *Race and Justice* 10, no. 3 (2020): 320-340.

⁴⁰⁶ Passavant, *Policing Protest*.

⁴⁰⁷ Passavant, *Policing Protest*, 15.

expression.⁴⁰⁸ Hill draws upon tumult's definitional connection to riot and insurrection, a noise that "signals motion and commotion, rattling the social machine with an unexpected jolt of perturbation."⁴⁰⁹ Hill suggests that the sounds of blackness produce a phantasmagoric Other, the haunting imagination of revolt that shapes its reception and repression. As I've argued throughout, what is heard as noise, as tumult, adheres to the unruly crowd and its *potentia*, its power to commit violence, to exceed its prescribed allotment, and radically transform relations of power. Passavant and Hill's work suggests that in a society structured around containing the consequences of its origins, its founding in racial deprivation, power will always be haunted by the specter of justice and revenge. *Black noise* is the apprehension of that anachronic haunting, drawing the past into the present and even further into other possible futures.

Rose recognizes this same spectral haunting in the various ways that Black youth and their culture are policed at the time of rap music's ascendance. The 'Black noise' of her title is a metonym for Black music's apparent threat to dominant modes of social order. But not only the music—Black masculinity, Black youth, and the masses of underemployed and overpoliced Black Americans who inhabit the inner city. It is in a very real sense the sound of Black assembly, and the sound of resistance to the powers that try to contain it. In fact, Rose's materialist analysis of the conditions from

⁴⁰⁸ Edwin C. Hill, *Black Soundscapes, White Stages: The Meaning of Sound in the Black Francophone Atlantic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

⁴⁰⁹ "The *tumulte noir* overwhelms; its turbulent storm of sound threatens to drown out its hearing subjects and to carry them away..." Hill, *Black Soundscapes, White Stages*, 1.

which rap emerges, and of the antagonistic forces against which the culture finds itself confronted, gives a concrete and lucid example of my argument for how we should understand a politics of noise. *Black Noise* provides us with necessary insights into the relationship of power and noise, in this case through an analysis of Black urban life at the advent of hip-hop and how it is policed spatially and discursively by institutional power. Rap's self-understanding as a form of "brought noise" makes an argument that noise is a force capable of exceeding its containment, of opening up a space of radical possibility in direct opposition to the powers that strive to foreclose those possibilities.⁴¹⁰ *Black Noise* thus gives occasion for a broader consideration of how Black critical thought and Black sonic expression have co-conspired to intervene into these relationships.

In the pages below I will explore "Black noise" as both an intervention into sound studies and a theory of sono-politics that operates on aesthetic, metaphysical, and sociological grounds. In the first part of this chapter I consider how Rose and other Black critical thinkers have engaged with concepts brought to us by the theoretical protagonists of my previous chapters. I start by thinking with Rose's materialist history of hip-hop alongside sociologist Nathan Hare's Black ecological thought as a means for reorienting the acoustic ecology developed by R. Murray Schafer. I show that the development of hip-hop is itself an *ecological* event, situated in the

⁴¹⁰ The phrase 'brought noise' is from Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 40. Moten doesn't elaborate on it but I take it to be a reference to Public Enemy's "Bring the Noise," which I discuss at length below.

postindustrial wastelanding of the Bronx, that makes audible soundscapes that Schafer seems incapable of being attuned to. I then turn to Rose's explicit critique of Jacques Attali's theory of *repetition*, which situates hip-hop in a tradition of Black music that disrupts the teleological chrononormativity of Attali's schema. I supplement her critique through a reading of hip-hop group Public Enemy's artistic production and social theorization of noise, considering their work and thought as a necessary interlocutor for Rose's own. In the section that follows, I give a genealogy of "Black noise" by situating the discursive and spatial policing of rap within the long history of policing targeted at Black people's sound making from enslavement through the present day. Finally, I turn to our contemporary moment and consider how "Black noise" has been taken up by Black critical theory and within the developing field of Black sound studies. Reading these literatures shows that in the decades since Rose's study "Black noise" has come to signify material and metaphysical systems of terror and anticipation that produce a metonymic chain similar to that which I have described elsewhere, only here it might best be shown as: *Black = noise = insurrection/rebellion*. It is this final equivalency, both negatively destructive to the social order and positively emancipatory, that we find explored through contemporary theorists of "Black noise" such as Saidiya Hartman and Ashon Crawley. The contribution of Black critical thought to the study of noise is its conviction that "noise" can be understood as both a form of social violence and social emancipation at one and the same time.

5.1 Black Sonic Ecologies

Sound studies, and in particular its intersection with the late-20th century environmental movement under the name “acoustic ecology,” has followed other humanistic and social theories in concerning itself primarily with the aesthetic, economic and political life-worlds of a narrow class of mostly masculine, mostly European, mostly bourgeoisie personhood, what Sylvia Wynter simply calls “Man.” Wynter’s critique says that there is a ubiquitous but narrow concept of “Man” shaped by European modernity that “over-represents itself as the human.” She tells us that this “Man” is an exclusionary “genre of the human” that is assumed to possess a universal perspective from which to apprehend the multiplicity of environmental and social crises, as well their historical, even ontological origins, but to the exclusion of other possible knowledges which may be necessary for survival.⁴¹¹ According to Justin Hosbey, Hilda Lloréns, and J. T. Roane in their introduction to a 2022 special issue of *Environment and Society*, ecological thought, as much as other epistemic modes developed in Anglo and European academic institutions, suffers from “the enduring evasion of the insights of Black histories, Black intellectual thought, Black social and political movements, and Black Studies within the theoretical and

⁴¹¹ Sylvia Wynter, (2003) “Unsettling the coloniality of being / power / truth / freedom: Towards the human, after Man: Its overrepresentation – An argument,” *The New Centennial Review* 3(3): 257–337; Alexander Wehiliye, “After Man,” *American Literary History* 20:1–2 (2008), 321–336; Katherine McKittrick, “Yours in the intellectual struggle,” in McKittrick (ed.), *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015); Lisa Lowe and Kris Manjapra, “Comparative Global Humanities After Man: Alternatives to the Coloniality of Knowledge” *Theory, Culture & Society*, 36:5 (2019), 23–48.

conceptual edifices of the disciplinary formations associated with ‘environmental humanities,’ ‘environmental social sciences,’ ‘environmental science,’ and related fields.”⁴¹² To this list we should add ‘acoustic ecology.’ Though not explicitly concerned with environmental justice as a movement, Rose’s *Black Noise* does offer insight into how the urban environment of postindustrial New York City constitutes a unique soundscape shaped by ecological conditions. Given what might be considered a *Black ecological turn* in recent years, important possibilities for expansion and intervention in this exact area may be opened by approaching the ecological legacy of sound studies, *and hip-hop*, through Black ecological critique.

Hosbey, Lloréns, and Roane explain their scholarly and editorial work as “an ongoing experiment in thinking through and with the potential epistemic insurgency presented by” what they term “Black ecologies.”⁴¹³ In referring to their work as an “ongoing experiment” they point to the scholarly research that preceded their own, acknowledging their work as a contribution to a long legacy of environmental and social critics who have engaged with the entanglement of race and environmental issues. They argue that Black ecological critique can be traced to the forced migration of people from the continent of Africa to the Americas by way of the Middle Passage, as far back as the narratives of enslavement written by Olaudah Equiano.⁴¹⁴ Though

⁴¹² Justin Hosbey, Hilda Lloréns, and J. T. Roane, “Introduction: Global Black Ecologies,” *Environment and Society* 13 (2022): 1–10, at 2.

⁴¹³ Hosbey, et. al., “Introduction: Global Black Ecologies”, 1.

⁴¹⁴ Hosbey, et. al., “Introduction: Global Black Ecologies”, 3; Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of The Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, The African written by Himself* (London: Stationers’ Hall, 1789).

early African American literature provides numerous examples of such critiques, they identify Nathan Hare's 1970 article, "Black Ecology," as a foundational text for Black critiques of the modern environmental movement.⁴¹⁵ Hare's article brings to bear sociological critiques informed by the plight of urban African Americans, exposing the intersections of racial political economies and systemic neglect with environmental health impacts that were largely ignored or unaccounted for in the discourses of the then still emergent environmental movement.

Even if ecological thinking has always been a component of Black critical analysis, modern environmentalism has regularly failed to think of environmental destruction as inextricable from the legacies of colonialism and enslavement. It's in this regard that Black ecological thought is a "potential epistemic insurgency," challenging directly the limits and lacunae of the environmental movement.⁴¹⁶ This insurgent critique is made explicit in the recent work of Malcolm Ferdinand, a Martinique philosopher whose *Decolonial Ecology* argues for the healing of what he describes as a "double fracture," a social wound brought about by world views that separate "the colonial history of the world from its environmental history."⁴¹⁷ Ferdinand says that this *double fracture* represents not only a historical error, but also a false antimony between environmental movements and those concerned with decolonialism and racial justice. He sees both of these as collective struggles resisting "colonial

⁴¹⁵ Nathan Hare, "Black Ecology," *The Black Scholar* 1, no. 6 (April 1970): 2-8.

⁴¹⁶ Hosbey, et. al., "Introduction: Global Black Ecologies," 1.

⁴¹⁷ Malcolm Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World*, translated by Anthony Paul Smith (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022), 3.

inhabitation,” a way of relating to the earth premised on dispossession, exploitation, extraction, and acts of severe violence against the colonized. Contesting these entangled crises requires something that can replace “an ecology whose function it is to preserve colonial inhabitation and the forms of human and non-human domination that come with it” with a *decolonial ecology* that actively repairs the damage done to humans and the non-human world they live within.⁴¹⁸ Ferdinand’s *decolonial ecology* articulated through a *Black sonic ecology* can give us access to understanding the epistemic failures of mainstream theories of our sonic environment, the ‘white aurality’ of acoustic ecology noted above.

Acoustic ecology emerged in the same period and context as the environmental movement of the 1970’s and was an important contributor to the recognition of “noise pollution” as an index of various forms of industrial harm and as an environmental factor that produces its own deleterious health effects. At the same time, proponents of this emergent field, Schafer and the WSP among them, seemed to suffer from Ferdinand’s double fracture, failing to appreciate the entanglement of ecological harms and North America’s settler-colonial legacy. The WSP’s mandate was to record the soundscape through phonographic processes as a form of data collection and in an anthropologically-minded effort to preserve sounds that were destined to be lost in the wake of development. How they categorized their recordings reveals an ontological frame of relation that *xwélmexw* musicologist Dylan Robinson has

⁴¹⁸ Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology*, 115.

critiqued as a kind of “hungry listening.”⁴¹⁹ Like most acoustic ecologists since them, the WSP distinguished between *anthrophony*, *biophony*, and *geophony*, or the sounds produced by human activity, by plants and animals, and by earth systems respectively.⁴²⁰ This distinction, analogous to the hierarchical systems of European natural philosophy, exemplifies a way of listening to the world as if the listener exists at a distance from that same world they inhabit. This imagined distance is a consequence of the relational rupture from so-called “Nature” generated by Enlightenment-era humanism. Yet in the settler-colonial context of British Columbia from which acoustic ecology sprang, it is perhaps inevitable that the WSP would end up listening to the non-urban world as if it were an uninhabited English garden, a place set at a remove from the disturbing tumult of human activity.⁴²¹

From the perspective of acoustic ecology, the noises of the city are not only noxious to urban residents but a potential threat to the *terra nullian* peace of rural and suburban space. To prevent its spread, noise must be contained within urban space and then suppressed through policing, legislation, and changes in the built environment. Schafer was particularly averse to urban and industrial noise, but the

⁴¹⁹ Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

⁴²⁰ Bernie Krause, *Wild Soundscapes: Discovering the Voice of the Natural World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

⁴²¹ Mitchell Akiyama, “Unsettling the World Soundscape Project: Soundscapes of Canada and the Politics of Recognition,” *Sounding Out!* (August 20, 2015); <https://soundstudiesblog.com/2015/08/20/unsettling-the-world-soundscape-project-soundscapes-of-canada-and-the-politics-of-self-recognition/>; Robinson, *Hungry Listening*.

consequences of this sonic pollution were often treated as universal harms whose quieting would benefit everyone equally. Much like other environmental concerns, the targeting of noise pollution that his work inspired failed to account for the differential forms of inclusion and exclusion, histories of economic divestment, and other structural conditions that produced ‘noisy neighborhoods.’ Some of the same communities most affected by noise pollution, including many formerly redlined and predominantly African American neighborhoods, are negatively impacted by noise’s social proscription and attempts to eliminate it. Noise control habitually targets spaces where Black social life converges, what J.T. Roane calls the “dark agoras,” using unquiet as a justification for further repression of Black life in the city.⁴²² This is in part because of the racial character of policing generally, but also because of the way in which noise itself is racialized. Some of the sounds most negatively associated with threats to mental and physical health, and thus often prohibited or limited by law, include quotidian elements of the soundscape produced by inner-city life – amplified music, loud voices, automobiles, social gatherings.

The regulation (and deregulation) of pollution produces different effects and consequences for differently situated communities. Partly this is an expression of biopolitical neglect stemming from “a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death,” where environmental harm is tolerated by states responsible for its

⁴²² J.T. Roane, *Dark Agoras: Insurgent Black Social Life and the Politics of Place* (New York: NYU Press, 2023).

mitigation based on the relative valuation of any given community.⁴²³ This “slow violence” of environmental harm disproportionately impacts poor and working-class people through willful forms of negligence and inaction.⁴²⁴ An important contention made by Black ecology is that the highly racialized distribution of economic inequalities, and the violence used to maintain these conditions, are inextricable from the effects of environmental degradation for Black communities.⁴²⁵ As Nathan Hare puts it succinctly, “although some of the ecological differentials between blacks and whites spring directly from racism and hence defy economic correlations, many aspects of the black environmental condition are associated with basic economics.”⁴²⁶ The implications of this is that it is poverty in combination with the historic formations of racial geography that have produced a situation where Black communities are disproportionately positioned in proximity to the toxic effects of pollution. Even if causation is unclear, there is ample evidence of a correlation between exposure to air pollution and exposure to violence.⁴²⁷ The Bronx is an exemplar of this entanglement, where the same Cross-Bronx Expressway that aided in restructuring the borough along racially divided lines continues to produce higher

⁴²³ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge* (New York: Vintage, 1978), 138.

⁴²⁴ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011)

⁴²⁵ Lindsey Dillon and Julie Sze, “Equality in the Air We Breathe: Police Violence, Pollution, and the Politics of Sustainability,” in Sze, ed., *Approaches to Environmental Justice and Social Power* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 246-70.

⁴²⁶ Hare, “Black Ecology,” 7.

⁴²⁷ Jane E. Clougherty, Jonathan I. Levy, Laura D. Kubzansky, P. Barry Ryan, Shakira Franco Suglia, Marina Jacobson Canner, and Rosalind J. Wright, “Synergistic Effects of Traffic-Related Air Pollution and Exposure to Violence on Urban Asthma Etiology,” *Environmental Health Perspectives* 115, no. 8: 1140–1146. This study of urban children shows that exposure to violence increases the likelihood of susceptibility to asthma as a result of traffic-related air pollution.

instances of asthma and other disease from air pollution.⁴²⁸ Even as industry in the United States has precipitously declined, with many factories and their pollution migrating to the global South, the impact of car traffic has continued relatively unabated, compounding the toxic effects of both exhaust *and* noise

Black ecological critique also points us to the “necropolitical” consequence of noise pollution. Attempts at mitigating urban noise often show a willingness to regulate social life and to police sound in ways that, once again, differentially impact low-income, racialized, and otherwise marginalized communities, with potentially homicidal effects as a result. We can find examples of noise policed as a public nuisance in the earliest records of city life, but our modern ideas of enforcing laws regulating sound became more prominent during the Industrial Revolution immediately following the mass migration of poor and working people to urban centers.⁴²⁹ Dispossessed of their land, unemployed, and criminalized for vagrancy, Black Americans suffered a shared fate with poor people across Europe and the British Isles who had moved into densely packed urban centers in search of work. It was in these neighborhoods that cities began to regulate economic and social activity by targeting excessive noise in public spaces such as streets, markets, and pubs. These

⁴²⁸ Anna Ley, “Plan to Tame Traffic in Manhattan Could Choke the Bronx,” *The New York Times*, Sept. 15, 2022, Section A, 13.

⁴²⁹ Wilfried Nippel, *Public Order in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Nicholas Hammond, *The Powers of Sound and Song in Early Modern Paris* (Penn State University Press, 2020); Aimee Boutin, *City of Noises: Sound and Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015); Adam Mack, *Sensing Chicago: Noisemakers, Strikebreakers, and Muckrakers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015); James G Mansell, *The Age of Noise in Britain: Hearing Modernity*. (Baltimore: University of Illinois Press, 2016).

laws, when they were enforced, selectively targeted low-income people, migrants, and minorities as both a means of controlling everyday life within their neighborhoods and limiting circulation outside of them. In this way, noise control became one more feature of ghettoization and segregation, and in many U.S. cities represented a merger of the “sonic color line” and red lining as practices of spatializing blackness.⁴³⁰

The explicit regulation of noise as a type of ‘pollution’ didn’t emerge until the mid-20th century. Governments in Europe and the United States began to develop standards for regulating occupational noise exposure alongside zoning laws in residential neighborhoods addressing sonic emissions from vehicles and industrial machinery. Noise was only officially recognized as a form of environmental pollution in the 1970’s along with the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) who developed an array of noise regulations meant to protect communities from excessive noise by limiting the sonic emissions of transportation, construction, and industrial activities.⁴³¹ Characteristic of other environmental protections at the time, these zoning laws often failed to protect low-income and minority communities from exposure to excessive noise levels the effect of which can lead to a range of

⁴³⁰ Jennifer Lynn Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016); Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Rashad Shabazz, *Spatializing Blackness: Architectures of Confinement and Black Masculinity in Chicago* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

⁴³¹ Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), *Model Community Noise Ordinance* (1974); The “Noise Pollution Clearinghouse” offers an array of resources describing noise pollution, its regulation, and evidence of its effects. *Noise Pollution Clearinghouse*, <https://www.nonoise.org/>.

health issues, including hearing loss, sleep disturbance, and cardiovascular disease.⁴³²

Exposure to the negative effects of noise is intensified as direct consequence of endemic overcrowding in the inner-city, a point that Nathan Hare made in 1970.⁴³³

Noise induces hearing loss and, as Hare points out, proximity to major arteries of traffic and congested roads disproportionally impacts urban dwellers, who themselves are disproportionately Black Americans, with deleterious effects. “Studies show that there is a greater hearing loss with age and that much of it is due to honking horns, loud engines and general traffic noise.”⁴³⁴ The acuteness of harm caused by traffic, by its noise and air pollution, did not stop city governments from deliberately undermining Black neighborhoods by placing major motorways directly in their path, a destructive processes banally described as ‘urban redevelopment.’ Historically Black neighborhoods, including the South Bronx, continue to be impacted by the legacy of these road building projects and are especially vulnerable to the consequences of traffic and its noise to this day.⁴³⁵

The unequal impact of environmental hazards due to systemic racism and economic inequality, the very basis of the environmental justice movement, is well

⁴³² EPA, *Model Community Noise Ordinance*.

⁴³³ “The social and psychological consequences of overcrowding are tangled and myriad in degree. To begin with, the more persons per unit of space the less important each individual there; also the noisier the place, other things equal, and the greater the probability of interpersonal conflict” Hare, “Black Ecology,” 5.

⁴³⁴ Hare, “Black Ecology,” 5.

⁴³⁵ Julie Sze, *Noxious New York: The Racial Politics of Urban Health and Environmental Justice* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

established.⁴³⁶ Studies analyzing the effects of noise pollution on African American communities demonstrate not only that African Americans and other communities of color are facing significant environmental health risks because of exposure to noise, but that environmental protections designed to mitigate these impacts and reduce noise exposure have fundamentally failed these communities.⁴³⁷ As Julie Sze and Lindsey Dillon remind us, an inability to breathe freely, whether due to environmental toxins or exposure to violence, is a commonality across urban Black experience.⁴³⁸ Thus even as a demand for greater protection against environmental pollutions, including noise pollution, must be articulated as a matter of social justice, the mitigation of exposures to violence is equally necessary. This requires not only interventions into domestic and public acts of violence within families and urban communities, but also at the hands of those empowered to intervene with force. Yet, not only have efforts at policing pollution failed to adequately protect Black Americans from these harms, policing itself has become yet one more environmental factor in the “state-sanctioned and extralegal exposure of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”⁴³⁹

⁴³⁶ Dorceta E. Taylor, *Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

⁴³⁷ Joan A. Casey, Rachel Morello-Frosch, Daniel J. Mennitt, Kurt Fristrup, Elizabeth L. Ogburn, and Peter James, “Race/Ethnicity, Socioeconomic Status, Residential Segregation, and Spatial Variation in Noise Exposure in the Contiguous United States,” *Environmental Health Perspectives*, Volume 125, Issue 7 (2017).

⁴³⁸ Lindsey Dillon and Julie Sze, “Equality in the Air We Breathe: Police Violence, Pollution, and the Politics of Sustainability,” *Sustainability: Approaches to Environmental Justices and Social Power*, edited by Julie Sze (New York University Press, 2018), 246-70; Clougherty, et. al., “Synergistic Effects.”

⁴³⁹ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2007), 247.

