What Does Protest Sound Like?
Vibrational Politics in an Unsettled Age

A thesis submitted by

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Abstract:

This thesis examines the relationship between sound and political protest during the period of the nascent Trump presidency. Drawing on ethnographic work done from 2016-2017, I advance the following claims. First, I argue that the disordering and reconfiguration of public space creates a condition of possibility for the manifestation of what I propose is a unique political subject comprised of an irreducible multiplicity of bodies. Crucially, it is collective, participatory sound that plays the constitutive role in the coalescence of this subject. I consider a number of case studies, some in which this political subject manifests, and some in which it does not. Second, I suggest that, in addition to the aforementioned political subjectivation, sound can model not just a political project or an ethical relation, but an alternate form of life.

Acknowledgements

This project would not have seen the light of day had it not been for the fantastic support and encouragement I received from the Tufts Music Department. Joe Auner has not only been a marvelous adviser and a careful reader of my work, he has also reined in my worst tendencies toward florid theoretical obscurity, and pushed me to rigorously define and articulate the connections between theory and practice. His comments and critiques have been at once deeply thoughtful and eminently practical, a rare combination indeed. In addition to all of this, his seminar on music and technology had a profound impact on me. I expect to spend the next chapter of my academic life grappling with issues first raised in this course.

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Jeffrey Summit has been gracious enough to allow to work on early versions of various thesis chapters in not one, but two seminars. He has

witnessed this project's germination from vague and rather inchoate idea to its present form. Moreover, he brought an ethnomusicologist's critical eye (and ear) to bear on my work throughout, always pushing me to consider the human factor. This sage advice—that one brackets the musical or sonic experiences of regular people to the detriment of one's work—is something that I will always bear in mind going forward.

I first sketched out the theoretical component of this paper in Melinda Latour's Music and Ethics seminar, and I am much indebted to her for encouraging me to pursue this rather unorthodox path instead of the more traditional paper I was planning to write. I have also greatly appreciated her advice with respect to PhD programs and value especially the frank discussions we have had concerning academia.

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I would be remiss not to mention my fellow Ethno-Bros, Jason and Drew, without whom this time at Tufts would have been much less memorable and enjoyable. But Drew, I'm not paying for any more haircuts…

Finally, I want to thank my family for all their love and support. In particular, I want to thank Dad for many years of tireless proofreading, writing advice, and intellectual conversations; Mom for bearing with such grace the heart-breaking news that there could be another academic in the family (but secretly you always knew, didn't you?); and Isobel, for having the good sense to get a real job! (Incidentally, if things continue on this trajectory, Mom and Dad will have the dubious honor of having one child working for the ISA and the other working for the RSA!)[1]

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[1] See Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses."

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Introduction

Of Sound and Soundscape

There is a curious difference between the sound of one voice, no matter how loud, and the sound produced by a mass of voices. The single voice lances across the soundscape, where, depending on the environment, it might bounce, echo, or resonate before it dies, paradoxically reaffirming its own singularity and impermanence. A shout, a cry, a scream: these are interjections. As they interrupt, they disappear, and while things may not return to normal afterward, the initial sonic disturbance ends.

Multiple voices are a different matter altogether. They weave themselves into a mass, a presence on the soundscape; the air crackles with energy, the space hums with potentiality. For those in the surrounding environment, this creates a palpable and perhaps discomfiting feeling—a physical sensation, in fact. Things are not as they were, something is changed. It is this change that I seek to investigate.

My work flows from a simple question (and its essential follow-up): What does protest sound like? And why does it matter? Sociologists, political scientists, and historians have studied protests, but they have generally ignored the role sound plays in constituting the environment.[2] Human geographers, in studying the built environment, tend to be somewhat better

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[2] Clement, *A People's History of Riots, Protest and the Law*; Fominaya, *Social Movements and Globalization*; Calhoun, *The Roots of Radicalism*; Tarrow, *Power in Movement*; McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970*; Piven and Cloward, *Poor People's Movements*.

attuned to sound, but their focus is primarily on physical structures and the

production of urban space.[3] Similarly, scholars from various disciplines have

studied the origins of human musicality, raising interesting questions about

the function of music-making in human societies, but their work remains

necessarily speculative.[4] While an emerging sound studies literature

considers historical and contemporary sound and urban space, along with

the fascinating and troubling relations between music, sound, and violence,

the issue of protest remains rather understudied.[5] Even Georgina Born's

magisterial *Music, Sound, and Space* mentions protest only in passing.

While no single volume can include all possible topics, the silence is

deafening, so to speak, in this regard.

A cynical rejoinder to this observation would be to suggest that this is

because protest sounds are not that important. Why should we care about

protest soundscapes? Why not focus on the politics of music, or indeed, on

protest music? [6] An initial response might reflect on the simple fact that, as

sound is a perpetual presence in everyday life (albeit one that is seldom

acknowledged or fully recognized), any study of a complex event such as a

[3] Cresswell, *Geographic Thought*; Mitchell, *The Right to the City*; Gandolfo, *The City at Its Limits*.
[4] Mithen, *The Singing Neanderthals*; Bannan, *Music, Language, and Human Evolution*; Tomlinson, *A Million Years of Music*.
[5] Wissmann, *Geographies of Urban Sound*; Lacey, *Sonic Rupture*; Boutin, *City of Noise*; Belgiojoso, *Constructing Urban Space with Sounds and Music*; Krims, *Music and Urban Geography*; Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity*; Daughtry, *Listening to War*.
[6] Teitelbaum, *Lions of the North*; Radano and Olaniyan, *Audible Empire*; Pieslak, *Radicalism and Music*; Fast and Pegley, *Music, Politics, and Violence*; Street, *Music and Politics*; Guilbault, *Governing Sound*; Attali, *Noise*; Eyerman and Jamison, *Music and Social Movements*.

protest that fails to attend to the sonic, is, at best, incomplete, or even seriously compromised. Recent political developments, grim as they might otherwise be, have left us with ample opportunity to address this lacuna. But there is a second, subtler reason to study the protest soundscape.

To suggest that daily life is structured according to habits, codes, scripts, and patterns is hardly a controversial claim.[7] Over the course of this project, I will argue that these habits result in a particular ordering of the soundscape and public space, especially in urban environments, wherein a condition of individuation is dominant. Sometimes, however, there is a rupture, a break. Protest sites, insofar as they disrupt this ordering of public space, represent such a break. The empty place opened by this break creates a novel and unusual condition that I seek to investigate.

I am not suggesting that this condition is *necessarily* true for all times and places. Other places may well differ significantly in their sonic profiles.[8] It would be interesting, for example, to compare the soundscapes of protests with those of other mass events like sporting events.[9] Such a comparative project is beyond the scope of this study, but it might reveal important commonalities as well as crucial differences. For instance, carnivals and the like often take place at particular places at specified times. While the same is undoubtedly true of some protests, it can hardly be said to be true of all.

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[7] See e.g., Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*; Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.
[8] See e.g., Kelly, "Songs and Silence in the Lancaster County Old Order Amish Settlement."
[9] Back, "Sounds in the Crowd."

Thus, I will argue the protest likely disturbs the urban environment in a unique manner. It is this unique disturbance that I will further explore.

Drawing on fieldwork done in 2016 and 2017 across a number of sites in the Boston area, I will demonstrate that sound plays a crucial role in making this break, that is, in reconfiguring not just the soundscape, but public space more generally. A break suggests the opening of a gap or an empty place where none existed before. Thus, a second aim will be to investigate what, if anything, happens in this gap. With that in mind, I consider a number of case studies and advance two claims.

First, I argue that the disordering and reconfiguration of public space creates a condition of possibility for the manifestation of what I propose is a unique political subject comprised of an irreducible multiplicity of bodies.[10] Crucially, it is collective, participatory sound that plays the constitutive role in the coalescence of this subject.[11] I consider a number of sites of protest in constructing these case studies, some in which this political subject manifests, and some in which it does not. Second, I suggest that, in addition to the aforementioned political subjectivation, sound can model not just a political project or an ethical relation, but an alternate form of life.[12] To

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[10] Although their work is in some ways dated, this notion is not dissimilar to ideas found in Hardt and Negri, *Empire*; *Multitude*. The idea of multiplicity is also important in Badiou, discussed below. For more on the notion of the gap or empty place as the site of political authority, see Breckman, *Adventures of the Symbolic*.

[11] David Novak seems to make a similar claim (albeit in passing) with respect to Japanese noise performances. See Novak, *Japanoise*.

[12] On the notion of form of life, see Agamben, "Form-of-Life."

understand how and why this is possible, we must investigate more closely the nature of sound.

What *is* Sound?

Given the omnipresence of sound in our daily lives, we might pause to reflect on its curious twofold character. Generally, our interactions with sound occur in a semiotic or linguistic register, which can obscure the physical infrastructure upon which meaning is constructed. It is all too easy to forget that, on a fundamental level, sound is the vibration of matter. To put it plainly, we interact with sound on a material level of vibrating bodies and eardrums, and it is this more primary level which allows for the emergence of a second-order level of meaning, that of language, symbols, and signs.

We must bear in mind, then, how the sonic disruptions of protest function in these two different registers. The first is that of discourse, wherein sound and speech, music and noise provide an opportunity for protesters to articulate and voice their dissatisfaction. The second is that of brute, vibrating matter. It is this crucial second register that not only contributes to the reordering of the sonic and spatial environment, but that may also provide a foundation for a politics of vibration.