These conditions of environmental racism are an underappreciated feature of hip-hop's development. Hip-hop's trajectory was transformed by Kool Herc's move from the basements of housing projects to outdoor block parties in the West Bronx's Cedar Park. These outdoor performances, buoyed by pirated electricity and accommodated by the general abandonment of the borough, became an outlet for communal play announcing to an expanding local audience the innovation of Herc's performance. This attention was transformative, making Herc a local legend and inspiring competing sound systems and performers such as Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambaataa. The explosion of hip-hop artists across the borough arose out of competition for fame and money, but a popular, if apocryphal, legend tells us that this process was accelerated by an environmental disaster. The night of July 13, 1977, DJs Grandmaster Caz and Disco Wiz were performing in a park in the Bronx when they and the assembled partiers heard the music cut to silence and watched as every light for miles blackened. In the midst of record high temperatures lightning storms had caused a sequence of technical and operational failures to the Con Edison electric grid, cutting power to almost the entire New York area.⁴⁴⁰ The city-wide blackout erupted into widespread looting in the Black and Puerto Rican ghettos of Harlem, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. The streets, parks, and stoops of these neighborhoods had already been spilling over with people seeking relief from the heat wave, relief that

⁴⁴⁰ James Goodman, *Blackout* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003).

was unavailable in tenement apartments lacking in air conditioning or in possession of landlords unwilling to repair what there was. With the lights out in the city, residents turned to looting, and as Caz and Wis have it, future hip-hop sound systems were birthed through the broken windows of home stereo suppliers.⁴⁴¹

The riots during the 1977 blackout were the climax of over a decade of systematic abandonment of Black communities and working-class residents.⁴⁴² The decimated wasteland of the South Bronx in particular was a monument to the failure of political and economic policies premised on Senator Patrick Moynihan's "benign neglect," or what Roger Starr, then-Mayor Beame's Housing Administrator, referred to as "planned shrinkage."⁴⁴³ City services had been clawed back, schools starved of resources, including music and afterschool programs, and industry had decamped without any foreseeable jobs or economic relief to replace it.⁴⁴⁴ As housing emptied, property owners cut utility services, refused repairs, left apartments empty—anything

⁴⁴¹ Jim Fricke & Charlie Ahearn, *Yes Yes Y'all: The Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip-Hop's First Decade* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002); Delaney Hall and Roman Mars, "Was the 1977 New York City Blackout a Catalyst for Hip-Hop's Growth?" *Slate* (October 16, 2014). For a critique of Fricke and Ahearn's seeming editorial investments in perpetuating narratives of hip-hop's roots in criminality, see Serouj Aprahamian, "Hip-Hop, Gangs, and the Criminalization of African American Culture: A Critical Appraisal of Yes Yes Y'all," *Journal of Black Studies* 50, no. 3 (March 19, 2019): 298–315. While the causality of the looting and hip-hop's flourishing can reasonably be questioned, there is evidence that home electronics were a prominently looted item. See Robert Curvin and Bruce Porter, *Blackout Looting!: New York City, July 13, 1977* (New York: Gardner Press, 1979), especially the interview found in "Appendix," 187–205.

⁴⁴² Deborah Wallace and Roderick Wallace, *A Plague on Your Houses: How New York was Burned Down and National Public Health Crumbled* (New York: Verso, 2001); Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 13–18; Rose, *Black Noise*, 33–34.

⁴⁴³ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, Washington, D.C., Office of Policy Planning and Research, US Department of Labor, 1965; Joseph P. Fried, "City's Housing Administrator Proposes 'Planned Shrinkage' of Some Slums," *The New York Times*, February 3, 1976, 35.

⁴⁴⁴ Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 13–18.

that would encourage residents to flee—until fires big and small rendered the buildings uninhabitable. It was well known that property owners could hire arsonists for cheap and collect on insurance, while fear of arson meant that insurance companies flourished. When the blackout took hold and neighborhoods erupted, Police struck their labor, with over 10,000 failing to report to duty, but Police Commissioner Michael J. Codd reassured city residents that if rioters had tried to leave their neighborhoods, deadly force would have been used.⁴⁴⁵ Newspaper headlines described the tumult in barely disguised echoes of colonial race-thinking: “The Heart of Darkness,” “The Plunderers,” and “A Walk on the Wildside” according to *Newsweek*; “Night of Terror” according to *Time*.⁴⁴⁶ Given the hyperbole of press accounts it is notable that most the serious violence was at the hands of, or directed back at, the police.⁴⁴⁷ While the riots had serious economic and emotional consequences for many, it none-the-less traded in a moral economy typical of looting, direct acts of instrumental acquisition by poor New Yorkers dependent upon informal economies for survival.⁴⁴⁸ However, media, politicians, and suburbanites saw no

⁴⁴⁵ Selwyn Raab, “Arrests in Blackout Dwarf ‘60’s Riot” *The New York Times* July 16, 1977.

⁴⁴⁶ Peter Goldman, “Heart of Darkness,” *Newsweek*, July 25, 1977, 16-22; Richard Boeth, with Eric Gelman, Frederick V. Boyd, Pamela Abramson, and Dennis A. Williams, “The Plunderers,” *Newsweek*, July 25, 1977, 23-27; Pete Axthelm, “A Walk on the Wild Side,” *Newsweek*, July 25, 1977, 31; “Night of Terror,” *Time Magazine*, July 25, 1977, 12-22. The *New York Times* revived these Conradian themes twenty years later: Clyde Haberman, “’77 Blackout: The Heart of Darkness,” *New York Times*, July 11, 1997, B1; Anthony Ramirez, “The Darkest Hours of a Dark Time,” *New York Times*, July 13, 1997, 3.

⁴⁴⁷ Contemporaneous accounts mention 2 homicides, both rioters shot by a store owner defending their businesses. Hundreds of people were admitted to emergency rooms during the riot, and 418 police officers were injured by rioters, one of whom was shot in the leg. Williams, “The Plunderers,” 23; Curvin and Porter, *Blackout Looting*, 59.

⁴⁴⁸ E. P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” *Past and Present* 50. (February, 1971), 76-136; Vasquez, “The Poor Person’s Defense of Riots.”

morality in the “looter,” a word they could use as a “color-blind dog whistle” to evoke racialized criminality while refusing to see behind the action any racial politics, much less class warfare.⁴⁴⁹ Society’s desire to take revenge on the ‘looters’ gave new thrust to the decades-long campaign of criminalization and incarceration, wars waged against the poor and their self-organization for civil rights and self-defense in the name of ending ‘crime.’⁴⁵⁰

Whatever the role of the 1977 blackout in resourcing the material infrastructure of hip-hop’s emergence, it also represents an axis of crises that have shaped Black lives, and inevitably Black noise. Policies of austerity had produced unique forms of environmental vulnerability affecting New Yorkers in dramatically unequal ways. The material neglect imposed upon the Bronx was itself a preview of the kinds of postcolonial dispossession and extractivist exploitation that have since become commonplace in cities and occupied territories around the world. T. J. Demos has called this globally distributed phenomena of bureaucratically administered disaster “a spreading *blackout* that is socioeconomic and structurally racist in origin.” This ‘*blackout*’ is a phenomenon that connects postindustrial cities in the Global North like the Bronx to 21st century postcolonies such as Puerto Rico and Jamaica. This is not only through histories of migration that were essential to the creation of hip-hop, but also through “an interconnected web of structural and purposeful neglect.”⁴⁵¹ The city

⁴⁴⁹ Osterwell, *In Defense of Looting*, 223-226.

⁴⁵⁰ Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

⁴⁵¹ T.J. Demos, *Beyond the World’s End* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 62.

these Latin and Afrodiasporic migrants arrived in was a model of carceral geography, or what Rashad Shabazz has called “spatialized blackness,” wherein architecture, urban planning, and policing conspire to constrain and delimit the boundaries of mobility and the conditions of possibility.⁴⁵² Even as neighborhoods and communities were being bulldozed and residents dispersed into cheap housing projects, many others were left behind in the burning rubble of the Bronx without means of providing safe or affordable access to food, water, climate control, or fresh air. As Rose recalls, “images of abandoned buildings in the South Bronx became central popular cultural icons” denoting civilizational collapse, a highly racialized image of urban space as already spoilt wasteland, its residents somehow to blame for their unlivable conditions.⁴⁵³

Hip-hop can be understood as a work of imagining radical black futures even in the face of this ecological and economic catastrophe. Hip-hop emerges out of the conditions of blackout as a dialectical artform able to “give form to sociopolitical and environmental violence, as well as to inspiring sites of resistance.”⁴⁵⁴ Hip-hop’s message contains, on the one hand, an articulation of the conditions of “impoverishment, necropolitics, and dispossession” that Demos attributes to Achille Mbembe’s phrase “the *Becoming Black of the world*,” a generalization of “the dispossession of the power of self-determination, of control over and belief in one’s

⁴⁵² Shabazz, *Spatializing Blackness*, 3-4.

⁴⁵³ Rose, *Black Noise*, 33.

⁴⁵⁴ Demos, *Beyond the World’s End*, 50.

future, even the free access to time and the possible.”⁴⁵⁵ Yet hip-hop does more than diagnose these structures of political, economic, and environmental disenfranchisement and inequality; it performs a world of “radical imagination where we can glimpse futures alternative to extractivism’s wastelanding, debt prisons, and sacrifice zones.”⁴⁵⁶ The hip-hop generation came up in and amongst these conditions of constraint and deprivation and turned to the streets for air to breath. They turned to media for escape, appropriating what was at hand to invent a futurist fugitive technocology from the ground up. Young people in the Bronx took the means of reproduction into their own hands, seizing microphones, public address systems, home stereo equipment, vinyl records, cassette tapes, mimeographs, the radio, *even the subway system*, as a means of telegraphing their message along subterranean networks of coded exchange.

Rose’s socio-cultural materialism situates the emergence of hip-hop in “the postindustrial city, which provided the context for creative development among hip hop’s earliest innovators, shaped their cultural terrain, access to space, materials, and education.”⁴⁵⁷ But these conditions need to also be understood through the analysis provided by Hare’s political ecology. To be sure, the Bronx’s abandonment was an effect of the neoliberal transformations that were unleashed by economic restructuring in the 1970’s and follows the patterns of urban development that can be

⁴⁵⁵ Demos, *Beyond the World’s End*, 62; Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, translated by Laurent Dubois (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 6, original emphasis.

⁴⁵⁶ Demos, *Beyond the World’s End*, 50.

⁴⁵⁷ Rose, *Noise*, 34.

traced across most major cities in the United States at that time.⁴⁵⁸ At the same time, those effects were decidedly uneven and reflect the racial geographies that produced Black communities as both economic and environmental sacrifice zones.⁴⁵⁹ It is from this state of abandonment that the visionary prophetic movement for life that is hip-hop emerged. Appropriating commercial electronics and the material refuse of the bankrupt metropolis surrounding it, musicians and audiences convoked around the radical imagination of lyricists, breakers, turntablists, and graffiti writers who actively rearranged and vitalized the world around them. Where others heard nothing but noise, the youth of the Bronx heard a prophetic sound of the next world to come.

5.2 Rap and Repetition

I've argued thus far that hip-hop is a product of an acoustic ecology quite different from the one imagined by R. Murray Schafer. Rather than hearing the noise of the city as an encroachment on peaceable silence, an aesthetic moral failing that lies in the city-goer themselves and results from their ambivalences towards the transcendent beauty of nature, Rose recognizes the imposition of urban space's toxicities as one driven by exactly the kind of policies of containment and policing that suburbanites

⁴⁵⁸ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (New York: Verso, 2017).

⁴⁵⁹ Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*; Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space* (New York: Verso, 2010); Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

call for to ameliorate their own discomforts with city noise.⁴⁶⁰ And while Schafer approached the sociological to justify his aesthetic priorities, Rose has done something like the inverse, foregrounding musicological methods to uncover something sociological about the conditions that produce her object of study. The idea that listening to music can inform an understanding of non-musical transformations in society, not as epiphenomenon but as constituent of those transformations, shares something with the turn towards the sociological in the new musicology of the '80's and '90's. It's unsurprising then that Rose takes up the writings of Susan McClary, Christopher Small, and James Snead to explore "links between music and social forces," and to some extent the writing of Adorno whose cultural critique was highly influential at the time.⁴⁶¹ Rose turns to Jacques Attali for the same reasons. In 1994, Attali was still the definitive source for theorizing noise's political import in American scholarship, so it is perhaps inevitable that Rose would make reference to him. Yet Rose's encounter with the new musicology and its influences is also a critique of the racial and class-based blind spots that are endemic to musicology as a whole and that fail to include rap and its predecessors in its purview.⁴⁶²

⁴⁶⁰ "Gentrification in the seventies, eighties, and nineties replaced urbanity with suburban values from the sixties, seventies, and eighties, so that suburban conditioning of racial and class stratification, homogeneity of consumption, mass-produced aesthetics, and familial privatization got resituated into big buildings, attached residencies, and apartments." Sarah Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2012), 27-28.

⁴⁶¹ Rose, *Black Noise*, 62-72.

⁴⁶² See also Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr., "Who Hears Here? Black Music, Critical Bias, and the Musicological Skin Trade," *Musical Quarterly* 85, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 1-52. More recent scholarly challenges to musicology's relationship to race include: Tamara Levitz, "Decolonizing the Society for American Music," *Bulletin of the Society for American Music* 43, no. 3 (Fall 2017); Matthew

Halfway through *Black Noise*, Rose relays an anecdote wherein the chairman of a music department at an unnamed institution affirms to her the importance of rap's lyrical content (as a sacrificial "social steam valve") but insists that "'there's nothing to the music'."⁴⁶³ Rap's music, which the chairman encounters through "automobiles with massive speakers blaring bass and heavy drum beats looped continuously," was simply noise, "unintelligible yet aggressive sound that disrupted his familial domain [...] and his sonic territory."⁴⁶⁴ Perceptions of hip-hop such as these were endemic at the time, raced and classed as a music without melody, or even musicians, over-amplified and inescapable thanks to car stereos and mobile personal listening devices. Rose takes such critics on, not by denying their experience but rather by taking seriously the questions that follow from it: "What is the point of rap's volume, looped drum beats, and bass frequencies? What meanings can be derived from the sound rap musicians have created? How is the context for its consumption connected to both its *black cultural priorities* and its *sociological effects*?"⁴⁶⁵ Rose understands the musical, emotional, and social power effected by rap as a direct consequence of its *sonic force*, its push to the extremes of vibration, volume, and noise. How one is affected by this sonic force is caught up in the question of receptivity, one's positionality, one's relationship to "black cultural traditions, the postindustrial

Morrison, "Race, Blacksound, and the (Re)Making of Musicological Discourse," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 72, no. 3 (2019): 781–823.

⁴⁶³ Rose, *Black Noise*, 62.

⁴⁶⁴ Rose, *Black Noise*, 63. This recalls Schafer's "sonic intruder" mentioned above.

⁴⁶⁵ Rose, *Black Noise*, 63.

transformations of urban life, and the contemporary technological terrain.”⁴⁶⁶ To Rose, all three of these analytics cohere in hip-hop’s use of sampling technologies and the infinitely looped and repeating rhythmic lines they produce.

Theorists of African American culture have long understood repetition to be central to Black musical and oral practice, its cyclical rhythms a signature difference from the Western classical musical prioritization of tonal harmony.⁴⁶⁷ The centrality of rhythm has often been held up in music studies as Black music’s direct connection to African roots, what Léopold Senghor described as the “fundamental characteristics of the African-Negro Style,” even as African music has regularly been reduced to an essentially rhythmic phenomenon.⁴⁶⁸ Rose situates rap music among other African diasporic musics, emphasizing its cyclical rhythms, antiphonal vocal structure, and thematic apposition to the blues. Rose notes that critics of rap music tend to disregard any claims to “musicianship,” instead treating the genre as yet one more iteration of popular dance music, such as disco, “in which black music has been linked to technological effects rather than black cultural priorities.”⁴⁶⁹ Rose disagrees; the repetitive deployment of beats and sampled sound is not a result of the limited musicianship of hip-hop producers, it is a conscious decision to take up technologies

⁴⁶⁶ Rose, *Black Noise*, 63.

⁴⁶⁷ James A. Snead, “On Repetition in Black Culture,” *Black American Literature Forum* 15, no. 4, *Black Textual Strategies*, Volume 1: Theory (Winter, 1981): 146-154.

⁴⁶⁸ Léopold Senghor, “Africa-Negro Aesthetics,” *Diogenes* 16 (1956): 37. Kofi Agawu has challenged this longstanding portrayal of all Black and African music as essentially rhythmic music. See Agawu, “The Invention of ‘African Rhythm,’” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48, no. 3 (1995): 380-95.

⁴⁶⁹ Rose, *Black Noise*, 83.

of reproduction in order to realize aesthetic and affective goals. “Rap’s process of techno-black cultural syncretism revises and expands black cultural priorities and the use of technological instruments.”⁴⁷⁰ Much as with the early manipulation of turntables and vinyl records that gave shape to the Bronx street parties, and acted as the sonic bedrock of the first generation of MC’s, access to relatively portable and affordable sampling equipment required both novel explorations of that media’s affordances and an audile technique able to catch the rhythmic and textural possibilities within a given sound object.⁴⁷¹ Producers took up sampling technologies because of its utility for producing and reproducing rhythm, but also its potential to reconfigure rhythm and, by extension, the bodies dancing to it.

Rose is claiming that rap participates in a counter-modernity developed through Afrodiasporic music, one that exists in continual tension with musicological priorities that position Western classical music’s development as the fullest realization of human creativity’s inevitable telos. The movement from folk music’s ‘primitive’ polyvocality, dissonance, and repetition towards greater harmonic complexity and tonal resolution within the western classical music tradition became a signifier of Enlightenment aspirations and a cipher for European supremacy. If classical music is the highest realization of culture, and thus belongs to the ‘end of history,’ then the repetitive atonality of Black music signals a culture and consciousness stuck in the

⁴⁷⁰ Rose, *Black Noise*, xv.

⁴⁷¹ “To make the noise that characterizes rap’s most creative producers and musicians requires approaching sound and sound manipulation in ways that are unconcerned with the intended or standard use of samplers.” Rose, *Black Noise*, 74.

past.⁴⁷² Not only does this distorted thinking encourage a dismissal of Black popular music by a minoritarian elite, but it seeds the fear and anxiety that such music's popularity seems to induce in dominant culture; an irrational fear of 'the past' erupting into the present. This ideologically constructed dilemma ties anachronicity to anarchism, marking Black music as an atemporal insurgency that threatens to undermine the allegedly fixed status of certain cultures and not others as belonging to an inevitable future.

As Rose points out, even Left critics of 'the present' – Attali, Adorno, and Jameson among them – reject rhythmic repetition as a degradation of music. "For Attali and other cultural theorists, repetition is primarily considered a manifestation of mass culture, a characteristic of culture in the age of reproduction."⁴⁷³ To these critics, repetition describes the industrialization of music as a form of mass production / consumption that then "ceases to be collective" (Attali) and that, in the context of jazz, "involves a self-renunciation" conducive to "the personality of the obedient" (Adorno), and ultimately leaves critique with "no primary object of study" (Jameson).⁴⁷⁴ Attali's rejection of repetition in *Bruits* is premised on an interpretation of its mode of production as interchangeable with commodification. The repetition of

⁴⁷² David Garcia, *Listening to Africa Freedom, Modernity, and the Logic of Black Music's African Origins* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

⁴⁷³ Rose, *Black Noise*, 71.

⁴⁷⁴ Rose, *Black Noise*, 71. Original citations found in Attali, *Noise*, 88; Theodore W. Adorno, (with the assistance of George Simpson), "On Popular Music" in Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin, eds., *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word* (New York: Pantheon, 1990), 313; Frederick Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture" *Social Text*, Winter 137, 1979.

music is the transformation of lived experience, by mechanical reproduction, into an element of capital in service of the music industry. As a prophecy of shifts in the social order it heralds the listener's transformation into a commodity themselves. "Repetitive music" is to Attali "the murder of creativity, the blasphemous herald of the death of society in which reality is only a normalized, liquidating artifice."⁴⁷⁵ In some terrible way he correctly anticipated the algorithmic distribution of music and its parasitic A.I. content creation, all of which farms the listener's data for sale on the open market.⁴⁷⁶ Yet this justifiable anxiety about capital's capacities to transform us into productive consumers misapprehends the possibilities for the appropriation and abuse of commercial electronics for otherwise purposes.

Inadvertently antiblack or otherwise, these Left critiques single out the centrality of rhythm in Black music, dismissing the possibility that music created from inside the commodity market might produce alternative meanings or resistances other than those imposed by industrial processes. Rose agrees that "repetition does, in fact, function as part of a system of mass production that structures and confines creative articulation" within the commodity system. Yet reducing all repetition to a mere effect of such industrial forces erases the importance of repetition outside of (or in and against) these social relations. In as much as they erase any possibility of resistance or meaning beyond these conditions of production, such critiques

⁴⁷⁵ Attali, *Noise*, 125-126.

⁴⁷⁶ Drott, *Streaming Music, Streaming Capital*.

demonstrate to Rose “a severe case of black cultural illiteracy” and occlude the radical possibilities inherent to the use of repetition as practiced in Black culture.⁴⁷⁷ Rather than an end, rap’s repetition is a continual renewal that, as Jeff Chang puts it, “seem[s] to whirl backward and forward—a loop of history, history as loop—calling and responding, leaping, spinning, renewing.”⁴⁷⁸ There is a political theology implicit in this evocation of cyclical time, a messianic embrace of death and renewal. Rose says this can be found in “the arrangement and selection of sounds rap musicians have invented via samples, turntables, tape machines, and sound systems [...] at once destructive (in that they actually take apart recorded musical compositions) and recuperative (because they recontextualize these elements creating new meanings) [...] “Noise” on the one hand, and communal countermemory on the other, rap conjures and razes in one stroke.”⁴⁷⁹ In its rejection of chrononormativity, its iteration, variation, and polyrhythmic anachronicity, hip-hop enacts a world transforming act of creative destruction.