Naomi Waltham-Smith develops a similar position, namely, that "aurality provides a paradigm for politics," which follows from her stronger claim that "aurality is ontology." [13] I am tempted to suggest that, if an ontological claim is to be made, "vibration" may be a superior category to

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[13] See Waltham-Smith, "The Sound of the Outside."

"aurality," insofar as it does not necessitate any *auris*. Indeed, as Steve Goodman observes apropos of "vibrational ontology" (his phrase), "if we subtract human perception, everything moves…at the molecular or quantum level, everything is in motion, is vibrating."[14] I take seriously Nina Eidsheim's claim (discussed further below) that "the way we conceive of our relationship to music could productively be understood as an expression of how we conceive of our relationship to the world."[15] The rest of this project will work through some of the implications of this quite radical reframing of music and sound as a vibrational practice.

Key Terms

While I hope to avoid unnecessary pedantry, a concept like "soundscape" is abstract enough to warrant some further discussion. The classic work here is R. Murray Schafer's *The Soundscape*, wherein he defines soundscape simply as "the sonic environment [in which] the term may refer to actual environments, or to abstract constructions such as musical compositions."[16] This is a good start, but we can be more rigorous by considering each half of the term—that is, the "sound" and the "scape."

"Sound-"

We can obtain a more robust definition of sound by referring to Nina Eidsheim's work. In *Sensing Sound*, Eidsheim makes the provocative claim that our common understanding of music and sound is fundamentally flawed.

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[14] *Sonic Warfare*, 83.

[15] Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound*, 8.

[16] R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1993), 274.

In privileging the aural, she claims, we fail to account for other sensory registers, the "tactile, spatial, physical, material, and vibrational" modes of perception that also inform our experience.[17] Sound, then, is merely a trope, an empty signifier through which we thread our understanding of music.[18]

As a corrective, Eidsheim advances a "reconception of sound as event through the practice of vibration."[19] The way we choose to conceptualize sound has consequences, and Eidsheim aims not merely to redefine our understanding of sound, but ultimately to make an intervention into how we think about "those who sing and listen, and those who are moved and defined through these practices… to understand more about the integral part that music plays in how we forge our relations to one another."[20] This relational element is crucial, and—anticipating the possible critique of her materialist position as totalizing (read: totalitarian)—she asserts, "if a totalitarian position is embraced, it must lie in the relational sphere."[21]

"-Scape"

Having defined the "sound" in soundscape, we need to define the "scape." Instead of "scape," I will substitute the word "space." It is absolutely

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[17] Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound*, 8.
[18] While I will continue to refer to "sound" and "the sonic" for the sake of convenience, I use these terms in Eidsheim's expanded sense. For a further discussion of sound in a similar vein, see Novak and Sakakeeny, *Keywords in Sound*.
[19] Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound*, 3.
[20] Eidsheim, 3.
[21] Eidsheim, 6. While a full reconstruction of the debates the concept of "totality" cannot be offered here, in the eyes of its detractors, "totality means closure and death, the end of difference, desire and non-identity" Jay, *Marxism and Totality*.

crucial here to reject the notion of space as static, as fixed, as immobile, as dead.[22] Rather, we must understand three interrelated points.[23] First, following Doreen Massey, space must be understood as the product of relationships constituted through interactions between people, objects, animals, and structures. These interactions occur on a variety of scales, from the intimate to the impersonal, from the tiny to the immense, from the local to the transnational. Second, space is the sphere of multiplicity. This follows directly from the previous point, namely, that the existence of interactions requires the existence of multiplicity, of heterogeneity. Third, space is never "finished." Instead, it is always under construction. Since space is always the product of relations, it is always in the process of becoming. Recalling Eidsheim's notion of sound as relational practice, then, it would seem that there is no easy manner of disentangling "sound" from "space." Sound and space, then, are co-constitutive of one another. The disturbance and reconfiguration of the realm of the sonic alters the spatial, and *vice versa*. This notion will have significant consequences when we consider it in light of Jacques Rancière's political thought.

"Protest"

I will call a protest any mass gathering of people who, outside the auspices of a major political party, have assembled for reasons they

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[22] For a thorough discussion and repudiation of the notion of space as static, see Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*.
[23] This definition is drawn from Massey, *For Space*.

understand to be political.[24] This definition is vague, but necessarily so, as

the question concerning the limits to the political is also subject to dispute

and contestation. Moreover, this definition also excludes cyber-activism such

as Twitter movements. Such movements, while surely important, are better

understood as a form of organizing or consciousness-raising, in strictly

functional terms.[25]

Methods and Challenges

Perhaps the central challenge of this project is methodological. How

can I observe, measure, record, and document these protests, fleeting as they

are? Does their very impermanence render the usual ethnographic tools

useless? They need not. Like countless other ethnographers, I have spent

time walking, observing, listening, looking, writing, pondering, and, of course,

making hours of field recordings. While my fieldwork sites were more

impermanent, variable, and subject to change than those employed by others,

many basic methodological approaches remained fruitful.