One of the few scholars to have grasped the spiritual dimension of Rose’s writing is Mark Lewis Taylor.⁴⁸⁰ Taylor reads Rose’s phrase “conjure and razes” as a reference

⁴⁷⁷ “Positioning repetition in late capitalist markets as a consequence of that market, marginalizes or erases alternative uses of relationship to repetition that might suggest collective resistance to that system.” Though Rose singles out the three critics mentioned above, she is clearly arguing that the cultural theory being taken up by the “New Musicology” of the time is in fact reproducing the same critical mistakes and racist assumptions that have dominated traditional Musicological positions vis-à-vis Afro-diasporic music. Rose, *Black Noise*, 71-72.

⁴⁷⁸ Chang, *Cant Stop Won’t Stop*, 85.

⁴⁷⁹ Rose, *Black Noise*, 65.

⁴⁸⁰ Mark Lewis Taylor, “Bringing Noise, Conjuring Spirit: Rap as Spiritual Practice,” in Anthony Pinn, ed., *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

to spiritual renewal and cosmic cycles of death and rebirth. Rap music, according to Taylor, is a kind of liberation theology, “a contestation with entrapment,” on the threshold between what is and what is not quite yet, suspended in a liminal space of contradiction and ambiguity, yet always seeking an integrative unity. Taylor uses terms—*liberatory*, *liminality*, and *integrative*—that he claims contain the everyday meaning of “spirit/spirituality” as it is understood in popular culture. Rap music intersects with these meanings, providing a space of spiritual experience outside of what for many fans are troubled relationships with institutional religion. Taylor goes on to explain the spiritual power of hip-hop by drawing our attention to what Lévi-Strauss describes in *The Raw and the Cooked* as the “musical emotion” produced by the dialectical tension of music’s dual temporality.⁴⁸¹ Lévi-Strauss argues that, like myth, music operates according to overlaid grids, one that exploits the organic rhythms of psychophysiological time—the visceral time of breath and heartbeat—while the other contains a “scale of musical sounds,” the infinite set of possible choices that the musician-composer can choose from. The power of these overlaid grids is the radical oscillation between two experiences of time, one anticipated and one surprising.⁴⁸² This oscillation in turn produces “a delicious falling sensation,” a vertiginous disorientation that returns us to my earlier discussion of Ahmed and Sartre.⁴⁸³ Music’s power is its ability to produce an intervention into “visceral time,”

⁴⁸¹ Taylor, “Bringing Noise, Conjuring Spirit,” 108-110; Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, 16-17.

⁴⁸² Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, 16.

⁴⁸³ Lévi-Strauss explains how this is the source of musical emotion in a passage that Taylor quotes at length: “The musical emotion springs precisely from the fact that at each moment the composer withholds or adds more or less than the listener anticipates on the basis of a pattern that he thinks he

a vertiginous, nauseating disorientation that suspends the body into a “synchronic totality” at the crossroads between infinity and nothingness... and then pull us back.

“Aesthetic enjoyment,” according to Lévi-Strauss, “is made up of this multiplicity of excitements and moments of respite, of expectations disappointed or fulfilled beyond anticipation.”⁴⁸⁴ Music is the art of maintaining this experience of tension, the oscillation between anticipation and surprise, and hip-hop is particularly adept at organizing its sound objects towards this end. Yet its critics disavow rap and its musical prowess as mere noise. Noise is how we describe these “multiplicity of excitements” when they occur without the guarantee of “respite,” when the cycle of disorientation and return threatens to unravel into endless disorientation. Noise thrusts us out of our perceptual grasp of the diachronic, and into a synchronic event outside of historic time, into an endless world of mythic time. Lévi-Strauss claims that it is “*as if* music and mythology needed time only in order to deny it,” yet music does in fact resort to it to give itself a proper sense of duration, to bound it in the world from

can guess, but that he is incapable of wholly divining because of his subjection to a dual periodicity: that of his respiratory system, which is determined by his individual nature, and that of the scale, which is determined by his training. If the composer withholds more than we anticipate, *we experience a delicious falling sensation*; we feel we have been torn from a stable point on the musical ladder and thrust into the void, but only because the support that is waiting for us was not in the expected place. When the composer withholds less, the opposite occurs: he forces us to perform gymnastic exercises more skillful than our own. Sometimes he moves us, sometimes he forces us to make the movement ourselves, but it always exceeds what we would have thought ourselves capable of achieving alone.” Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, 17, italics mine; quoted in Taylor, “Bringing Noise, Conjuring Spirit,” 110.

⁴⁸⁴ Lévi-Strauss goes on to say: “Aesthetic enjoyment is made up of this multiplicity of excitements and moments of respite, of expectations disappointed or fulfilled beyond anticipation—a multiplicity resulting from the challenges made by the work and from the contradictory feeling it arouses that the tests is subjecting us to are impossible, at the same time as it prepares to provide us with the marvelously unpredictable means of coping with them.” Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, 17.

which it comes. Noise on the other hand is an instrument “for the obliteration of time.”⁴⁸⁵ Hip-hop’s repetition, its conjuration and razing, rhythmically affirms and negates this possibility. This cyclical disruption of historic time and opening up of mythic time is the raw material of the DJ/producer, embedded within “the fundamental vibrating loop at the heart of the record, *the break*.”⁴⁸⁶

“The break” refers to the section of a soul, funk, or an RnB record where the drums take an improvised solo as the other musicians drop out, working out a surprising polyrhythm in exciting variations. Kool Herc developed techniques for isolating and repeating the break after witnessing dancers’ innervated response to these moments. He would play two of the same records, letting the drum break on one playout before switching to the starting point on the other, and then cuing the first once again, a “Merry-Go-Round” technique that could extend a rhythm pattern of only a few seconds to several minutes of ecstatic dance music. The dancefloor exchange between break dancers and the DJ as break producer was a critical element of hip-hop’s evolution.⁴⁸⁷ Herc’s innovation would eventually be replicated by sampling and drum-machine technology, but it was in the break that he found the locus of hip-hop science. Hip-hop’s repetition then is many things at once, including a musical innovation that facilitates that “delicious falling sensation” *ad infinitum*. It is an act of creative destruction—of conjuring and razing—rending a break from out of recorded

⁴⁸⁵ Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, 15-16.

⁴⁸⁶ Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, 79, emphasis added.

⁴⁸⁷ “Sometimes he moves us, sometimes he forces us to make the movement ourselves...” Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, 17.

sound in order to produce new sonic expressions. Rose notes the destructive necessity in sampling, it's inevitable violence to an original composition or recorded performance, yet it also completes its cycle through a recuperative act of healing, through the creation of "communal countermemory." What critics heard as noise, rap's audience heard as the reappropriation of a cultural common that had been enclosed by the forces of market capitalism.

Rose may wish to recuperate rap and restore a seriousness to its study denied by her fellow scholars, but she does not disavow rap's denigration as noise in the process. Her titular invocation of "noise" would have signaled to two audiences at once: the scholars of the new musicology who had embraced Attali's book from a decade earlier, and readers who were already fans of hip-hop. Anyone in the latter camp would have understood "Black Noise" to be in reference to the hugely popular song "Bring the Noise" by rap artists Public Enemy. First appearing on the film soundtrack to 1987's "Less than Zero," the song was released as a B-side and then included on Public Enemy's 1988 album "It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back."⁴⁸⁸ Musically it was an explosive collage of funk rhythms, political speech, and extra-musical sound objects, accelerated to an uncommonly fast 109 beats-per-minute. Lyrically it details the group's prowess, makes nods to Black nationalism, and

⁴⁸⁸ *Less than Zero* (dir. Marek Kaniévska, 1987); *Less than Zero* (Def Jam, 1987); Public Enemy, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (Def Jam, 1988). A few years later Chuck D and Flavor Flav contributed vocals to a cover by the metal band Anthrax, public supporters of Public Enemy who were name-checked in the original, a single that would become a hit in its own right: Anthrax featuring Chuck D., "Bring the Noise" (Island, 1991).

situates the group in its insurgent context within popular music, invoking comparisons to rock music and challenging Black radio's resistance to playing rap.⁴⁸⁹ Taken as a whole, the single is a provocation to the music industry and its resistance to the politicized performances of blackness that Public Enemy exemplified and hip-hop in general. Rose has in some sense taken Public Enemy's praxis of Black noise and repurposed it as a scholarly text cohering the group's message as a theoretical whole. Her radical contribution to this antiphonal exchange was to take the group's commitments to noise seriously and think through their layered implications for sound, technology, and Black life.

Public Enemy's own conception of "noise" operates on multiple levels, denoting the formal content of the group's productions and its cultural position as Avant Garde music, but also the sociological role that the blackness of the music, its creators and its early audience played a part in. As regards its music, Public Enemy's noisiness is not only an allusion to rap's generalized derogation as non-musical noisiness (though it was this too), it also refers to their self-conscious embrace of atonal, dissonant, and traditionally non-musical elements compiled into a complicated

⁴⁸⁹ Public Enemy more explicitly than most Hip-Hop groups was interested in their position vis-à-vis rock music, and the "noise" they're bringing could be interpreted as an update of the Rock-n-Roll tradition. Confirming this take, *Village Voice* rock critic Robert Christgau wrote at the time that "Bring the Noise" was "merely the greatest piece of rock and roll released in 1987." Robert Christgau, "Significance and Its Discontents in the Year of the Blip" *Village Voice*, March 1, 1988. Chuck D makes the point that "Bring the Noise" was an explicit challenge to "so-called Black radio" in multiple sources. See Chuck D, Jah Yusuf, and KRS-One, *Lyrics of a Rap Revolutionary: Times, Rhymes & Mind of Chuck D. Volume 1 Public Enemy (1987-1994)* (Beverly Hills, CA: Off Da Books, 2006), 50.

arrangement of *musique concrète*. The group's musical compositions were produced by a collective enterprise known as "the Bomb Squad" featuring Carlton Ridenhour (the group's primary MC and lyricist using the *nom de guerre* Chuck D), Eric "Vietnam" Sadler, brothers Hank and Keith Shocklee, and Bill Stephey, with contributions from William Drayton (better known by his hype-man's stage name Flavor Flav).⁴⁹⁰ Childhood friends in Long Island, New York, the Bomb Squad began developing a sonic vocabulary while broadcasting weekly on Adelphi University's radio station WBAU, one of the few shows broadcasting hip-hop in the early 80s. In addition to laying down records and tape by other artists, sometimes with guest MCs rapping live in the studio, the group began experimenting with original material, sometimes live on air.⁴⁹¹ They eventually emerged from their radiophonic experiments to produce Public Enemy's debut album for Def Jam records, "Yo! Bum Rush the Show," now with Chuck D as their MC.⁴⁹² The Bomb Squad combined early turntablist techniques inspired by Bronx-based DJs such as Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash, along with maximalist approaches to sample-based collage and electronic beat construction.⁴⁹³ While the producers went on to become pop music hitmakers, their initial work for Public Enemy remains a remarkable example of radical sound art disguised as popular culture.

⁴⁹⁰ The Bomb Squad eventually included Gary "G-Wiz" Rinaldo beginning with Public Enemy's fourth album. Public Enemy, 1991, *Apocalypse 91... The Enemy Strikes Back*, Def Jam, vinyl LP.

⁴⁹¹ Lloyd Bradley, "Public Enemy: Pride & Prejudice" *MOJO*, November 1999. Chuck D, Hank Shocklee, and Eric Sadler were students at the Adelphi studying design, engineering, and music respectively.

⁴⁹² Public Enemy, 1987, *Yo! Bum Rush the Show*, Def Jam, vinyl LP.

⁴⁹³ Andre Gee, "Legendary Producer Keith Shocklee on Being Part of Hip-Hop's Pre-History," *Rolling Stone*, May 14, 2023.

Like most hip-hop artists, Public Enemy's music was made possible by the commercial availability of affordable and portable sampling technology. Freed from the weighty obligations of live instrumentation and mobile sound system culture, while still advancing the experimental cutting and scratching techniques of the Bronx's sound system DJ's, the Bomb's Squad's production took advantage of the dense archive of sound objects stored in their radio station headquarters. Their compositional practice would begin with studio improvisations, "operating as a team, [creating their music] in jam sessions in which records, cassettes, drum machines and all the technology of modern recording serve as the ensemble's instruments."⁴⁹⁴

Rhythms would be constructed and deconstructed ("conjured and razed") from dozens of samples lifted from classic soul and funk records, sometimes reproduced or layered with Sadler's programmed drums. The effect, then and now, is a density of sound that can make locating the specific melodic or rhythmic hook a challenge by comparison to most popular hip-hop productions. Yet this overload of information, combined with its acousmatic effects, provokes an anxious innervation in the listener. Cultural theorist Joshua Clover reflects that for those who came from the Black and urban underclass, "the affective experience of constant pressure, surveillance, and the threat of violence" would be hauntingly familiar, while for the group's many white, affluent and middle-class fans "the sound arrives as an aesthetic attack ... a largely

⁴⁹⁴ Lewis Cole, "Def or Dumb?" *Rolling Stone*, October 19, 1989, 53.

alien experience that refuses to offer itself as pleasure.”⁴⁹⁵ This brought noise was intended to imitate the soundscape of urban space, awash with potentially familiar and possibly disturbing sonic events taken from everyday life. There is something of the dialectical affirmation and negation of hip hop’s conjuration and razing in this schizophonic transmission, acousmatically rendering a dangerous and distant Other embodying the noise of the city.

The Bomb Squad’ production on “Bring the Noise” demonstrates their ability to build political meaning out of a chaotic amalgamation of sound objects compressed into a tight, radio format-dictated three-and-a-half-minute song form. Constructing polyrhythmic dance music out of soul samples and accelerated drum machines cranked to an unusually fast 109 beats-per-minute, the song is thick with their signature citational practice. It begins with the chopped speech of Malcolm X (“too black... too strong”) before erupting with an alarm-like guitar squeal lifted from Funkadelic, cycling over a beat box back beat.⁴⁹⁶ Multiple James Brown records appear, including the widely sampled break from “Funky Drummer,” and Jesse Jackson’s exclamation of “brothers and sisters!” lifted from his introduction to the

⁴⁹⁵ Joshua Clover, *1989: Bob Dylan Didn’t Have This to Sing About* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2009), 33.

⁴⁹⁶ “It’s just like when you’ve got some coffee that’s too black, which means it’s too strong. What you do? You integrate it with cream, you make it weak.” Malcolm X, “Message to the Grassroots,” November 10, 1963, King Solomon Baptist Church, Detroit; audio recording released as Malcolm X, 1965, *Message to the Grass Roots*, Afro Records, vinyl LP; reprinted in *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, ed. George Breitman (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990 [1966]), 3-17; Funkadelic, “Get Off Your Ass and Jam,” 1975, track 6 on *Let’s Take it to the Stage*, Westbound, vinyl LP.

Soul Children’s “I don’t know what this world is coming to!” underpins Chuck D’s own lyric.⁴⁹⁷ The samples, enfolded within the militant imagery of the group’s design aesthetic and the presence of the group’s security force/dance troupe SIW (“Security of the First World”), claim for the group and the Hip-Hop generation more broadly an aesthetic and affective belonging to the tradition of the Black Power movement of the late sixties and seventies.⁴⁹⁸ At the same time, the sheer density and speed of the music asserts a sonic militancy that feels dangerously urgent compared to the conscious popular music of that earlier period.⁴⁹⁹ “Bring the Noise” exemplifies the ways that sampling can operate as a meta-textual commentary on intergenerational Black identity, not ‘borrowing’ from the past (much less ‘stealing’) so much as embracing inherited cultures and traditions.⁵⁰⁰

Possibly due to their having congregated first as radio artists, Public Enemy contextualized their practice through a strenuous critique of mainstream news organizations and Black-owned media, particularly radio, which received vitriolic attacks in numerous songs and interviews.⁵⁰¹ They positioned itself as a critic of the

⁴⁹⁷ <https://www.whosampled.com/Public-Enemy/Bring-the-Noise/samples/>

⁴⁹⁸ S. Craig Watkins, “A Nation of Millions: Hip Hop Culture and the Legacy of Black Nationalism,” *The Communication Review* 4, no. 3 (2001): 373–398.

⁴⁹⁹ Joanna Demers, “Sampling the 1970s in Hip-Hop,” *Popular Music* 22, no. 1 (2003): 41–56. In multiple interviews Chuck D cites Marvin Gaye’s “What’s Goin On” as a musical and conceptual touchstone for “It Takes a Nation of Millions.” See for example: Danny Kelly, “How Public Enemy Became the Most Exciting Band on the Planet,” *New Music Express* (October 1998).

⁵⁰⁰ Joseph Schloss, *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004); Justin Williams, *Rhyming and Stealing: Musical Borrowing in Hip Hop* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

⁵⁰¹ “Radio stations, I question their Blackness / They call themselves Black, but we’ll see if they’ll play this.” On Black-oriented radio and rap see Amy Coddington, *How Hip Hop Became Hit Pop: Radio, Rap, and Race* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2023).

media, but also as an alternative. “We’re almost like headline news,” Chuck D was quoted as saying in an article from 1989, “Rap music is the invisible TV station that Black America never had.”⁵⁰² Public Enemy had constituted itself as a cross between a rock band, a guerilla group, a sports team, and a media organization, with both musicians and non-performing members holding down distinct off-stage roles ranging from design (Chuck D) to security (Richard Griffin, aka Professor Griff) to “media assassin” (Hank Allen). A fully integrated audio/visual/textual project, Public Enemy deployed its signification across mediums, developing a distinct aesthetic protocol that was recognizable in video, on recording, on stage, in its album art, in its iconic style of dress, its branding, its performance style, and its communications to journalists and news media. They transformed hip-hop’s culture, drawing in elements of Afrocentrism and connections to Black Islam that both addressed previous generations and asserted a vivid cultural politic for the next. Public Enemy’s use of Black nationalist and Black power aesthetics was part of a self-conscious project of confrontation and antagonism towards the very institutions that had betrayed the movement for civil rights and produced the conditions of abandonment and containment from which the culture of hip-hop had emerged. Their Black noise was an interruption of communications, a “disturbance in the signaling system” that was popular media.

⁵⁰² “Rap to kids is news to us”, *Austin American-Statesman*, July 26, 1989, A12. Chuck D is likely referring to the popular CNN news program, Headline News. This is the origin of Chuck D’s often attributed misquote, “Rap is the Black CNN.”

Public Enemy also understood their “noise” to be an effect of their performance of blackness in an era where Black masculinity was increasingly being demonized. Chuck D saw himself to be an embodiment of Black rage profanely refusing to be silenced. “If they’re calling my music ‘noise,’ if they’re saying that I’m really getting out of character as a black person in America, then fine — I’m bringing more noise.”⁵⁰³ Here Chuck D is making explicit that there is a relationship to social performance that makes a someone visible as Black and at the same time audible as noise. Fanon registered something similar when in his *Black Skins, White Masks* he reflected, “when I disobey, *when I make too much noise*, I am told to ‘stop acting like a n-----’.”⁵⁰⁴ Both Chuck D and Fanon are delineating a social border policed by an imminent violence which their respective noisiness crosses. They are aware that there are behavioral expectations, forms of comportment, that contingently secure their place in American and French colonial society respectively. When they “get out of character” or “disobey” they become *noisy* and, as Fanon makes explicit, denigrated. They are raced *by* their designation as noise, and their noise indexes the social limits—the *sonic color line*—of racial amity within a White supremacist society.

Public Enemy understood their positionality in relation to power; their namesake’s criminality was made equally explicit in their hyperbolic language and militant performance. All of it was meant to foreground and critique the incongruous

⁵⁰³ Chuck D quoted in Jonathan Bernstein Pat Blashill, Jonathan Blistein, Nathan Brackett, and David Browne, “The 500 Greatest Albums of All Time,” *Rolling Stone*, October 1, 2020, 52.

⁵⁰⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann. (New York: Grove Press 1967), 191. Emphasis mine.

concatenation between blackness and threat that makes everyday Black life dangerous and construes ordinary activities as, somehow, an alien assortment of illegible yet punishable acts.⁵⁰⁵ As Jennifer Stoever makes plain, “noise and loudness frequently function as aural substitutes for and markers of race and form key contours of the sonic color line,” an aural continuation of the social bordering that Du Bois named as a condition of Black containment. The sound of laughter, shouting, crying, talking on the phone, listening to music, etc. are transformed through their racialization, first to (Black) noise, and then to crime.⁵⁰⁶ This sonic color line functions as yet another border that is enforced, a boundary that spatializes blackness, limiting movement and controlling access to socially and geographically delineated zones of inclusion and exclusion. This boundary policing is in part because, as Stephen Best and Saidiya Hartman have argued, Black voices and bodies are rendered unintelligible to juridical and penological systems that remain structurally unchanged since prior to Emancipation.⁵⁰⁷ Thus even as Black noise is policed for being unlistenable, efforts at redress are further thwarted, made unhearable by the arbitrary deafness of “white aurality.”⁵⁰⁸ Bringing the noise is an attempt to turn the tables on power, to insist on being audible without consenting to being intelligible, and with a certain indifference

⁵⁰⁵ This point is made powerfully by artist Dread Scott’s *#WhileBlack* (2018), silkscreen prints which enumerate mundane actions which have resulted in Black people being killed by police.

⁵⁰⁶ Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 13.

⁵⁰⁷ Stephen Best & Saidiya Hartman, “Fugitive Justice” *Representations* 92, no. 1 (November 2005): 1-15.

⁵⁰⁸ Nina Baym, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

to the way that society's rejection of Black music places the noisemaker into a zone of criminality.

"Bring the Noise" would bring Public Enemy unprecedented success, charting and going platinum as part of the full-length album *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, transforming the group into rap music rock stars. At the same time, Public Enemy found themselves increasingly exposed to scrutiny by media figures and politicians who were already hostile to their unapologetically militant and often profane attacks on white American power. The group was forced to publicly disavow a series of unambiguously homophobic and antisemitic comments made by Professor Griff, who was eventually asked to leave the group.⁵⁰⁹ At the same time, the rising popularity of gangsta rap, and particularly the success of the Los Angeles based N.W.A., soon overwhelmed commercial and media interest in Public Enemy's Black nationalist message. The performative embrace of criminality was proving more lucrative than consciousness raising. Rose doesn't apply a moralizing critique of this aesthetic and commercial turn, but she does note that it would become a justification for a growing effort to police and contain rap's fandom that in most major cities were predominantly Black youth. The lyrical and discursive policing that Public Enemy were subjected to as they achieved broad commercial success and wider publicity would be extended to other rap artists and intensified as their lyrical content became

⁵⁰⁹ Jon Pareles, "Public Enemy Rap Group Reorganizes After Anti-Semitic Comments," *The New York Times*, August 11, 1989.

more explicit in its descriptions of sex, drugs, and violence. Ultimately this policing of what is sayable on album, or listenable through car speakers, a juridical snare that continues to criminalize rap artists and fans to the present day, would be extended to other forms of Black life in public which, like rap, would be denigrated as nothing but Black noise.

5.3 Tumult Noir

Rose's critique of rap's policing as described above is clearly not only concerned with aesthetics. She understands the policing of rap music to be part of a longer history and larger structure of segregation and subjugation of Black people. Central to *Black Noise* is a "politics of Black cultural expression," one that demonstrates how the policing of noise can never be separated from the historical policing of Black life and in particular Black assembly.⁵¹⁰ This is a politics of Black noise that combines aesthetics and the sociological in two significant ways. First, she makes the point that rap has a "hidden politics" that is not necessarily intelligible in its lyrical or musical content. "The politics of rap music involves the contestation over public space... it is not just what you say, it is where you can say it, how others react to it, and *whether you have the power to command access to public space.*"⁵¹¹ In other words, the politics of rap music is a contest over Sacred Noise, the power to be heard, to impose one's noise over public space, and to refuse to be made silent. Black noise is a

⁵¹⁰ Rose, *Black Noise*, 99.

⁵¹¹ Rose, *Black Noise*, 124. Emphasis added.

profane appropriation of this sovereign right. This may explain why marginalized members of society can seem performatively noisome in public space. Under regular conditions of policing and the real risk of violence for acting “out of line,” noise—loud voices, vehicular noise, amplified music—can go where bodies cannot. Whether performed live or transduced through car speakers, portable sound systems, or private headphones, rap acts as a mode of profanity, a democratic and rebellious act of taking the power to make noise out of the exclusive domain of sovereign power.

Secondly, Rose makes clear that institutions with power over Black lives, including schools, police, and the media, have reinforced a conflation between rap and the violence of social disorder, policing them socially and discursively as one and the same thing. Since “formal policies that explicitly circumscribe housing, school, and job options for black people have been outlawed,” institutions have to find informal ways of perpetuating race-based discrimination.⁵¹² “Underwriting these de facto forms of social containment is the understanding that black people are a threat to social order,” with Black urban youth are discriminately targeted as “the most profound symbolic referent for internal threats to social order.”⁵¹³ Unlike their white peers, whose music may also be vilified a noisome threat to society, as was the case with heavy metal, Black youth are not victims of the music industry’s predations but rather “coconspirators in the spread of black cultural influence.”⁵¹⁴ Thus Black youth

⁵¹² Rose, *Black Noise*, 125.

⁵¹³ Rose, *Black Noise*, 125-126.

⁵¹⁴ Rose, *Black Noise*, 130. As Rose points out, at the same time as rap was facing intense public scrutiny a cultural panic surrounded heavy metal and its fandom, only in the case of the latter, the

are policed as an internal threat to society, always on the verge of full-fledged criminality. “Not surprisingly, then, young African Americans are in a fundamentally antagonistic relationship to the institutions that most prominently frame and constrain their lives. The public school system, the police, and the popular media conceive and construct young African Americans as a dangerous internal element in urban America; an element that, if allowed to roam freely, will threaten the social order; an element that must be policed.”⁵¹⁵ This discursive and institutional policing of rap, its artists and fans, is only a contemporary instantiation of a long extant tradition of repression, containment, and policing of Black bodies. Like other Black music before it, rap was framed as part of a conspiracy to spread social disorder and criminality, and therefore liable to be policed accordingly.

Neither rap music, nor even the alleged gang activity that it became associated with in popular discourse, were such novel socio-cultural forms that they required an unprecedented response. Rather they were rearticulations of a long continuum of law enforcement projects that have 1) understood the assembly of Black bodies to be a threat to social order; 2) have endeavored to limit the number of Black bodies that can occupy space together; and 3) have targeted public sound making by Black people as noise, either because it is produced through Black assembly, or else because it convokes Black assembly. Under the conditions of structural oppression and

youth were figured as children preyed upon by a satanic conspiracy rather than criminal participants in its furtherance.

⁵¹⁵ Rose, *Black Noise*, 125-126.

institutionalized violence that manufacture racial hierarchy, Black assembly is conceived of as an imminent threat of revolt, an invocation of Passavant's "spectral figure of black insurrection." Passavant sees in the same period of deindustrialization and abandonment that lay the foundations of hip-hop as the moment of neoliberal authoritarianism's ascendance, "built upon the premise of repressing this haunting figure's appearance."⁵¹⁶ Rose registers that rap and its audience evoke this very same haunted figure: "The presence of a predominantly black audience in a 15,000 capacity arena, communicating with major black cultural icons music, lyrics, and attitude illuminate and affirm black fears and grievances, provokes *a fear of the consolidation of black rage*. Venue owner and insurance company anxieties over broken chairs, insurance claims, or fatalities are not important in and of themselves; they are important because *they symbolize a loss of control that might involve challenges to the current social configuration*."⁵¹⁷ Rose hears in the Black noise of rap the spectral audibility of a Black insurrection to come, and the policing of rap acts as a proxy for policing racialized urban youth and the appearance of blackness in public space.

The exercise of this police power has a genealogy, a penological origin that is rooted in centuries-old fear of this insurrection and is coterminous with "blackness" itself. At one point Rose alludes to this deeper history of policing Black noise: "I immediately flashed on a history lesson in which I learned that slaves were prohibited from

⁵¹⁶ Passavant, *Policing Protest*, 15.

⁵¹⁷ Rose, *Black Noise*, 134-135; emphasis mine.

playing African drums, because, as a vehicle of coded communication, they inspired fear in the slaveholders.”⁵¹⁸ The proscription against drumming was one of the New World slave codes that regulated the conditions of enslaved people, determined the limits of their individual freedoms, and defined the punishments for transgressing them.⁵¹⁹ The codes varied widely across colonial empires, but their purpose was always to prevent slave rebellion whether it might be induced by the provocations of leniency or cruelty. Iberian and French colonies had legal traditions pertaining to enslaved African labor that preceded their colonization projects across the Atlantic. Spain’s *Las Siete Partidas* and the French *Le Code Noir* were both based on Roman Slave Law, though to subtly different effects, the former providing more conditions for manumission than the latter.⁵²⁰ The Dutch had no laws regarding slavery, but their colonies were administrated by trading companies who issued “placaaten” to regulate the effects of its trade in people.⁵²¹ The English meanwhile had no tradition of positive law pertaining to chattel slavery, leading to the erroneous belief that there existed no slavery in England, though enslaved people were bought and sold there. The English colonial slavery acts of the 17th and 18th century were not so much breaks from legal tradition as they were legislative responses to what was fundamentally a

⁵¹⁸ Rose, *Black Noise*, 62.

⁵¹⁹ The codes also attempted to regulate the behaviors of freemen and non-Black labor in relation to the enslaved, defining in what manner and circumstances they might interact. Alan Watson, *Slave Law in the Americas* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989).

⁵²⁰ Judith Kelleher Schafer, *Slavery, the Civil Law, and the Supreme Court of Louisiana* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), 1-3.

⁵²¹ Watson, *Slave Law in the Americas*, chapter 7.

new social institution.⁵²² These laws reflect the colonial legislature's recognition of the serious public consequences of the exponential growth of an economy dependent upon an unfree private labor force.⁵²³

Barbados' 1661 Servants Act was the first comprehensive English law regulating indentured servants (primarily involuntarily transported Irish) and enslaved African labor.⁵²⁴ Barbados' updated 1688 Act, as with its earlier Act, would become a standard from which other colonies would reproduce as precedent, Jamaica, South Carolina, and Georgia among them.⁵²⁵ These laws did double work, both establishing legal guidelines for New World mastery and initiating a project of *racecraft*.⁵²⁶ According to historian Edward Rugemer, it is beginning in Barbados that "the historical foundations of race and slavery can be traced to the struggle between the planter elite and a labor force of bound servants and African slaves who resisted oppression."⁵²⁷ Thus even as these laws created the material and social conditions of organized violence necessary to maintain the plantation economy, they also produced

⁵²² Lee B. Wilson, *Bonds of Empire: The English Origins of Slave Law in South Carolina and British Plantation America, 1660-1783* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

⁵²³ Watson, *Slave Law in America*, 63-82 passim.

⁵²⁴ "An Act for the good Governing of Servants, and Ordering the Rights between Masters and Servants," [1661] in *Acts of Assembly, Passed in the Island of Barbadoes, From 1648, to 1718* (London, 1721), 22-29.

⁵²⁵ William Rawlin, "No. 329. An ACT for the Governing of Negroes (10 July 1688)" *The laws of Barbados collected in one volume by William Rawlin, of the Middle-Temple, London, Esquire, and now clerk of the Assembly of the said island* (Barbados: 1699; Ann Arbor: Text Creation Partnership, 2011). Edward B. Rugemer, "The Development of Mastery and Race in the Comprehensive Slave Codes of the Greater Caribbean during the Seventeenth Century," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (July 2013): 429-458.

⁵²⁶ Karen E. Fields and Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (New York: Verso, 2022).

⁵²⁷ Rugemer, "The Development of Mastery and Race," 431.

the discursive and legal preconditions for severing personality from ‘property.’ To maintain this fiction, every effort was made to coerce not only the enslaved, but the free Black, Native, and European community into its reproduction. The enslaved naturally rejected the conditions assigned to them, which led to an array of resistance including theft, flight (also, legally, theft), murder, suicide, quotidian acts of joy, ironic performance, poison, arson, and, at its most extreme, insurrection. To prevent such resistance the planter aristocracy oscillated between disciplinary violence and paternalism, particularly through religious instruction, yet no slave society could avoid slave rebellion.

As I mentioned in my introduction, the Slave Codes also contained regulations on Black noise. Though the proscription of noise itself was rarely codified or used as a justification for other prohibitions, it can be read between the lines in the numerous and extreme restrictions on Black assembly. The congregation of enslaved Africans and freedmen was a site of potential illicit communication, disorderly conduct, and sonic disruption. Behind these concerns was always the fear of conspiracy and rebellion. For while the codes did address *criminal* behavior conducted by and against the enslaved, they also made illicit and punishable “a wide array of slave behavior that did not amount to criminal offenses” such as: congregating on plantations or in town; wandering off plantations without a pass; hunting or strolling with dogs; riding horses (“whereby they convey intelligences from one part of the country to another, and carry on their secret plots and contrivances for insurrections and rebellions”);

owning wooden swords [...] ; "rambling, riding, or going abroad in the night"; building churches; and traveling in groups without a white man.⁵²⁸ Emanating from such otherwise licit practices as described above are the sounds of Black conversation, gossip, animal companionship, military drill, partying, religious worship, and social bonding, but also and always breathing together in the unsurveilled murmur of conspiracy. Deprived of material possessions, conscripted into illiteracy, the vast archive of social creativity that amounted to *slave culture* was a soundworld laden with codes and hidden meanings, "a dynamic, unruly culture that was principally made to be heard."⁵²⁹

The most explicit noise ordinance found in the codes is a ban against musical instruments first implemented in Barbados' 1688 "An Act for the Governing of Negroes," which was an update of the 1661 Servants Act, the first comprehensive English law regulating enslaved labor.⁵³⁰ The 1688 Act included detailed limitations on Black movement and assembly, as well as prohibitions against weapons and instruments.

And for that as it is absolutely necessary to the safety of this Place, That all due care be taken to restrain the Wanderings and Meetings of Negroes and

⁵²⁸ William M. Wiecek, "The Statutory Law of Slavery and Race in the Thirteen Mainland Colonies of British America" *The William and Mary Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (April 1977): 258-280, at 272.

⁵²⁹ Shane White and Graham White, *The Sounds of Slavery: Discovering African American History Through Songs, Sermons, and Speech* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005), 189.

⁵³⁰ William Rawlin, "No. 329. An ACT for the Governing of Negroes (10 July 1688)" *The laws of Barbados collected in one volume by William Rawlin, of the Middle-Temple, London, Esquire, and now clerk of the Assembly of the said island* (Barbados: 1699; Ann Arbor: Text Creation Partnership, 2011); "An Act for the good Governing of Servants, and Ordering the Rights between Masters and Servants," [1661] in *Acts of Assembly, Passed in the Island of Barbadoes, From 1648, to 1718* (London, 1721), 22-29.

other Slaves at all times, more especially on Saturday Nights, Sundays and other Holy-days, [...] and their using, and carrying of Clubs, Wooden-Swords, or other mischevious and dangerous Weapons, or *using or keeping of Drums, Horns, or other loud Instruments*, which may call together, or give Sign or Notice to one another of their wicked Designs and Purposes; and that all Masters, Overseers, and others may be encouraged and enjoined diligently and carefully to prevent the same.⁵³¹

This ban on “loud” musical instruments reflected planters’ fears of African methods for spreading news of rebellion following the 1675 ‘Cormantee’ conspiracy.⁵³² An anonymous pamphlet from 1676 describes the instruments used in the foiled plot as including “Trumpets to be made of Elephants Teeth and Gourdes to be sounded on several Hills, to give Notice of their general Rising, with a full intention to fire the Sugar-Canes, and so run in and Cut their Masters the Planters Throats in their respective Plantations whereunto they did belong.”⁵³³ The plot was exposed by an informant, as many such plots would be, but the lurid imaginings it inspired compelled lawmakers to intervene in any possible future attempts at self-
emancipation or revenge.

⁵³¹ William Rawlin, “No. 329. An ACT for the Governing of Negroes (10 July 1688)” *The laws of Barbados collected in one volume by William Rawlin, of the Middle-Temple, London, Esquire, and now clerk of the Assembly of the said island* (Barbados: 1699; Ann Arbor: Text Creation Partnership, 2011).

⁵³² Hilary Beckles, *Black Rebellion in Barbados: The Struggle against Slavery, 1627–1838* (Bridgetown, Barbados, 1984), 30–42.

⁵³³ Anonymous, *Great Newes from the Barbadoes. Or, A True and Faithful Account of the Grand Conspiracy of the Negroes against the English* (London, 1676), transcribed by Holly Brewer, Matt Fischer, Lauren Michalak, Jordan Sly, “Barbados Slave Rebellion,” *Slavery Law & Power in Early America and the British Empire*, Accessed March 18, 2024. <https://slaverylawpower.org/barbados-slave-rebellion/>.

Anxieties over the insurrectionists' use of the drum was not entirely misplaced. The 'talking drum' was a long-established technology of telephony with roots in the West African nations from which the majority of enslaved labor had been taken to the Americas.⁵³⁴ Wolof, Akan, Yoruban, Songhai and Hausa, among others, brought this form of traditional communication with them through the Middle Passage and, in combination with other musical traditions, developed New World instrumentations and applications. Plantation owners justifiably feared that the drum could act as a "speech surrogate" and thus a tool to organize mass insurrection across vast areas.⁵³⁵ The most famous recorded example of such use is during the Stono Rebellion of 1739. Named for the region of South Carolina where the conspiracy originated, itself named for the Indigenous people displaced by the colony, the Stono Rebellion was led by an enslaved Congolese man popularly remembered as Cato.⁵³⁶ After stealing arms and munitions from a warehouse, a group of approximately 20 insurrectionists began marching south towards Spanish Florida, encouraging others to join, and taking violent revenge on any white residents they came upon. One contemporaneous

⁵³⁴ Ushe Mike Ushe, "The Talking Drum: An Inquiry into the Reach of a Traditional Mode of Communication," *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 3, no. 1 (2015): 110-117; Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

⁵³⁵ Cecilia Durojaye, Lauren Fink, Tina Roeske, Melanie Wald-Fuhrmann, and Pauline Larrouy-Maestri, "Perception of Nigerian Dũndún Talking Drum Performances as Speech-Like vs. Music-Like: The Role of Familiarity and Acoustic Cues," *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (2021).

⁵³⁶ Mark M. Smith, *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005); Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: Norton, 1974); Jack Shuler, *Calling Out Liberty: The Stono Slave Rebellion and the Universal Struggle for Human Rights* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2009); Peter Charles Hoffer, *Cry Liberty: the Great Stono Slave Rebellion of 1739* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); John Jeremiah Sullivan, "Talking Drums," *Oxford American* 107, Winter 2019.

account recalls the group “calling out Liberty, marched on with Colours displayed, and two Drums beating, pursuing all the white people they met with, and killing Man Woman and Child when they could come up to them.” Allegedly drunk on rum, “they halted in a field; and set to dancing, Singing and beating Drums, to draw more Negroes to them.”⁵³⁷ The role of the drum as described here, possibly borrowing from both Colonial and Congolese military traditions, had the effect of communicating at great distance the fact of the rebellion and its location, drawing upwards of 100 to its epicenter.⁵³⁸ A militia soon put down the rebellion and in total 40 of their number were killed.⁵³⁹

It was soon after the suppression of the Stono Rebellion that South Carolina passed the “An Act for the better Ordering and Governing Negroes and other Slaves in this Province,” which codified enslaved Africans as chattel (“absolute slaves, and the subjects of property in the hands of particular persons”) and detailed an array of restrictions and protections based on this designation.⁵⁴⁰ It in every way sought to undermine solidarity between the enslaved, free Blacks, poor whites, and Native Americans, but also among the enslaved themselves. In its descriptions of proscriptions and punishments, the act established in law the total sovereign authority

⁵³⁷ James Edward Oglethorpe, “An Account of the Negroe Insurrection in South Carolina (1740)” in *Publications of James Edward Oglethorpe*, Edited by Rodney M. Baine (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 252-255.

⁵³⁸ John K. Thornton, “African Dimensions of the Stono Rebellion” *The American Historical Review* 96, no. 4 (October 1991): 1101-1113.

⁵³⁹ Oglethorpe, “An Account of the Negroe Insurrection in South Carolina (1740),” 255.

⁵⁴⁰ John F. Grimke, *The Public Laws of the State of South Carolina From Its First Establishment as a British Province Down to the Year 1790* (Philadelphia: R. Aitken and Son, 1790), 163-174.

of white over Black.⁵⁴¹ Its prohibitions against Black travel and assembly clearly had the recent insurrection in mind, and among other rules limiting communication between the enslaved, the act outlawed the use of drums.⁵⁴² This was an update to an earlier Carolinian slave law from 1691 modeled after the Barbadian code of 1661, an unsurprising source given that island's role in the earlier formation of the planter colony. The post-insurrection Carolina code revised in 1740 was modeled on the post-insurrection Barbados code of 1688, but it also borrowed heavily from the Jamaican Slave Act of 1684, that island colony having likewise experienced numerous rebellions shortly prior to enactment.⁵⁴³ A version of this same family of law, including provisions against masters and Whites "allowing persons of color or slaves to beat drums, blow horns or allow public meeting or feastings of strange slaves," would be adopted with some variation by Georgia in 1755.⁵⁴⁴ In all these cases of Black assembly—noisy, fugitive, unruly, spirited, erotic, autonomous, mournful, unsupervised, secret—the law compelled others to intervene and reinforce the bounded social world (or social death) of the enslaved.

⁵⁴¹ Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Towards the Negro, 1550-1812* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969).

⁵⁴² Shuler, *Calling Out Liberty*, 4.

⁵⁴³ "An Act for the Better Ordering of Slaves", in *The Laws of Jamaica, Passed by the Assembly, and Confirmed by his Majesty in Council, April 17, 1684. To Which is added, the State of Jamaica, As it is now under the Government of Sir Thomas Lynch. With a large Mapp of the Island* (London, 1684), 140–48; This genealogy is worked out in Rugemer, "The Development of Mastery and Race."

⁵⁴⁴ Watson, *Slave Law in the Americas*, 69; "An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negros and other Slaves in this Province," (1755)

Black assembly was generally a source of existential fear for the planter class. As early as 1526 in the first settlement in what is today the United States, insurrection and the conspiracies that aspired to it were a feature of colonial worlds.⁵⁴⁵ Up until the abolition of slavery in the 19th century no less than 250 conspiracies and rebellions by enslaved people had been recorded.⁵⁴⁶ Following the revolution in Saint Domingue, the plantation societies that surrounded the Island in all directions intensified their resolve to contain any possibility of rebellion. The Haitian revolt erupted out of the ferment of radical humanism that guided the revolution in France and its concepts of equality and universal ‘Rights of Man’ circulated on the “common winds” of popular communication among the Caribbean colonies through pamphlets, gossip, songs, newspapers, and hushed conversation.⁵⁴⁷ Vodou, with its midnight mass of ritual dancing and drumming, became associated with the revolt’s African influences, intensifying the slave-owning class’s fears of Black assembly. Even after declaring independence the rituals were banned in the newly formed nation of Haiti for fear of their subversive effect.⁵⁴⁸ Revolutionary leader Toussaint Louverture’s

⁵⁴⁵ Hebert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), 163.

⁵⁴⁶ Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 162. This number is certainly an undercount. In his 1943 study Aptheker defines slave insurrection or conspiracy as requiring “a minimum of ten slaves involved; freedom as the apparent aim of the disaffected slaves; contemporary references labeling the event as an uprising, plot, insurrection or the equivalent of these terms.” (162) He concedes that a more liberal definition would greatly increase the total number of such incidents, as would inclusion of rebellions and plots conducted on slave ships. In an article from 1987, Aptheker accounts for additional research made by himself and others up that point, though he does not hazard an updated “total number” of insurrections or plots. Aptheker, “American Negro Slave Revolts: 50 Years On,” *Science & Society* 51, no. 1 (Spring, 1987): 68-72.

⁵⁴⁷ Julius S. Scott, *Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution* (New York: Verso, 2018).

⁵⁴⁸ David Patrick Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).

1800 decree banning “nocturnal assemblies and dances” revived prerevolutionary prohibitions against vodou ceremonies that had been first written into *Le Code Noir* in 1685 and then decreed by Police Rulings in 1758 and 1777. These laws criminalized assembly near a Master’s house or in a remote place, for weddings or funerals, day or night, and banning drumming and singing not associated with field labor.⁵⁴⁹ It would seem that the specter of Black insurrection continued to haunt Haiti as a threat against power and its rule by domination irrespective of its racial constitution.

The threat and promise of insurrection inspired by Saint Domingue created uneasy alliances between Spanish, English and American colonies in an attempt to contain the spread of universal human rights. The arrival of tens of thousands of French refugees, free people of color, and St. Domingue slaves generated a climate of paranoia in coastal towns and among the plantations, provoking sympathy but also a xenophobic fear of conspiratorial intentions. The arrival of French planters and their enslaved Africans had significant effect on the francophone colonialists in New Orleans who had already in 1724 developed a slave code in order to defend against slave conspiracies, of which there had been many.⁵⁵⁰ New Orleans had become a

⁵⁴⁹ Martin Munro, *Different Drummers: Rhythm & Race in the Americas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 25-27; Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 244; Leslie G. Desmangles, *The Faces of Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

⁵⁵⁰ Thomas N. Ingersoll, “Slave Codes and Judicial Practice in New Orleans, 1718-1807,” *Law and History Review* 13, no. 1 (Spring, 1995): 23-62. This code was largely devised from the 1685 *Code Noir*. See also Daniel Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt* (New York: Harper Perrenial, 2010).

Spanish possession in 1763 and thus laws addressing slavery fell under *Las Siete Partidas* until the establishment of the Black Code of 1806 following the territory's incorporation into the United States. While musicking was not expressly forbidden under any of these laws, other typical prohibitions on Black assembly, mobility, and sociality were included.⁵⁵¹ A meaningful exception was made in Congo Square, an open space where the enslaved were allowed to trade, make music, and dance together on Sundays under the supervision of their masters. It's in this zone of exception that there developed a hybrid pan-African music native to that site, often referred to by music historians as the origins of jazz.⁵⁵² Following the Saint Domingue revolt, with the arrival of refugees from the island, voodoo took hold in the territory, but in Congo Square it was secularized as a performative music and severed from its ritual technology. In many ways Congo Square exemplifies the sacrificial noise theorized by Jacques Attali, channeling the revolutionary energies that could have seen the Haitian revolt spread north into American plantations into music and myth.⁵⁵³

⁵⁵¹ Schafer, *Slavery, the Civil Law, and the Supreme Court of Louisiana*, 5; "An Act Prescribing the Rules and Conduct to Be Observed with Respect to Negroes and Other Slaves of This Territory," Act of June 7, 1806

⁵⁵² Marshall Steams, *The Story of Jazz* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1956), 50-55; Jerah Johnson, "New Orleans's Congo Square: An Urban Setting for Early Afro-American Culture Formation," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 32, no. 2 (Spring 1991): 117-157; Catherine Gunther Kodat, "Conversing with Ourselves: Canon, Freedom, Jazz" *American Quarterly* 55, No. 1 (March 2003): 1-28; Bryan Wagner, "Disarmed and Dangerous: The Strange Career of Bras-Coupé," *Representations* 92, no. 1 (Fall 2005): 117-151.

⁵⁵³ In addition to the aforementioned origins of jazz and voodoo, Congo Square is the alleged birthplace of one of the most important legends of marronage, Bras Coupé. See Wagner, *The Life and Legend of Bras-Coupé: The Fugitive Slave Who Fought the Law, Ruled the Swamp, Danced at Congo Square, Invented Jazz, and Died for Love* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2019).

Under American rule Louisiana further entrenched its commitments to slavery and, following 1806's increasingly violent and punitive Black Code, joined other slave states in outlawing musicmaking under certain by both free and enslaved Blacks. Despite these regulations, Black music was a constant feature of plantation life and in the free Black communities surrounding it.⁵⁵⁴ Gatherings of drummers, dancers, ritualists, and revelers were known to gather at the edges of New Orleans' city limits, and these gatherings often enlisted Creole, Native, and White participants. Following Emancipation, freed Black musicians gained access to the instruments of Napoleonic military marching bands—tubas, clarinets, trombones, and trumpets—appropriating their timings and arrangements to produce a radical reinterpretation of the blues.⁵⁵⁵ Attempting to revive legal distinctions of the earlier *Code Noir* and Black Codes post-emancipation laws in the late 19th century forced the Creole of color community, many of whom had received a French education in western music, into relationship with the Black 'jass' musicians of Uptown, creating a hybridity that transformed the blues-based music of the Black marching bands. Amiri Baraka believed the codes in fact created the conditions that created jazz, because the codes drew a line between "adaption and assimilation," between cultural invention and disappearing into the dominant mass culture, a choice that had once, but no longer, been offered by mixed-

⁵⁵⁴ Shane White and Graham White, *The Sounds of Slavery: Discovering African American History Through Songs, Sermons, and Speech* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005); Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Dena J. Epstein, "Slave Music in the United States before 1860: A Survey of Sources (Part 1)," *Notes*, Second Series, 20, no. 2 (Spring, 1963): 195-212; "Slave Music in the United States before 1860: A Survey of Sources (Part 2)," *Notes*, Second Series, 20, no. 3 (Summer, 1963): 377-390.

⁵⁵⁵ LeRoi Jones [Amiri Baraka], *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow, 1999), 70-80.

ancestry and free legal status. After slavery's abolition the Black laws and eventually the rule of Jim Crow became a line separating the music of the plantation aristocracy from the hypnotic swing of the voodoo informed blues, "and it was this boundary, this no man's land, that provided the logic and beauty of [Black] music."⁵⁵⁶ This division, between an unqualified 'music' and the savage sounds of *Black noise* persisted in the century that followed, even as Black music became synonymous with American culture.

Though the abolition of the slave trade and chattel slavery would eventually repeal the slave codes in Louisiana and elsewhere, the regulation of Black bodies – and *Black noise* - persisted in its wake. Confronted with millions of newly free Black citizens, Southern States fought to retain white institutional power by instituting "Black Codes," a barely disguised revision of the earlier laws regulating slavery, and these too set limits on Black assembly and mobility. These race-based laws were largely a revival of English vagrancy statutes with intent that Black freedmen should be compelled to continue working on their master's plantations or else face arrest.⁵⁵⁷ Emancipation as dictated by the 13th amendment also carved out an exception for the continued enslavement of incarcerated persons, a caveat that emboldened the aggressive and purposeful imprisonment of Black Americans as a means of producing free labor and maintaining "Plantation Bloc" power in the postbellum era.⁵⁵⁸ These

⁵⁵⁶ Jones, *Blues People*, 79-80.

⁵⁵⁷ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 199-201.

⁵⁵⁸ Eric Foner, *The Second Founding: How the Civil War and Reconstruction Remade the Constitution* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2020); Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*; Clyde Woods,

vagrancy laws remained essentially intact for a century, giving police license to charge individuals with utmost discrimination throughout the period of Jim Crow, until the Civil Rights-era Supreme Court decided that being able to "stand on a public sidewalk... only at the whim of any police officer" was unconstitutional.⁵⁵⁹ While the legacy of this decision and the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 signaled an end to overtly race-based policing, in practice and by design many laws regulating assembly, houselessness, movement, and noisemaking have continued to be tailored in ways that disproportionately target Black people, along with Native American, Latino, and poor White communities.

This elaboration on Rose's "history lesson" is intended to convey a continuity of legislating and policing Black assembly from the establishment of New World slavery to the b-boys and b-girls in the streets of 1980's New York City. New York was never a center of the slave trade, nor host to the kind of plantation culture that characterized many of the states and colonies described above, but slavery is inextricable from its history. There exists records of African-diasporic residence in the Munsee Lenape island of present day Manhattan as far back as 1613.⁵⁶⁰ The

Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta (New York: Verso, 2017). Du Bois notes that although "Negroes were no longer real estate ... Negroes were liable to a slave trade under the guise of vagrancy and apprenticeship laws." (167)

⁵⁵⁹ *Shuttlesworth v. City of Birmingham*, 382 U.S. 87 (1965), 90-91; *Papachristou v. City of Jacksonville*, 405 U.S. 156 (1972); Gary Stewart, "Black Codes and Broken Windows: The Legacy of Racial Hegemony in Anti-Gang Civil Injunctions," *The Yale Law Journal* 107 no. 7 (May 1998): 2249-2279.

⁵⁶⁰ Jan Rodriguez was left behind on Manhattan by the Dutch explorer Thijs Volchertz Mossel, Captain of the *Jonge Tobias*, to hold the island as a claim. Rodriguez married into the Algonquian-speaking Lekawe (Rockaway) and upon arrival of other Dutch merchants declared himself a "freed man" though his former master called him a "black rascal." Graham Russell Hodges, *Root & Branch: African*

colony of New Amsterdam continued to host a mix of free and, beginning with the 1626 sale of 16 enslaved Africans by pirates to the Dutch East India Company, enslaved Black residents.⁵⁶¹ When New Netherlands was ceded to England and the “Duke’s Laws” became the basis for legal slavery, the status of Black freedom was maintained, but so was the institution of slavery.⁵⁶² Though the State would begin a gradual process of abolition at the turn of the 18th century, New York’s codes regulating slavery were as severe as those found further south, a reflection of both the relative size of the enslaved population and the influence of wealthy Barbadian planters and slave owners who brought with them techniques of repression and a racial conception of slavery from the West Indies.⁵⁶³ Colonial norms soon overtook English law, and the kinds of social proscriptions and violent punishments found in other English colonies became commonplace in New York.

This included the regulation of Black noise. As early as 1692 an ordinance was passed condemning any enslaved person discovered “playing or making any hooting or disorderly noise... or found in a publick house” on a Sunday to be whipped twenty times.⁵⁶⁴ The 1702 “Act for Regulating Slaves” distinguished enslaved people as a distinct juridical subject, and strictly regulated their assembly, alleging “that they

Americans In New York and New Jersey, 1613-1863 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 6-7.

⁵⁶¹ Graham Russell Hodges, *Root & Branch*, 8.

⁵⁶² Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Towards the Negro, 1550-1812* (New York: Norton, 1969), 85; “The Duke of York’s Laws, 1665-75,” *The Historical Society of New York Courts* (Albany, New York: New York State Library, 1809).

⁵⁶³ Russell, *Root & Branch*, 36

⁵⁶⁴ *Minutes, Common Council, New York City, 1665-1775*, i, 134, quoted in Edwin Olson, *The Journal of Negro History* 29, no. 2 (April 1944): 147-165.

have been found oftentimes guilty of Confederating together in Running away, or other ill Practices”⁵⁶⁵ Among its prohibitions and limitations the Act stated that no more than three enslaved persons could meet at one time without their master’s consent, a crime punishable up to 40 lashes.⁵⁶⁶ Laws against Black assembly restricted the numbers that could gather at funerals and forbade gathering at night.⁵⁶⁷ The Act would be reinforced after an insurrection in 1712 and again following the exposed conspiracy of 1741, suggesting that New Yorker’s anxiety over Black assembly was prescient, and likely attempts at suppressing conspiracy became a contributing cause of slave rebellion.⁵⁶⁸ Even after slavery was abolished in New York State in 1827, anti-abolition sentiment remained intense. Spurred on by fears of miscegenation and anger over Black congregants occupying formerly white-only spaces, nativist New Yorkers from the white working class and European immigrant communities participated in a terrifying series of riots in the summer of 1834.⁵⁶⁹ As the New York Police Force transformed from a municipal to metropolitan force, many of its members were hired from these same constituencies leaving a lasting impression on the force and its relationship to Black New Yorkers.

⁵⁶⁵ Acts of assembly, passed in the province of New-York, from 1691, to 1718

⁵⁶⁶ Olson, “The Slave Code in Colonial New York”, 152-153.

⁵⁶⁷ Olson, “The Slave Code in Colonial New York”, 153.

⁵⁶⁸ Olson, “The Slave Code in Colonial New York”; Thomas J Davis, *A Rumor of Revolt: The "Great Negro Plot" in Colonial New York* (New York: Free Press, 1985).

⁵⁶⁹ Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

In the final decade of the 19th century, waves of immigration and in-migration coincided with the development new industrial technologies for production and transport. These urban transformations provoked a rapid expansion of the repertoire of noise ordinances in New York City, some of which sought to address the deleterious impact of industry on ordinary citizens, but many of which seemed designed to aid police in containing the tumult of the blooming populations that filled city streets.⁵⁷⁰ Nearly one million new New Yorkers arrived after 1890, and the city's total population doubled in the years leading up to the second World War.⁵⁷¹ Meanwhile the Great Migration of Black Americans fleeing the Jim Crow South led to a seven-fold increase in Black New Yorkers, primarily converging in Harlem and the boroughs of Brooklyn and the Bronx.⁵⁷² The exponentially increasing density of urban living, combined with racial animus and xenophobic anxieties, directed sonic policing towards mitigation by means of containment. These prohibitions are notable because of their peripheral relationship to the primary acoustic concerns of city dwellers. As Emily Thompson has shown, the majority of noise complaints through to the 1930s had shifted from social noises to the sounds of motorized transport, machinic factories, and the amplified audio of mechanical noise.⁵⁷³ New York Police and Health Commissioners combined efforts in 1908 to issue General Order 47, an

⁵⁷⁰ Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity*.

⁵⁷¹ Jane Allen with tables by Nathan Kantrowitz, "Population", in *The Encyclopedia of New York City*, edited by Kenneth T. Jackson (New-York Historical Society & Yale University Press, 1995), 910-914.

⁵⁷² Henri Florette, *Black Migration: Movement North, 1900–1920* (Garden City, N. Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1975); James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York: Atheneum, 1975); Jervis Anderson, *This Was Harlem: 1900-1950* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981).

⁵⁷³ Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity*, 115-168 passim.

attempt to revive already extant but underenforced noise ordinances that included the abatement of industrial noises, but in its execution enforcement of that order targeted everyday street life, including musicians, vendors, and “shouters.”⁵⁷⁴ As Schafer lamented in his brief history of noise, the Sacred Noise had transmitted its uncensurable powers from church bells to factory whistles and car horns, but the ordinary profanity of everyday life continued to be punished and silenced.

The noise of the street wasn't the only thing being policed in response to New York's turn-of-the-century transformations. Black music, particularly Jazz, faced unique scrutiny, seemingly motivated by what Thompson called “a curious conjunction of racism and antimechanism” that disparaged the music as a proxy for changing demography and technological assault of American progress.⁵⁷⁵ In 1926, the New York City Cabaret Law was passed strictly regulating any business combining food, alcohol, dancing, and music. The law applied to “... any room, place or space in the city in which any musical entertainment, singing, dancing or other similar amusement is permitted in connection with the restaurant business or the business of directly or indirectly selling public food or drink.”⁵⁷⁶ To avoid being designated a carberet and therefore free from the onerous requirements of the license, the only instruments that could be played were strings, keyboards, and sound systems, and the number of musicians who could perform at one time had to be three or less. This clearly targeted

⁵⁷⁴ Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity*, 124.

⁵⁷⁵ Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity*, 130-132.

⁵⁷⁶ Paul Chevigny, *Gigs: Jazz and the Cabaret Laws in New York City* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 56.

venues that hosted the large ensembles that performed jazz and their instruments – drums, brass, and wind – which were central to its musical vocabulary. Even after Prohibition’s repeal, the political context under which control of speakeasies, dance halls, and illegal alcohol consumption had served as the law’s initial justification, police continued to use it as a tool of social control. Beginning in the 1940’s, musicians were required to apply for “cabaret cards” in order to perform in New York City, a process which involved visiting a police station for fingerprinting and photographing. Until the policy’s discontinuation in 1967, the police could arbitrarily revoke the card, or refuse its biannual renewal, as it did for musicians such as Thelonious Monk, Billy Holiday, and Miles Davis, giving the police remarkable control over not only the clubs but the workers within them whose success challenged their racial, classed, and gendered positions within society.⁵⁷⁷

Though enforcement was relatively lax through the 70’s and 80’s, the Cabaret Law was still in full effect at the birth of hip-hop. The carve out for amplified music became a workaround for DJ’s to be able to perform, and the “three-musician rule” meant it was easier—and cheaper—for clubs to hire a DJ than the musicians whose records they played. Once again, the aesthetic innovations of rap were unintentionally supported by the political economy of neoliberal racial capital. By the 1990’s a campaign of police raids against unlicensed bars and clubs became a prominent

⁵⁷⁷ Nate Chinen, “The Cabaret Card and Jazz: Nefarious nuisance or blessing in disguise?,” *Jazz Times*, May 17, 2012.

feature of the era of “Zero Tolerance” instituted in by then New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani.⁵⁷⁸ Under the leadership of Chief William Bratton New York Police were ordered to directly target city residents who were allegedly engaged in disturbing the peace or who were otherwise accused of minor crimes that affected “quality of life” under the presumption that such misdemeanors produced the conditions of more serious crime. These policies were the realization of a decades long conservative reaction to the urban uprisings of the 1960’s, a view that equated civil disobedience and the movement for civil rights with a “crime crisis.”⁵⁷⁹ Aggressive and restrictive policing policies were implemented as the public face of Nixon’s anti-Leftist, anti-Black power “War on Drugs” campaign, accelerating what would be a decades-long process of mass incarceration.⁵⁸⁰ The possession and sale of minor quantities of illegal drugs led to mandatory minimum sentences, sometimes for life, but other “quality of life” crimes including minor property damage such as graffiti and petty theft became villainized as part of this same crisis. Public space became a highly contested “war zone,” and a chain of causality was traced between

⁵⁷⁸ Andrea McArdle and Tanya Erzen, eds., *Zero Tolerance: Quality of Life and the New Police Brutality in New York* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2001).

⁵⁷⁹ Passavant, *Policing Protest*, 102-106.

⁵⁸⁰ In a 1994 interview John Ehrlichman, Nixon’s White House Council, gave this account: “The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people. You understand what I’m saying? We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.” Dan Baur, “Legalize It All: How to win the war on drugs,” *Harper’s Magazine* (April 2016).

more serious forms of violent crime and quotidian forms of street life that included buskers, loiterers, youth at play, and amplified music.

The argument for such interventions into minor forms of illicit, and even technically legal, behaviors often rested upon an application of the “broken windows theory” first put forward in 1982 by James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling.⁵⁸¹ According to the authors’ analysis, crime is fundamentally a breakdown of social order that scaffolds exponentially from minor infractions to felonious violence. “Social scientists and police officers tend to agree that if a window in a building is broken *and is left unrepaired*, all the rest of the windows will soon be broken.”⁵⁸² The primary source of their claim is a 1969 study conducted by Philip G. Zimbardo, the same social scientist who co-created the infamous Stanford Prison Experiment.⁵⁸³ Wilson and Kelling willfully misinterpret Zimbardo’s findings to be an argument for the “connection between visual cues of disorder and neighborhood deterioration,” a

⁵⁸¹ James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling, “Broken Windows: The Police and Neighborhood Safety,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (March 1982), 29-38.

⁵⁸² Wilson and Kelling, “Broken Windows,” 31, emphasis in original.

⁵⁸³ Craig Haney, Curtis Banks, and Philip Zimbardo, “Interpersonal Dynamics in a Simulated Prison,” *International Journal of Criminology and Penology* 1 (1973): 69-97; Philip G. Zimbardo, “The Human Choice: Individuation, Reason, and Order versus Deindividuation, Impulse and Chaos,” in *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation*, ed. William J. Arnold and David Levine (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969), 287. Zimbardo left identical 1959 Oldsmobiles, each with removed license plates and a propped hood intended to suggest abandonment, one in the affluent home of Stanford in Palo Alto, California, and one in his former hometown of the Bronx. While the initial results of Zimbardo’s experiments conformed to his expectations—the car in the Bronx was quickly stripped for parts while the one in Palo Alto remained untouched—he was surprised to discover that an initial act of vandalism by the researchers themselves immediately escalated into an orgy of destruction that included Zimbardo, his graduate students, and eventually passersby. Zimbardo saw this surprising event of Bataillean excess as a demonstration that there is something inherent to the nature of a crowd, its anonymity and contingent social license, that when combined with social inequality could motivate vandalism regardless of social norms.

conclusion from which they infer that the aggressive policing of minor elements of (audio)visual disorder can prevent the devolution of a city into the socio-economic disaster signified by the Bronx. This claim, widely embraced by police forces eager for greater license, barely disguises a racially and economically biased view of causality that abstracts the actual material conditions that broke the windows of the Bronx.⁵⁸⁴ The policing approach inspired by the theory of broken windows, and exemplified by Giuliani and Bratton's policy of "zero tolerance," has widely been rebuked and is seen as having contributed to the greater criminalization and exposure to premature death of those targeted, Black Americans in particular.⁵⁸⁵

Though initially targeting jazz clubs, the Cabaret Law and later Zero Tolerance policies would be used against many forms of musical assembly, including unlicensed experimental music venues, bars that allowed dancing, and even the decades-long regular assembly of Afro-diasporic drummers in public spaces such as Marcus Garvey, Thompkins Square, and Central Park.⁵⁸⁶ In 1986 the American Federation of Musicians brought a failed case to the New York Supreme Court arguing that the instrument rules were discriminatory. Despite such legal challenges, and a well-

⁵⁸⁴ Bench Ansfield, "The Broken Windows of the Bronx: Putting the Theory in its Place" *American Quarterly* 72, no. 1 (March 2020): 103-127.

⁵⁸⁵ McArdle and Erzen, *Zero Tolerance*; Bernard E. Harcourt, *Illusion of Order: The False Promise of Broken Windows Policing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Jordan T. Camp and Christina Heatherton, eds., *Policing the Planet: Why the Policing Crisis Led to Black Lives Matter* (New York: Verso, 2016).

⁵⁸⁶ Francis R. Bradley, *The Williamsburg Avant-Garde: Experimental Music and Sound on the Brooklyn Waterfront* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023); Ruth Saxelby, "How You Can Help End N.Y.C.'s Racist No-Dancing Law," *The Fader*, May 10, 2017.; Berta Jottar, "Zero Tolerance and Central Park Rumba Cabildo Politics," *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 5, no. 4 (November 2009).

documented disregard of the rules by many business owners, the Cabaret Law was only repealed in 2017.⁵⁸⁷ It is suggestive that the code's repeal was contained as a subsection of a new law that required affected business to install cameras and security guards.⁵⁸⁸ Changes to the Cabaret Law, an ordinance that originated as a means for police to surveil and control licentious and "wild" behavior, seems only to have been accommodated by the promise that the venues themselves would shoulder that responsibility of privatized policing.⁵⁸⁹ It is hard in many of these cases to disentangle racialized policing and the regulation of noise. When a marginalized group is targeted for policing, whether by those who initiate a complaint, or by officers directly, their noisemaking may have only been deemed an intolerable disturbance because of how it was racially coded (Marie Thompson's "noise-as-unwanted source"), or it may merely have been a useful pretext for racially motivated harassment. As was also true a century ago, *actual* noise complaints lodged by residents in New York are today primarily in response to industrial and commercial activities that have no overt racial

⁵⁸⁷ *Chiasson v. CONSUMER AFFAIRS*, 132 Misc. 2d 640 - NY: Supreme Court 1986. There were numerous campaigns to abolish the code over the near century of its existence. Though the act was modified in 1986 to account for its discrimination against specific instruments, it otherwise remained intact for another 30 years. Davide C. Levy, "Opinion: New York City's Cabaret Law is Pulling the Plug on Jazz," *The New York Times*, April 3, 1987. At the time of its repeal in 2017, only 127 out of more than 12000 bars and clubs in New York City were cabaret license holders. Alan Krawitz, "Ninety years and counting for New York's outdated cabaret law" *Metro* [online], March 21, 2016; <https://www.metro.us/ninety-years-and-counting-for-new-york-citys-outdated-cabaret-law/>.

⁵⁸⁸ "Establishments previously required to obtain a cabaret license must continue to abide by requirements 1) to install and maintain security cameras and, 2) if they employ security guards, to ensure such security guards are licensed pursuant to state law and to maintain a roster of such security guards." The New York City Council Int. No. 1672 (2017).

⁵⁸⁹ "Well, there has been altogether too much running 'wild' in some of these night clubs and, in the judgment of your committee, the 'wild' stranger and the foolish native should have the check-rein applied a little bit." Recommendation No. 10, Proceedings of Board of Alderman and Municipal Assembly of City of New York [Dec. 7, 1926], at 577; quoted in Chivigny, *Gigs*, 55-56.

character.⁵⁹⁰ At the same time, even if it isn't quantifiable just how much race determines any respective police response or its consequences, the decibels animated by an individual's stereo system in direct competition with the Sacred Noises of industrial capital are disproportionately policed compared to their relative impact on the communities around them.⁵⁹¹

Rose's intuition that there is something in common between the prohibitions against African drumming in the era of slavery and the discursive and material policing of rap music in her own time is borne out in the long history of racial codes regulating Black assembly. These laws and prohibitions are not only found in the plantation societies of the Southern United States and the Caribbean but also in places such as New York where Black Americans fled "North" in search of economic prosperity and bodily freedoms. The fear of Black assembly that motivated these laws attach the noisiness of these assemblies, their *tumult noire*, to the same proximate violence that Le Bon attached to the Crowd in his day. The tenuous grasp on control that the masters held over the enslaved required a constant vigilance and isolation to defend their possession of the dispossessed, to keep at bay the profanity of Black noise which

⁵⁹⁰ The NYC Department of Environmental Protection's "A Guide to New York City's Noise Code" which details frequently heard "sounds of the city" and their approximate decibel levels places "stereo/boom box" (110-120dB) in the sound pressure continuum between "Jackhammer/Power Saw" (110 dB) and "Thunderclap" (120 dB). New York City Department of Environmental Protection, *A Guide to New York City's Noise Code: Understanding the Most Common Sources of Noise in the City* (2018), 2.

⁵⁹¹ New York City's Department of Environmental Protection's 2022 report on noise complaints shows that social noise such as "loud music" (371 complaints) barely registers compared to "construction" (25,141), "air condition/ventilation equipment" (3,946), "barking dog" (7,311), or even "ice cream truck" (1,508). New York City Department of Environmental Protection, *Local Law 53 Annual Report Calendar Year 2022*.

surely sounded like a prophetic judgement announcing the imminent impossibility of abolition. The reorder of things that followed emancipation was of course incomplete, and one can hear in the petty policing of Black musicmaking the haunting specter of Black insurrection as some kind of overdue revenge against power. Rose senses this prophetic power in rap's hidden politics: "Emerging from the intersection of lack and desire in the postindustrial city, hip hop manages the painful contradictions of social alienation and prophetic imagination."⁵⁹² The noisiness of Black noise is its expression of the abolitionary imaginary, its radical vision of the world as it is—exploitative, violent, unjust—being abolished completely, replaced as Du Bois' abolitionary democracy once promised with new institutions for living otherwise.

5.4 Black Sound Study

The genealogy above traces the long historical arc of policing noise as a means for policing Black people. It can also be read as its inverse: a genealogy of Black resistance and fugitivity *through noisemaking*, made audible in the anxieties and legal weaponry of slave societies and their afterlives. Given the role that soundmaking and perceptions of noise have had in the struggle for freedom, it should be no surprise that contemporary Black critical thought has embraced sound studies as part of its rich interdisciplinary praxis. Black study has long been a source for thinking socially,

⁵⁹² Tricia Rose, "A Style Nobody Can Deal With: Politics, Style and the Postindustrial City in Hip Hop," in *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music & Youth Culture*, ed. Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose (New York: Routledge, 1994), 71. Her use of the word "manages" suggests a certain amount of accord with Attali's assessment of music's role as containing latent social violence.

aesthetically, and critically through sound, from the epigraphs of Du Bois' *Souls of Black Folk* and Zora Neale Hurston's ethnographic theories of "Negro expression," to the wide-ranging contemporary theorizations of "Black noise" developed by Saidiya Hartman, Fred Moten, Alexander Weheliye, Kathrine McKittrick and others.⁵⁹³ Black scholarly approaches to sound studies has been *primarily* concerned with music and culture as spaces for race politics to be understood and as expressions of Black life.⁵⁹⁴ As a consequence, the contributions of Black critique to the field of sound studies, which some critics say is overrepresented by the perspective of white settler masculinity, have at times seemed like a parallel but disconnected stream of scholarship.⁵⁹⁵ The predominantly anglophone and francophone project of academic sound studies reflects post-War interests attuned to technology, information theory,

⁵⁹³ Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folks*; Zora Neale Hurston, *The Sanctified Church* (New York: Marlowe and Co., 1997); Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14; Stephen Best & Saidiya Hartman, "Fugitive Justice" *Representations* 92, no. 1 (November 2005): 1–15; Moten, *In the Break*; Kathleen McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2006); McKittrick, "Rebellion/invention/groove" *Small Axe* 20, no. 1 (2016): 79–91; McKittrick & Alexander G. Weheliye, "808 and Heartbreak" *Propter Nos* 2, no. 1 (Fall 2017): 13–32.

⁵⁹⁴ Some influential late 20th century work in this vein includes Greg Tate, *Flyboy in the Buttermilk: Essays on Contemporary America* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1992); Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*; Alexander G. Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Julian Henriques, *Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques and Ways of Knowing* (London: Continuum Books, 2011).

⁵⁹⁵ Gustavus Stadler, "On Whiteness and Sound Studies," *Sounding Out!* (July 6, 2015); <https://soundstudiesblog.com/2015/07/06/on-whiteness-and-sound-studies>; Mitchell Akiyama, "Unsettling the World Soundscape Project: Soundscapes of Canada and the Politics of Recognition," *Sounding Out!* (August 20, 2015); <https://soundstudiesblog.com/2015/08/20/unsettling-the-world-soundscape-project-soundscapes-of-canada-and-the-politics-of-self-recognition/>; Marie Thompson, "Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies" *Parallax* 23:3 (2017), 266–282; Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

ecology and environmentalism, as well as the study of music and culture.⁵⁹⁶ While race and coloniality does make an appearance in this growing corpus, it has rarely done so as explicitly or centrally as more recent scholarly interventions have insisted it should.⁵⁹⁷ This seeming deafness to a differently situated experience of sound and noise has been challenged in multiple ways but nowhere more consistently than through its meeting with Black critical thought.⁵⁹⁸

Were we to bracket off and explicitly “Black” sound studies it would be a sound studies that draws upon, and is in dialog with, both Black critical theory and the dominant current of academic sound scholarship, even as it converges with other disciplines and subdisciplines. As is the case in sound studies more generally, science, technology, media, and communications are central to Black sound studies, though with perhaps a more capacious understanding of these terms.⁵⁹⁹ Tavia Nyong’o has defined Black sound studies as “the interdisciplinary study of how black subjects transform, and are transformed by, sound, music, and, in particular, audio

⁵⁹⁶ Chen-Peng Yeang has made the point that “sound-studies scholars who have paid attention to noise have concentrated exclusively on sonic noise,” which is to say that they have ignored the contributions of historians of probability and statistics, and information sciences. Yeang, *Transforming Noise*, 6-9.

⁵⁹⁷ Greg Steingo and Jim Sykes, “Introduction: Remapping Sound Studies in the Global South,” in *Remapping Sound Studies*, ed. Steingo and Sykes (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 1-37.

⁵⁹⁸ I should clarify here that my use of “Black critical thought” does not assume that authors identify as “Black” or part of an African diaspora. I use the terms to distinguish instead the extent to which a given text is actively examining the phenomena that constitute blackness and Black life as its central purpose, and in doing so is thinking with others whose work is doing likewise.

⁵⁹⁹ There is much discussion, for example, of what George Lewis calls “the spiritual dimensions of black engagement with technology,” (142) where African and Afro-diasporic religious practice can be thought of as technology. George E. Lewis, “Foreword: After Afrofuturism,” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 2 no. 2 (May 2008): 139–153. See also Philip Butler, *Black Transhuman Liberation Theology: Technology and Spirituality* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

technology.”⁶⁰⁰ Sound is critically a technology of the body and, following Nyong’o, Black sound studies compels us to “listen to the black body as a musical and technical instrument that resounds at frequencies that confound its routinized, racialized instrumentalization.”⁶⁰¹ Nyong’o’s descriptions rhyme with the tradition of *Afrofuturism*, a polymorphous array of speculative projects that have often looked to musical creators (Sun Ra, Parliament Funkadelic, even Duke Ellington) as foundational.⁶⁰² Afrofuturism was inspired by the commercial and critical success of Black electronic music, the contribution of Black ideas to 1990’s cyberculture, and cultural inquiry into different literary forms of Black speculative imagining. Afrofuturism’s method and means extend well beyond the sonic, however, and not all encounters between technology and blackness are inherently Afrofuturist.⁶⁰³ Erik Steinskog, one of the few scholars to attempt an overview of Black sound studies as a distinct if “still undefined field,” sees its connection to Afrofuturism as “lines of thought that can be used for study and new discussion of black sonic culture, black

⁶⁰⁰ Tavia Nyong’o, “Afro-philosophical Fictions: Black Sound Studies after the Millennium,” *Small Axe* 44 (July 2014): 173-179, at 174.

⁶⁰¹ Lewis, “Forward: After Afrofuturism,” 142; Nyong’o, “Afro-philosophical Fictions,” 174.

⁶⁰² Paul Youngquist, *A Pure Solar World: Sun Ra and the Birth of Afrofuturism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016); John Corbett, *Extended Play: Sounding Off from John Cage to Dr. Funkenstein* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994); Graham Lock, *Blutopia: Visions of the Future and Revisions of the Past in the Work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

⁶⁰³ The term ‘Afrofuturism’ originates in the writing of Mark Dery: “Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture – and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future – might, for want of a better term, be called ‘Afrofuturism’.” Dery, “Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose,” *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, ed. Mark Dery (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994), 179–222, 180. Other foundational texts of Afrofuturism include Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet Books, 1998); Alondra Nelson, “Introduction: Future Texts,” *Social Text* 20, no. 2 (2002): 1–15.

studies, popular music studies.”⁶⁰⁴ As George Lewis proposed a few decades earlier (in what he erroneously believed to be a post-Afrofuturist moment), “broadening the conversation” around Afrofuturism “would allow a wider range of theorizing about the triad of blackness, sound, and technology.”⁶⁰⁵ What Lewis calls “black technological engagement” is central to Afrofuturism, and the same can be said of Black sound studies.

The question arises then of how *noise* has been taken up by Black sound studies. Most often it has been invoked in reference to an ongoing aesthetic misrecognition of black musical creation as an “unmusical sound.” In an act of irony and linguistic subversion, “noise” is used by scholars to describe Black musicking to make explicit the ways that dominant systems of aesthetic value have been unable to recognize Black musical creation *as music*, or as musical innovation, and have attempted to suppress through various means Black musical performance. This is of course the way that Rose, inspired by Chuck D, takes up “noise” in response to rap’s rejection as legitimate music. But this is not the only sense that contemporary Black critical thinkers have articulated a metonymic relationship between the sound of Black life and Black life itself. There are three different valences by which “noise” has been taken up in recent decades as a resource for Black critical thought, the *aesthetic* defense of Black music’s derogation being only the first. We also find that the

⁶⁰⁴ Erik Steinskog, *Afrofuturism and Black Sound Studies: Culture, Technology, and Things to Come* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 3.

⁶⁰⁵ George E. Lewis, “Foreword: After Afrofuturism,”.

metonymy between ‘noise’ and blackness has been nurtured to describe a *sociological* tension that holds ‘blackness’ as uncontrollable, resistant, disruptive, anarchic, loud, unintelligible, and dangerous. A third valence consists of noise’s use as a metonymy for what some have claimed to be blackness’ *metaphysical* excessiveness. In this context, ‘noise’ is part of a semiotic assemblage that attempts to articulate how blackness functions as a kind of psychic, or even ontic disturbance. Thus far I have explored through Rose the interrelation between aesthetics and the sociological, but contemporary work in Black sound studies has developed an even greater theoretical investment in the metaphysics of blackness, using ‘noise’ as one of its terms of art.

‘Noise’ has joined in an intertextual lexicon produced by Black study, a metonymic chain that links (*Black*) *noise* to a blooming multiplicity of theoretical concepts autochthonic to the field. These words are meant to mark a contiguous relationship between blackness and adjectival expressions of Black being as something that always exceeds its containment. *blackness*, according to Fred Moten, “is before the binary that has been said to define our existence” by which he means that it precedes the sociological construction of blackness “as an effect of the color line, which is to say the white/nonwhite binary which orients it and by way of which it is plotted.”⁶⁰⁶ It is thus *anachronic* and *anachoreographic*, defying both teleology and the spatial fix

⁶⁰⁶ Fred Moten, *Stolen Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 33-35.

that has attempted to settle race as a historic and geographic project.⁶⁰⁷ This elision of containment in time and space is a fugitivity that theorists such as Moten purport to be inherent to blackness, a seemingly essential characteristic that exceeds formal and structural limits placed upon Black bodies. This excessiveness, or as Nahum Chandler has called it, “exorbitance,” is a characteristic of movements, performances, encounters, feelings, and thought that have enduringly troubled a world constituted by the historical mass enslavement of African people.⁶⁰⁸ Articulating these qualities in ontological, aesthetic, phenomenological, ethical, and epistemological terms has emerged as a collective project of radical Black philosophy, or as Moten describes it, “Black Study.”⁶⁰⁹

Thus noise has entered a concatenation of metonymy, a grammar that attempts to enact the phenomena it describes: the escape from intelligibility that is an essential condition of modern colonial systems of control.⁶¹⁰ Taking as only one example, in

⁶⁰⁷ Fred Moten, “blackness,” Erica R. Edwards, Roderick A. Ferguson, and Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, *Keywords for African American Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 27-29; Anthony Reed, “The Black Situation: Notes on Black Critical Theory,” *American Literary History* 34, no. 1 (Spring 2022): 283–300; Camilla Hawthorne and Jovan Scott Lewis, eds., *The Black Geographic: Praxis, Resistance, Futurity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023).

⁶⁰⁸ “The Negro is produced as an exorbitance of thought: an instance outside of all forms of being that truly matter...” (355). Nahum Chandler, “Of Exhorbitance: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought,” *Criticism* 50, no. 3 (2008): 345-410.

⁶⁰⁹ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. New York: Minor Compositions, 2013); Andrew J. Douglas and Jared Loggins, “The Lost Promise of Black Study,” *The Boston Review* (September 28, 2021); Joshua Myers, *Of Black Study* (London: Pluto Press, 2023).

⁶¹⁰ fahima ife’s prefatory note at the start of her *Maroon Choreography* offers a characteristic survey of “the poesis of black study” with a cluster of unattributed but widely circulating terms: “study, waywardness, tarrying, ritual, practice, rehearsal, shoal, ceremony, series, rematriation, wake, duration, intimacy, pause, and refusal.” If you know, you know. fahima ife, *Maroon Choreography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), ix.

Amber Jamilla Musser's recent book of art criticism and theory, *Between Shadows and Noise*, noise functions as an analog for the ways raced and gendered worlds are rendered illegible, unrepresentable, unassimilable, an "uncontained excess" by misogynoir.⁶¹¹ Black noise for Musser is part of "the equation of blackness with being out of place, such that the matter of blackness is perceived as threatening, noisy, and dangerous."⁶¹² Black noise is unwanted because, like Mary Douglas' dirt, it is matter—or sounds—out of place. Musser offers no definition of noise proper, certainly not one that connects it to aurality or signal processing, only a suggestion of phenomenological unintelligibility. Noise appears as just such a floating signifier, an abstraction of an already contingent, subjective, contextually specific set of values. Its given negativity, or perhaps more accurately its denigration of the subject that is noise, also affords that subject the opportunity for escape, because to be noise is to escape the condition of being captured by aesthetic perception. There is in this rendering of noise a metaphysics of freedom. It is a feeling, a sense of possibility, but one that can seem unmoored from the material conditions that might produce that freedom as a concrete reality. To be "out of place" is to already possess a fugitive's status, but it is also a condition of ungrounded non-relation.

The ambiguity of Black study arises from its stylistic commitment to opacity as a kind of theoretical resistance, not unlike the notoriously impenetrable French

⁶¹¹ Amber Jamilla Musser, *Between Shadows and Noise: Sensation, Situatedness, and the Undisciplined* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2024), 2.

⁶¹² Musser, 5.

structuralist writings that Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan calls “cacaphony theory.” Geoghegan describes cacophony theory as a language imitating “a certain kind of rationalism” while at the same time unsettling the “clear and articulate knowledge claimed by technical experts.”⁶¹³ Geoghegan is appraising mid-century French theorists whose writing appeared to embrace cybernetics and its logics of systemic and distanced analysis of the human as an objective science. He claims that this was both a sincere attempt to produce a new language of humanistic study, and an ironic literature of indecipherability aimed at disrupting the “US behavioral sciences increasingly enamored of the idea that noise and errancy might be engineered out of the human condition.” This linguistic play served two purposes. First it made participation in any form of intellectual exchange outside of the coded terms of a particular theorists or theoretical community increasingly difficult.⁶¹⁴ Yet cacophonous theory also served to slow down thought, to force participants in the discourse to read and re-read, to reorganize their own method of thought in ways that departed from dominant modes of scholarship and discourse. At a time when bureaucratic thinking and technocratic language seemed to be consuming all spheres of human society, from politics to medicine to education to policing, “theory” became a means of undermining these logics through imitation. In some sense, Black study practices cacophonous theory in just this way. It produces an interior discourse as a kind of social and intellectual *marronage*, while also staging a confrontation against a

⁶¹³ Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan, *Code: From Information Theory to French Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023), 145.

⁶¹⁴ This was understandably construed as an attempt to create cults of personality, or theoretical “schools” in which adherents became *Lacanian*s, *Althusserian*s, *Foucauldian*s, *Deleuzian*s, etc.

neoliberal academy shaped more than ever by structural exclusions, scholarly specialization, and the existential imperatives of publishing.⁶¹⁵

Rose grasped the role of cacophonous evasion and obfuscation in rap and its “development of black forms and practices that are less and less accessible, forms that require greater knowledge of black language and styles in order to participate.”⁶¹⁶ ‘Noise’ gets conscripted in this project today as both a word standing in for a certain kind of metaphysical unintelligibility and as a signifier of those subjectivities (or, as some argue, objects) that seek to evade a kind of capture. The noisiness of blackness resists. It refuses apprehension, be it through the material apparatuses of surveillance or the (re)commodification of Black performance, restlessly stealing itself away.⁶¹⁷ Blackness and noise share a metonymy in as much as they are both derogated by power and yet neither submit fully to this condition, always in the process of exceeding their containment. What is unclear in how Black study mobilizes ‘blackness’ and ‘noise’ (such as with Musser above) is the extent which either term has an actual material or historical referent. Some contemporary Black critical thinkers have critiqued Black study for jettisoning the formative class conditions and temporalities that shape Black lives in favor of reducing lived experience to, as Nick

⁶¹⁵ This performance of confrontation and incommensurability has proven lucrative and, as was true at the time for the French structuralists mentioned above, practitioners of cacophonous theory are some of the most highly paid writers, teachers, and researchers in today’s academy.

⁶¹⁶ Rose, *Black Noise*, 6. Referencing Baraka’s take on Be Bop, she signals that these forms and practices are a “response to the continuation of the plantation system logic in American culture” that assumes a right extract the riches of Black labor. See Jones, *Blues People*, 181.

⁶¹⁷ Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

Mitchell puts it, “abstraction and analogy.”⁶¹⁸ Blackness (and its metonymy) become a trope that, according to Anthony Reed, relies on “a static, quasi-ontological antinomy rather than antagonism or dialectical struggle” to understand the causes of its condition, “inhering in rhetorical, grammatical, and tropological configurations that are definitionally prior to any history.”⁶¹⁹ If we follow Mitchell and Reed’s critiques, the noisiness of blackness as it has been embraced by cacophonous theory is both anti-historical *and* ante-historical, allegedly produced by an already and always extant *antiblackness*, an anoriginal precondition of modernity in whose wake we are endlessly engulfed in. According to their critique, however, antiblackness is a product of social and material histories that caused it to come into being and decidedly not ontological.

I don’t oppose the use of noise as a resource for thinking through the metaphysics of blackness as a theoretical intervention, but I share Mitchell and Reed’s critical desire to locate this relationship in a material history. Black noisiness has a history, that this history has contingencies which might be addressed in the present, and that we gain future possibilities for radical freedom if we can ground ourselves in the sociological conditions that have produced blackness as a kind of noise. This *sociological* treatment of Black noise does not have to negate the *aesthetic* and *metaphysical* uses of noise I’ve discussed above. This is what has motivated my turn to Rose—her

⁶¹⁸ Nick Mitchell, “The View From Nowhere: On Frank Wilderson’s *Afropessimism*,” *Spectre* (Fall 2020): 110-120, at 119. On the temporal see Reed, “The Black Situation,” 297-298.

⁶¹⁹ Reed, “The Black Situation,” 282-283.

implicit syntheses of these three valences of Black noise. She understands that the (Black) crowd and its noise are policed because of their implicit threat to the social order, and that the rap concert is a concentration of that “Black situation” (to borrow a phrase from Reed). Yet whereas a theorist like Frank D. Wilderson III would say “there is something organic to Black positionality that makes it essential to the destruction of civil society,” and thus also the inverse, Rose refuses to deprive the lives of the musicians and fans she writes about of a history that has produced their conditions.⁶²⁰ This history, of policing, of cultural erasure, of resilience, of creativity, is one that I’ve tried to extend further through a study of Black noise.

Black noise is audible but at the same time derogated as unlistenable, perceived but misapprehended as unintelligible, if heard at all considered unbearably loud, but more than anything it is always and already in advance deemed unwanted. These are social relations; they are relations of power. The sonic tensions that these power relations produce mark individual Black bodies and their noise as representative of its larger aggregate, a collapsing of scales that makes a discrete act of soundmaking indistinct from the *tumulte noir* that threatens societal collapse. William Cheng illustrates this scale jump in his study of the murder of Jordan Davis. Davis was one of four young people embroiled in a verbal altercation with a middle-aged white man at a gas station over the volume of their music. The man, disturbed by Black youth and what he

⁶²⁰ Frank B Wilderson III, “The Prison Slave as Hegemony’s (Silent) Scandal,” *Social Justice* 30, no. 2 (2003): 18, emphasis added.

considered to be their unbearably loud music, and allegedly feeling threatened, shot into the car. Not unlike George Zimmerman or Darren Wilson, Davis's killer seems to have conflated an individual with the whole, a teenage boy becoming the embodiment of the totality of Black America and the haunting specter of Black insurrection. Cheng registers this as a conflation between the Black body and Black noise: "Altogether, stereotypes of black physical excess and black sonic excess implicate the threatening physicalities of black sound and, in turn, the threatening sounds of black physicality."⁶²¹ The unbearably loud rap music, the blackness of the youths in their car, and the perception of criminality engendered by the historical criminalization of both, all of these elements project across the boundaries of the permissible. All of these are varieties of Black noise interpreted as tantamount to violence.

Noise's excess, its innate capacity to spill over "the boundaries of the permissible," is the source of both its raw potential and risk. Sound can go where the body is not permitted, but the forces of containment have found ways to police even these invisible boundaries, as in the example of what Jennifer Stoever has called *the sonic color line*. Stoever takes up the Du Boisean problem of the twentieth century and

⁶²¹ William Cheng, "Black Noise, White Ears: Resilience, Rap, and the Killing of Jordan Davis," *Current Musicology* 102 (Spring 2018): 115-189 (119). To my contention that Rose is cited but not read, Cheng acknowledges Rose as one among many scholars who has written on race and vehicular noise (i.e., "Jeep Beats"), he makes no mention of her other theorizations of rap, policing, and noise, even as he appropriates "Black Noise" for his article's title. To be fair, he doesn't mention Fanon either and perhaps assumed that for musicologists and critical race and ethnic studies scholars the reference was obvious.

shows how “the listening ear” demarcates these boundaries every bit as much as scopic regimes. According to Stoever, “the sonic color line [...] codifies sounds linked to racialized bodies – such as music and the ambient sounds of everyday living – as ‘noise,’ sound’s loud and unruly ‘Other.’”⁶²² This construction of the Other as noisy is not a phenomenon exclusive to race, but it still plays a crucial role in producing racial distinctions: “the sonic color line invokes noise in direct connection to (or as a metonymic stand-in for) people of color, and particularly blackness.”⁶²³ She goes on to say, in a framing echoed by Cheng above, “the sound of hip-hop pumped at top volume, for example, has become a stand-in for the bodies of young black men in American culture.” This, as Stoever points out, can allow the regulation of sound to function as a pretext for the police use of racial profiling that might otherwise be unallowed.⁶²⁴ Thus the sonic color line is an immaterial boundary nonetheless enforced by material violence, policed by both explicit laws and social norms, scaffolded on the needs of racial capital and desires of white supremacy.

The color line is a limit imposed upon Black expression, activity, movement, labor, inhabitancy; it is a border inscribed on no map because it is everywhere at once. The expression, activity, movement, labor, and inhabitation of border-crossing, what historically has been called migration, marronage, or vagrancy, is what Saidiya Hartman describes in its gendered and historically situated form as *waywardness*.

⁶²² Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 12.

⁶²³ Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 13; Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*; Smith, *How Race is Made*.

⁶²⁴ Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 13.

“Wayward” is yet another cacophonous contribution to Black theory, but it also holds other valences, “related to the family of words: errant, fugitive, recalcitrant, anarchic, willful, reckless, troublesome, riotous, tumultuous, rebellious and wild.”

Waywardness is a deviation from norms, from the rule of law, from the mastery of men. It “inhabit[s] the world in ways inimical to those deemed proper and respectable.” It is constant movement (“drifting and wandering ... interminable migrations ... never settling”) but without ends (“unmoored, adrift, rambling, roving, cruising, strolling, and seeking”). To be wayward is “to riot, to strike, to refuse.” It is “a beautiful experiment in living.”⁶²⁵ To be *wayward* is to *get out of character*, to *make too much noise*, to be *Black noise*, crossing *the sonic color line*.

In her book, *Wayward Lives Beautiful Experiments*, Hartman shows how the effervescence of youthful pleasure, “the anarchy of colored girls assembled in a riotous manner,” is metamorphosed into a phantasmic violent disorder by the forces of social control.⁶²⁶ Their “ambulatory possibilities” are entangled in the paradox of their statutory freedom and the traps laid by vagrancy laws imported from England. The young women in her book are stolen away from themselves by the state, imprisoned for living as if they were free. Their freedom is too noisy, too ebullient for the conditions of Jim Crow-era America, even in New York City which as we’ve seen

⁶²⁵ Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019), 227-228.

⁶²⁶ Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 229.

sought to discipline any libidinal pleasure that threatened to place too many Black bodies outside of its police power.

The young women's incarceration proved as noisy as their lives outside. Unwilling to submit to its abuse while imprisoned in New York State's Reformatory for Women at Bedford Hills, the wayward young women housed there embarked on a "noise strike": shouting, crying, hammering at their walls, singing together, screaming, and rattling their cell doors.⁶²⁷ Bedford Hills was and would continue to be a place for rehearsing "the dangerous music of open rebellion" behind caged doors – in 1974 over 200 women took part in the "August Rebellion," rising up against solitary confinement – but it's the "ensemble" of 1920 that marks a particular moment of "black noise" that Hartman wants to listen to.⁶²⁸ A *New York Times* article from the time claims one of the ensemble compared their "medley of sounds" to jazz, and certainly Hartman hears this "black noise of disorderly women" as a "beautiful noise" their profane tumult an "improvised music."⁶²⁹ For Hartman, the riotous noise strike is perfect axis of Black noise's aesthetic, metaphysical, and sociological character—*Black noise = Black music = Black opacity = Black struggle*. The wayward girls incarcerated in Bedford Hills had to riot to be heard because their dreams of freedom were inaudible to a system designed to cancel their noise. As Hartman and Stephen

⁶²⁷ "Girls on 'Noise' Strike," *New York Times* January 25, 1920, pg. 19; quoted in Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 279.

⁶²⁸ Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 283; Victoria Law, *Resistance Behind Bars: The Struggles of Incarcerated Women* [2nd Edition] (Oakland: PM Press, 2012).

⁶²⁹ "Girls on 'Noise' Strike"; Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 232.

Best write elsewhere, “Black noise represents the kinds of political aspirations that are inaudible and illegible within the prevailing formulas of political rationality; these yearnings are illegible because they are so wildly utopian and derelict to capitalism.” Unable to hear Black noise, but unable to ignore it, the newspapers reported that the girls were making “jaz,” what Hartman calls a “synonym for primal sound, unrestrained impulse, savage modernism.”⁶³⁰ To the listening ears of their jailers and overhearers, the riot’s “sonic tumult and upheaval—it was resistance as music.”⁶³¹

Through Hartman we return to my claim for noise’s metonymic chain, to the inseparability of the crowd from its noise, the imminence of its threat to social order that justifies its ontological badness, and ultimately to its promise of other possible worlds. What is left out by the journalists covering the noise strike at Bedford, but restored by Hartman, is that element of Black noise that is a utopian vision, a dream of freedom.⁶³² *Wayward Lives Beautiful Experiments* is intended to be “an archive of the exorbitant, a dream book for existing otherwise,” and the noises it records are meant to be heard as a rehearsal of a different social relation. It’s not a coincidence that the riotous girls were being punished for their interracial solidarity and

⁶³⁰ “DEVIL’S CHORUS SUNG BY GIRL RIOTERS, Bedford Hears Mingled Shrieks and Squeals, Suggesting Inferno Set to Jaz. OUTBREAK PURELY VOCAL Disturbances Vindicate Miss Cobb, Resigned, Says Ex-Manager Barrett,” *The New York Times* July 26, 1920, 14; Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 283-284.

⁶³¹ Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 284.

⁶³² “What we call ‘black noise’ Robin Kelley would describe as a ‘freedom dream,’ or Fred Moten would describe as ‘the surreal utopian ‘nonsense’ of a utopian vision, the freedom we know outside of the opposition of sense and intellection’.” Best and Hartman, “Fugitive Justice,” 14n21. See Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston, 2002); Fred Moten, *Stolen Life* (Duke University Press, 2018), 136.

multiracial eroticism. Much like the multiracial marronage that threatened the social fabric of an earlier slave society, the structure of class war following emancipation depended upon categorical distinctions to maintain its status. The same logic and anxieties regarding multiracial sociality are embedded in the text of the slave codes, black codes, Jim Crow, and prohibition laws.⁶³³ It is not insignificant that the riot begins when a fight pitting multi-racial friends and lovers against the racist white inmates who despised them saw them unite in solidarity when the police attempted to contain the melee. Hartman knows the virtue of noise's metonymy with blackness, its conveyance of the strong sense that Black Americans are trapped in a condition of being unwanted, unlistenable, unbearable, and unintelligible, and that their art and music is doomed to derogation or appropriation. At the same time, she seems convinced that "Black noise" holds an emancipatory promise, that it is a freedom dream, a pure means by which joy and anger can rupture the everyday and let in other possible worlds.

Hartman's Black radical imagination offers a metaphysics of blackness that departs from the pessimistic hold of some of her own early writings, arguing that otherwise possible worlds can be prefigured and rehearsed in the present. This anticipation of "the possible" reimagines the phenomenological and epistemological break promised by Black study, rejecting claims that blackness is an ontological totality. It does so by

⁶³³ Linebaugh and Ridker, *The Many Headed Hydra*; David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 2020).

positing a different kind of escape from capture, an embodied set of practices that includes *thought* as an act of resistance, but without an abandonment of other methods of being in opposition to power. Another contemporary theorist of Black noise, religious scholar Ashon Crawley, refers to this work of materializing imagination as the creation of “otherwise possibilities” in order to “underscore the ways alternative modes, alternative strategies, alternative ways of life *already exist*” and therefore can be cultivated and proliferated.⁶³⁴ Crawley turns to imagination as a resource for collective projects of disruption, of which Black study is a part. “Black study is the force of belief that blackness is but one critical and urgently necessary disruption to the epistemology, the theology-philosophy, that produces a world, a set of protocols, wherein black flesh cannot easily breath.”⁶³⁵ Black study is, like blackness, noise to the “known, the normative, the violent world of western thought and material condition,” which is to say that it disrupts and “unsettle[s] epistemological projects founded upon pure reason, pure rationality.”⁶³⁶ Yet Crawley is committed to exploring how these theories of disruption emerge in the flesh, as embodied performances that make a joyful noise.

Crawley’s theoretical intervention is grounded in a historical project, in the Pentecostal movement the erupted out of a 1906 prayer meeting on Azusa Street in Los Angeles where an interracial, intergenerational, multi-gendered, multi-class,

⁶³⁴ Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath*, 2-4, 6-7.

⁶³⁵ Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath*, 3.

⁶³⁶ Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath*, 3, 5.

multi-national community broke from the norms of segregated worship long established under slavery. In their egalitarian religious commitment to communion through an array of *aesthetic* practices, the participants produced a *metaphysical* rupture that Crawley calls “*Blackpentecostalism*.”⁶³⁷ Blackpentecostalism is offered as a critique of dominant theological and philosophical traditions that have produced and reproduced categorical difference, and it performs this critique through the *choreosonic*, an inseparable cooccurrence of sound and movement. Crawley traces the choreosonic practices of Blackpentecostalism to the ring shouts and drum circles of antebellum America, an origin point of the “joyful noise” of the Black church. The joyful noise of Blackpentecostalism is “a mode of sonic production that refuses sonic purity, using melismatic, melodic irruption, [and] irreducible noise,” to critique Enlightenment thought and its material policing of categorical difference. Like the noise strike at Bedford Hills, Azusa Street’s joyful noise – the testimony and tarry, the glossolalia, the whooping and shouting of the Black Pentecostal church – is a *Black noise* whose disruptive character is inseparable from its practice of a social relation that refuses the categorical distinction upon which power is constructed. Crawley’s claim is this joyful noise disrupts “western theology-philosophy” because the latter “emerges from within the western epistemology of categorical, absolute difference as its operating ground” and therefore “considers noise as always in need of abatement.”⁶³⁸ Noise’s errancy, its inability to be “pinpointed, separated,

⁶³⁷ Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath*, 9-11, 26-27, 36-38.

⁶³⁸ Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath*, 139.

individuated,” confounds the possessive individualism at the heart of rational modernity.⁶³⁹ Its invocation of *collective irrationality* is at the heart of (Black) noise’s proscription.

Crawley’s thinking brings into synthesis the aesthetic, metaphysical, and sociological aspects of Black noise. This becomes evident when Crawley turns briefly and to a reading of the British philosopher and hero of conservatism Edmund Burke and his book on aesthetics, *Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime*.⁶⁴⁰ Much as Crawley attempts to find an embodied materiality in concert with the metaphysics and aesthetics of Blackpentecostalism, Burke helped to accomplish a similar task through his interpretation of Longinus’ theory of the sublime. ‘The sublime’ according to Burke’s aesthetic theories is produced by “whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror.”⁶⁴¹ Terror produces a combination of astonishment and horror, it anticipates our reasonings and “robs the mind of all its powers,” placing in its stead “an apprehension of pain or death.”⁶⁴² In this way, the sublime induces an array of passions, affects of horror, fear, awe, but “indeed terror is in all cases whatsoever,

⁶³⁹ Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath*, 139.

⁶⁴⁰ Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath*, 139; Edmund Burke, “A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful” (1757; second edition 1759) in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful and Other Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, edited by David Womersley (New York: Penguin, 1998).

⁶⁴¹ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 86.

⁶⁴² Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 101.

either openly or more latently the ruling principle of the sublime.”⁶⁴³ Burke’s emphasis on pain and terror would seem to disclude certain kinds of objects and experiences we might commonly associate with sublimity and its enervating or exultant sensations—landscapes, spectacles, artistry, architecture—but his claim is that it is a substrate of horror that distinguishes between the sublime and the ordinary. The sublime is expressed by objects and conditions (*darkness, the ocean, suddenness, magnificence, infinity, vastness, obscurity*) that may present one with feelings of a positive nature but always contain a capacity to induce within us an overwhelming fear. Thus, Burke’s claim that certain colors are conducive to the sublime, among them “sad and fuscous colours, as black, or brown, or deep purple, and the like,” raises the question for Crawley of why terror might be induced by these hues.⁶⁴⁴

Crawley is reading into Burke’s aesthetic theories “the audiovisual encounter of problems,” a source for understanding the work of antiblackness in what he calls “the western theological-philosophical project.”⁶⁴⁵ To begin with, Burke describes the color black’s obscurity, its incapacity to be overseen, its relation to the terrible

⁶⁴³ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 102. Burke goes on to emphasize this relationship by arguing for his own metonymic chain: “Several languages bear a strong testimony to the affinity of these ideas. They frequently use the same word, to signify indifferently the modes of astonishment or admiration, and those of terror. *Θάμβος* [Thambos] is in Greek, either fear or wonder; *Δεινός* [deinos] is terrible or respectable; *αἰδέω* [ahideo], to reverence or to fear. *Vereor* in Latin is what *αἰδέω* [ahideo] is in Greek. The Romans used the verb *stupeo*, a term which strongly marks the state of an astonished mind, to express the effect of either of simple fear or of astonishment; the word *attonitus* (thunder-struck) is equally expressive of the alliance of these ideas; and do not the French *étonnement*, and the English *astonishment* and *amazement*, point out as clearly the kindred emotions which attend fear and wonder? They who have a more general knowledge of languages, could produce, I make no doubt, many other and equally striking examples.”

⁶⁴⁴ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 101.

⁶⁴⁵ Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath*, 139.

sublime, is born of its proximity to darkness: “I must observe, that the ideas of darkness and blackness are much the same; and they differ only in this, that blackness is a more confined idea.”⁶⁴⁶ Burke goes on to say that blackness is “a *partial darkness*,” a non-color that “derives some of its powers from being mixed and surrounded with coloured bodies,” from the phenomenological effect of our distinguishing it from what is not black.⁶⁴⁷ The fear of darkness, and thus blackness, rests in its epistemic resistance and the phantasmic substitutions that haunt it:

For in utter darkness it is impossible to know in what degree of safety we stand; we are ignorant of the objects that surround us; we may every moment strike against some dangerous obstruction; we may fall down a precipice the first step we take; and if an enemy approach, we know not in what quarter to defend ourselves; in such a case strength is no sure protection; wisdom can only act by guess; the boldest are staggered, and he, who would pray for nothing else towards his defence, is forced to pray for light.⁶⁴⁸

One can’t help but read here a mix of psychological and physiological disorientation, a sense of nausea as the distinction between figure and ground dissipates. The sublime experience of darkness, and thus blackness, is vertiginous, dangerous and full of terrors.

This encounter with sublime terror is not merely ocular; noise too is sublime. Crawley calls attention to Burke’s rapid transition from color to sound, implying a continuity

⁶⁴⁶ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 173.

⁶⁴⁷ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 175. See also: Meg Armstrong, “‘The Effects of Blackness’: Gender, Race, and the Sublime in Aesthetic Theories of Burke and Kant,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54, no. 3 (Summer, 1996): 213-236.

⁶⁴⁸ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 172.

of thought as he contemplates the terror of blackness and the terror of noise. Sound's horror is conducted by its relative unbearability, first and foremost its amplitude: "Excessive loudness alone is sufficient to overpower the soul, to suspend its action, and to fill it with terror." Hinting at the idea of Sacred Noise, Burke tells us that the geophonic and belliphonic noises "of vast cataracts, raging storms, thunder, or artillery, awakes a great and awful sensation in the mind." Yet here Burke turns to the anthropological, invoking the riots and wars that shaped his political mind and would define his later writing:

The shouting of multitudes has a similar effect; and, by the sole strength of the sound, so amazes and confounds the imagination, that, in this staggering and hurry of the mind, the best-established tempers can scarcely forbear being borne down, and joining in the common cry, and common resolution of the crowd.⁶⁴⁹

With this apposition, Crawley argues that Burke has constructed a radical audiovisual equivalency, that "fuscous color coalesces with loud sound; blackness is noise."⁶⁵⁰

What Crawley alludes to, but perhaps misapprehends, is a third metonymy—*blackness is noise is the crowd*. Both Burke and Crawley hear a terrific array of unknown possibilities in the *shout*. Burke hears tumult, the possibility of social order overturned by the multitudes. Crawley hears ecstatic antiphony, a metaphysical communion between bodies carried up on their vocal eruptions.

⁶⁴⁹ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 123.

⁶⁵⁰ Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath*, 140.

Perhaps it's peculiar for Crawley to turn to Burke to theorize Black noise as a method of liberation. Historiographers have treated Burke as a paradoxical figure, a "liberal conservative" who sought liberty in the protection of property and progress through the maintenance of tradition. He was outspoken in his sympathy for revolting American colonists and became an icon of conservatism for his opposition to the French Revolution's violent excesses and the spread of Radicalism to England. Karl Marx regarded him a "sycophant" whose politics were swayed by the largesse of oligarchies on either side of the Atlantic ("he always sold himself in the best market").⁶⁵¹ Burke identified himself as an abolitionist ("I should think the utter abolition to be, on the whole, more advisable than any scheme of regulation and reform") but his loyalty to property and the political economy of Empire required he advocate for a gradual manumission contingent upon the "civilizing" effects of religious instruction.⁶⁵² Burke's "Sketch of a Negro Code" proposes some relatively humane reforms to existing law but still contains numerous regulations on Black sociality. He recommends punishments that are nominally less severe (10 blows instead of the more typical 40) for such behaviors as "disorderly conduct during divine service," while also allowing "any free negro [who] hath been twice convicted [of such misdemeanors as] idleness, drunkenness, quarrelling, gaming, or vagrancy" to be sold into slavery.⁶⁵³ Political historian Daniel O'Neill makes abundantly clear

⁶⁵¹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I*, translated by Ben Fowkes (New York and London: Penguin, 1976), at note 13, 925-926.

⁶⁵² Edmund Burke, "Sketch of a Negro Code," (1792) in *The Portable Edmund Burke*, edited by Isaac Kramnick (New York: Penguin, 1999), 183. Daniel I. O'Neill, *Edmund Burke and the Conservative Logic of Empire* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 75-91.

⁶⁵³ Edmund Burke, "Sketch of a Negro Code," 188-189, 194.

that whatever Burke's beliefs about slavery, or for that matter American liberty, he was horrified by the prospect of Black democracy. Burke aligned himself with the plantation aristocracy in St. Domingue and the American south "as a means of preserving [British] empire and fending off the demotic masses of Others, whom he cast in Orientalist terms as 'savage' African slaves revolting from below based on the principles of the rights of man."⁶⁵⁴

Against his own abstract moral views, Burke was driven by an apparent fear of Black masses, of the revenge of the oppressed on anyone above their station, and of the tumult of actually existing revolution. It is perhaps not so unlikely then that Burke's aesthetic theory of the sublime would likewise be haunted by the specter of Black insurrection.⁶⁵⁵ Meanwhile, Crawley's interventions into the theological and philosophical (and sociological) construction of power through his attunement to Black noise resonates with many of the claims I've made thus far: that there is a metonymic chain binding blackness, noise, and the unruly crowd; that fear of violent insurrection conditions the performance of power and its efforts to suppress all forms of tumult, social and auditory; that this process is traceable in the development of

⁶⁵⁴ O'Neill, *Edmund Burke*, 90

⁶⁵⁵ One can't help being struck by Burke's discourse on "darkness" and "blackness" in *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Sublime* (Part IV, Sections XIV-XVIII) and the extent to which it would appear to be a thinly veiled allegory for the abolitionist debate. Section XVIII ("The Effects of blackness Moderated") seems to mirror arguments put forward in his "Sketch of a Negro Code": "Though the effects of black be painful originally, we must not think they always continue so. Custom reconciles us to everything. After we have been used to the sight of black objects, the terror abates, and the smoothness and glossiness, or some agreeable accident, of bodies so coloured, softens in some measure the horror and sternness of their original nature; yet the nature of their original impression still continues."

legal theories and is indexed by legal literatures; that this has a particular history *vis-à-vis* Black people in the wake of modernity; and that Black forms of resistance make audible the affordances and effects of Black noise. Crawley's turn to a Black noise sublime is both diagnostic and instructive. It provides explanation for the metaphysical effects of blackness by a way of a critical reading of an aesthetic theory of empire set against the backdrop of a sociological imagination defined by bourgeois white Christian supremacy. We can sense what is terrifying and excessive about the freedom dreams of Black imagination, of "*Blackpentecostalism*," or, to bring this back to the hip-hop vernacular of Tricia Rose and Public Enemy, why Black noise might incite the sublime fear of a Black planet.

If the work of Hartman and Crawley is any indication, noise will continue to be a critical sign in Black Study's grammar. As is the case with noise more generally, it can be slippery, exceeding any attempt at fixing its meaning. Yet embedded in noise's very root is the tumult of revolt and social disorder. This is no less apparent should we think about, listen to, or perform Black noise. The "crowd" summoned by Black noise is a lingering presence of slave revolt and insurrection. The noise of hip-hop is the noise of Denmark Vesey, of Gabriel from Virginia, of Nat Turner, of the whole island of Saint Domingue, transduced through car stereos, headphones, basement dance parties, and now, improbably, giant arenas. Only power has something to fear from Black noise, but power is more diffuse than ever, its halls and palaces once at its center now destitute, instead distributed with no seeming end across sprawling

networks. What could the unruly crowd possibly burn down to the ground now? The 1977 blackout, like the riots a decade earlier, like the riots in 1992, and 2014, and 2020, show that tumult has no central target. Tumult launches its noisome violence against the whole world, or at least against any part of it that is still scaffolded upon a foundation with a double fracture.

If most scholars of Black noise today hint at the tumult audible in the cut of Black performance, Tricia Rose was explicit. Even so, *Black Noise*'s contribution to political theory and the critique of antiblackness has thus far been largely ignored by the antiphonal literature of Black study. Rose is still relegated, though certainly celebrated, as a matriarch of hip-hop scholarship. Without meaningful exception, she does not appear in citation or bibliographic notes in most of the Black sound studies texts I've discussed above. By reading her work as I have in this study, by positioning her as a political theorist of noise, I'm hopeful that I've provided a corrective to her displacement from the sound studies canon (Black or otherwise) and given incitement to deeper consideration of her work by scholars invested in the historical and material formation of Black life. As I've already suggested above, the brought noise of hip-hop that Tricia Rose highlighted in her scholarship, as exemplified by the Bomb Squad's production, exemplifies those qualities of Black sound studies that form its trinity of *blackness*, *sound*, and *technology*. Yet as 'noise' is taken up by Black philosophical critique, I also hope that Rose's sociological approach to the culture of

hip-hop and its police can help to ground the metaphysics and aesthetics of Black sound in a lived experience of freedom dreaming as practice.

CODE 33, Oakland, 1999

Walking from the street level into the 3-story City Center West parking garage, audience members are confronted by the gauntlet of over a hundred red, black, and white vehicles, hazards and headlights activated. Held within this visual spectacle, at the center of each ring of headlights, are dozens of distinct conversations, police officers in uniform sitting on folding chairs beside local youth and facilitators. The sound of dozens of heated conversations about police and community relations, the (in)justice system, the intractability of certain social problems, reverberate off the cement to become a noisy mass. We, the audience, were asked to eavesdrop on these conversations, auditors with no invitation to speak into the circle. The conversations were the result of two years of negotiated collaboration between Oakland youth and the Oakland Police Department, facilitated by the artist team of Suzanne Lacy, Unique Holland, and Julio Morales. Named after the police code given to clear the radio of signal, this newest iteration of Lacey's ongoing "Oakland Projects" was meant to open a space for truthful speech and listening unmediated by the typical power relations between authority and youth.⁶⁵⁶

Standing in the crowd one felt the distance between the process and emotion that the circle was experiencing and strange isolation and discomfort of being asked to witness someone else's catharsis. However comfortable or familiar the circle might

⁶⁵⁶ Suzanne Lacy, Unique Holland, and Julio Morales, *Code 33: Emergency Clear the Air!* (1997-1999); Suzanne Lacy, "The Oakland Projects (1991-2001)," official website of Suzanne Lacy, <https://www.suzannelacy.com/the-oakland-projects/>.

have been, and this felt tenuous at best, on the outside one was left only with the anxious sense of the situation's precarity. I had not been around this many police in a crowd this large outside of a protest, and ignorant of Lacy's work at the time I had no way of understanding what this gathering served other than to redeem and humanize the dehumanizing violence work I associated with the police.

Early on, even before the sun had set, a noise came up from below the open-air garage, and something shifted among the officers, organizers, and the gathered crowd. I attempted to descend to where the commotion was originating but was blocked by police. I was told that there was a protest outside that was trying to enter the performance and disrupt the event. I would find out later that a demonstration in support of Mumia Abu-Jamal had made the decision to march on the event and, prevented from entering the garage, had gathered out on the street. Any protest might have been enough to put event organizers at ease, but the fact of its explicit support for Abu-Jamal, a Black activist and radio producer who for 17 years had been incarcerated on death row for the alleged murder of a police officer in Philadelphia, certainly shaped their reception. A planned parade of police cruisers and low riders had to be abandoned. Police closed the gates of the garage with the purpose of keeping the 150 or so protestors from entering, effectively trapping people and cars inside.⁶⁵⁷

⁶⁵⁷ Hank K. Lee, "New Police Code in Oakland Lets Teens Speak Out" *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 8, 1999.

In the moment of protest the police were compelled to choose between vulnerability and control. They assumed the demos outside the performance to be a threat, yet in protecting the event they had in effect placed a whole congregation of system-impacted community members into a temporary state of arrest. Most of us failed to notice what had happened, that we had been kettled and separated from the demonstration outside, but it is hard not to wonder, if we had known, what side of the gate we might have chosen. It's possible that the police worried about this as well.

6.0 Noise's Imagination

“Any noise, when two people decide to invest their imaginary and their desire in it, becomes a potential relationship, future order.”

Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*⁶⁵⁸

In the pages above I have shown how the terror of tumult, and an aesthetic hatred of noise, is tied up in the anticipation of its audible world-making and world-destroying potential. This relationship to a chaos brought about by dynamic social disruption is at the very heart of noise's definition, its origins in the sound of a riotous crowd. This may at first have seemed incompatible with the ways we generally think about noise in its common-sense everyday form, as an unwanted sound or signal. It also departs from the dominant debates that have focused on noise in the fast-growing field of scholarship called *sound studies*. Yet as I've shown, a relationship to tumult and the social and political consequences of its threat to power is at the very center of how we hear noise. Even our determinations as to which sounds should qualify as music proper are shaped by a master morality that values the organized sounds of one culture, or one era, over others. Noise's badness is difficult to disentangle from the social relationships that produce and define it. This is why even aesthetic categories are impossible to disaggregate from sociological features. As we have seen through R. Murray Schafer's aesthetic moralism, Jacques Attali's political anthropology, and

⁶⁵⁸ Attali, *Noise*, 143.

Tricia Rose's historical sociology, a study of the dichotomy of music and noise is always a study of power.

Most of this study has been organized by revisiting theories of noise offered by these three canonical sound studies scholars. While each of these scholars has been lauded for their influence on various subfields—acoustic ecology, new musicology, hip-hop studies—that influence has also eclipsed provocative insights that each made as regards power and noise. Schafer's *Sacred Noise* makes a distinction among those sounds that disrupt the soundscape, signaling the exceptional capacity of sovereign power to do so without censure. Attali's *sacrificial noise* shows us how the noise of social disorder can be contained, expelled through a cathartic release, and eventually transformed into a commodity as popular music. Rose's *Black noise* takes up the commercialization and policing of rap music as an example of this process, showing how the long legacy of material and discursive policing of Black people in the Americas is perpetuated in her present. Though rarely saying so explicitly, each of these theorists are aware of the tumult that lays behind their study, the assembled and unruly crowd whose noise is audible behind power's efforts to silence, commodify, and contain it. I argued earlier that there is a political theory of noise contained within this canon that has gone unnoticed; the theory is this: *noise is the prophetic sound of an assembly that possesses a capacity to transform social conditions*. This is tumult, a crowd whose noise anticipates that assembly, an assembly that threatens power, and the sound of that assembly overcoming its containment.

There is something prophetic then about the sound of tumult, a sense that one possible future has slipped in through the seams of history. What does it mean to say that noise undoes the world, abolishes the existing social order, or even more, creates the world anew? The violence that noise heralds, that haunts the imagination of power, is not just the sounds of revolt and its material and bodily destruction that casts the long shadow of revolution. No, it is the sound of the future world that is created out of the process of abolishing the old. It is the sound of prophetic anticipation. It is the sound of a dam breaking as the new world rushes in, dissolving the old under its cascading waters. In the mundane nuisance of everyday cacophony is a hint of the mythic, divine violence that rips the world asunder. In the pages above I have explored some of the limits and boundaries that give shape to the world, and the phenomenon of noise's transgression. I have shown that wherever there is noise, there are limits and boundaries being challenged, that noise gives contour to those limits, moves over, between, and past them. I have shown that noise is that which blurs distinctions, dissolves differences, and for all its vertiginous terror makes real the world made otherwise.

Negative forms of political realism tell us to accept the world as it is, yet the-world-as-it-is is itself a fantasy imposed upon our daily lives. The institutions that structure this fantasy, including borders, prisons, private property, and policing, are not 'natural' conditions necessary for our existence but "the residual dreams of the

powerful.”⁶⁵⁹ To produce a radically different system of social organization based on shared values of real freedom would require imagining that another world is possible. To do so collectively as a practice of social movement is to convoke *the radical imaginary*. Radical imagination is not utopian in its pejorative sense, meaning an escapist fantasy of “no place” dreamed up to take us out of the immiseration of everyday life. Rather it is an experiment in making the world otherwise, a prefiguration in the present of the future world that will be realized only through acts of collective cocreation. As Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish tell us, “the imagination is a collective *process* and not an individual *thing*,” that is to say that radical imagination is a common formed by acting together, not a private property that any one individual can possess.⁶⁶⁰ It is the abolition of *dreams-as-private property*.

Collective dreams are the political program of revolts against pragmatism, of the compulsion to accept what exists as a precondition of what is possible.⁶⁶¹ It is no coincidence that the great theorists of dreams, the international Surrealist movement, were also devoted to the experimental practices of instantiating dreams in material reality. The political dream erupted on the streets of Paris in May of 1968, where the graffitied walls announced a rejection of “reality” in favor of dream and imagination:

⁶⁵⁹ Haiven and Khasnabish, *The Radical Imagination*, 4.

⁶⁶⁰ Haiven and Khasnabish, *The Radical Imagination*, 62.

⁶⁶¹ Stephen Duncombe and Silas Harreybe, “Political Imagination” in Vlad Petre Glăveanu, ed., *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of the Possible* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021); David Graeber, *The Democracy Project: A History. A Crisis. A Movement*. (London: Penguin, 2013).

“I take my desires for reality because I believe in the reality of my desires”; “Be realistic, demand the impossible”; “Power to the imagination”; “Those who lack imagination cannot imagine what is lacking.”⁶⁶² Henri Lefebvre described this explosion of imagination as “the possibilist tendency” meaning “all those who viewed or view the ‘realm of possibilities’ as still open.”⁶⁶³ This is not politics of wish-fulfillment but the logical consequence of social movements. As Robin D.G. Kelly says, “revolutionary dreams erupt out of political engagement; [...] the conditions and the very existence of social movements enable participants to imagine something different, to realize that things need not always be this way.”⁶⁶⁴ Imagination characterizes political thought in all its utopian attempts to present political solutions and models for alternative societies. This practice of imagination has given birth to all manner of ‘futurisms’ that reject claims for a Hegelian end of history in favor of prefigurations that radically reshape the here and now by producing visions of thriving, creativity, and justice.⁶⁶⁵ Many of these visions have convoked what I call the “abolitionary imaginary,” the process by which institutions which produce

⁶⁶² *Situationist International Anthology (Revised and Expanded Edition)*, edited and translated by Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006)

⁶⁶³ “They are the proponents of the potential rather than the real. They go therefore beyond the real and sometimes beyond the rational. They go so far as to proclaim the primacy of imagination over reason. They explore the realm of possibility and want to achieve some of these possibilities. Some of them want to achieve everything.” Henri Lefebvre, *The Explosion: Marxism and the French Upheaval*, trans. By Alfred Ehrenfeld (London, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969 [1968]), 57.

⁶⁶⁴ Kelly, *The Black Radical Tradition*, 8-9.

⁶⁶⁵ adrienne marie brown, *Emergent Strategies: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico: AK Press, 2017); Andrea Ritchie, *Practicing New Worlds: Abolition and Emergent Strategies* (Chico: AK Press, 2023).

unfreedom are speculatively undone, removed from the landscape, and made immaterial phantasms of the past.⁶⁶⁶

How does noise aid the abolitionary imaginary? As I've argued throughout this text it is noise's affective and material effects that transform bodily space, surrounding us in its voluminousness, and permeating the boundaries which divide us. This division between selves structured by social inequities, which are themselves structured by power relations underwritten by violence, instill in us a sense that these conditions are given, natural, universal, culminations of the inevitabilities of history. They are not. These social divisions are fundamentally contingent structures that demonstrate their contingencies by the ever-increasing resort to brute force in order to preserve their existence. As social movements struggle against their limits, calling for the abolition of those boundaries that constrain them, the tumult of protest can spill out and over, under and through, touching body to body through the medium of inchoate sound waves that speak louder than words. Noise in this state is *antepolitical*, precognitive, a sensation, and at the psychic level of the symbolic. Before people assemble its meaning they *sense* noise, and in vibration's touching-touch a line is crossed, a wall breached, a limit transgressed. In this sense the *abolitionary imaginary* is unconscious desire given permission to flourish, portending a consciousness that can go beyond rational restraint, a "consciousness that does not observe the limit, but overflows" and

⁶⁶⁶ Gabriel Saloman Mindel, "Performing Abolition: Paul Robeson in the Canadian Borderlands," *Resonance: The Journal of Sound and Culture* 2, no. 3 (2021): 411-426.

moves to create worlds in an act of radical poesis.⁶⁶⁷ This is poetry as a creative act but also, Kelly reminds us, a way of knowing: “it is *that* imagination, that effort to see the future in the present that [we] shall call ‘poetry’ or ‘poetic knowledge.’”⁶⁶⁸

This is the affordance that I believe noise contains: poetic knowledge, profane knowledge, prophetic knowledge of the order to come. Knowledge does not guarantee action, nor does action guarantee justice, righteousness, or greater freedom. Noise may portend an acceleration towards a world we might desperately wish to avoid, a world of climate chaos, unchecked capitalist accumulations, fascist and white supremacist authoritarianism. Tumult is a rupture in the everyday that allows access to the virtual, a world of the imagination that becomes actualized in the present. This realization of the imagination may be temporary, contingent upon the material circumstances, the actuality of the rupture that allowed it to come into being. The meaning of the prefigurative moment is also changed by the *whatever* that comes next, be it forceful repression, or the twisting of those dreams of liberation into violent forms of cruelty, revenge, and domination. This is the danger of every revolution, that it will unleash unpredictable energies that, once freed, will refuse to be constrained by anything resembling a social order. There is plenty to fear in the madness of crowds, and the violence that is noise that is the entering into our present of the future may yet prove to be worse than the status quo. Yet *this* world, *this*

⁶⁶⁷ “A consciousness no longer Apollonian but Dionysian - consciousness that does not observe the limit, but overflows; consciousness *which does not negate any more*.” Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2012), 308.

⁶⁶⁸ Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 9.

structure of sovereign power and its police, is unlivable for too many, and knowing that it might be otherwise we cannot help but take to the street, unfurl our noise, and hope that our mighty tumult can bring into being a livable world, healed and whole.

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