Nevertheless, that I focus on singular events that represent a radical

reconfiguration of the urban soundscape does suggest a certain departure

from the work of other urban ethnographers.[26] In practice, this has a number

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[24] Mass events affiliated with a political party are better understood as
political rallies.
[25] But cf. Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of
Networked Protest* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).
[26] For instance, LaBelle, *Acoustic Territories*; Peterson, *Sound, Space, and the
City*; Samuels et al., "Soundscapes: Toward a Sounded Anthropology"; Sterne,
"Sounds like the Mall of America: Programmed Music and the Architectonics
of Commercial Space"; Wood, "Soundscapes of Pilgrimage: European and
American Christians in Jerusalem's Old City."

of consequences. It is, of course, not possible to revisit events that are, by definition, singular. Thus, to examine just how urban soundscapes are transformed during a protest, I have decided to make mine a comparative approach, considering protest soundscapes not only in relation to one another, but also in relation to the sounds of everyday life. (Implicit here is another question, which I address below: what is a "normal" or "everyday" soundscape?) Moreover, by framing the question in this way, I gain the freedom to do ethnography away from protest sites for later comparison. That is, I can study these same spaces at times when no protest is occurring, and mark the differences in the soundscape.

I should acknowledge that I accept the criticism that mine is perhaps an unscientific technique of measurement, one that is altogether subjective and centered on where I am and whether I am recording. Regardless, I believe I can turn what might otherwise be a methodological weakness into a source of strength for the project by showing that, despite my subject-centered approach, there is nonetheless a shared character—a shared material disturbance—that typifies the protest soundscape.

What I can demonstrate is that certain kinds of change occur: a public, measurable change (about which more below), and a change in my subjective experience of the protest. I will suggest, therefore, that others might share a similar experience. And more than that, I can demonstrate a disturbance in the urban soundscape through visual analysis of the waveforms derived from my field recordings. By comparing the waveforms of recordings made during

normal periods—that is, at those times when no protest is occurring—with

protest waveforms, I can show a measurable change in the soundworld of the

city. Insofar as sound is a material phenomenon, this constitutes an objective

change.[27] This more empirical approach dovetails well with the subjective

and, at times, impressionistic thick description that I offer as my other

evidence. This is not to say, of course, that technologies of measurement

allow for a view from nowhere—far from it. However, they offer a method of

approaching the real that is not purely subjective, and that also allows for a

certain consistency that purely subjective description cannot provide. I am

nonetheless highly aware of the limits to technologies of recording and

measurement, which I consider more fully in the concluding section.

At this point, the obvious question arises: Why did you not interview

participants in these events? In traditional ethnographic work, one spends an

extended period of time with a group of people. In the case of protest, this is

simply not possible, due to the transience and character of the event.

Protests, I would argue, like other spectacular events, are uniquely unsuited

to interviews. The sheer logistical challenge is a major factor. One cannot

easily engage participants in extended interviews, and brief interviews are

unlikely to yield revelatory insights. Moreover, barring some kind of

scientific sampling methodology, given the sheer number of people involved,

interviewing ten, twenty, even fifty people would by no means constitute a

representative sample of varying points of view. What such an approach

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[27] I use the loaded term "objective" advisedly, with full cognizance of the complex set of issues it raises.

would do, I think, would be to create the illusion of greater rigor without providing much rigor at all.

What claims is it reasonable for me to make, then, given the subjective character of this project? As previously stated, I take as an uncontroversial foundational axiom that daily life is structured by repetition, patterns, and the like. This extends to the sonic realm. Moreover, I will demonstrate the crucial role that sound plays with respect to the rupture—to the break with the ordinary—in my case studies. The inferences I draw from this central finding are somewhat more tenuous, but raise fruitful and provocative questions, which, I hope, will inform future research. In my hypothesis—that a political subject may emerge in the context of a protest, and that intentional, participatory sound plays a key role in the process of subjectivation—I neither specify the nature or quality of the sound in advance, nor do I suggest that this subject must necessarily emerge.

Outline of the Thesis

Chapter one begins *in medias res* with a discussion of a spontaneous protest at Tufts University. I then consider the "normal" sonic and spatial environment, paying particular attention to the manner in which space is the product of relations (e.g., legal, political, economic), as well as the modes of behavior and subjectivity produced by the (sub)urban environment. I then discuss how a protest serves to reconfigure this environment not just sonically, but spatially and symbolically, as well.

Chapter two investigates the gap opened by protest. I consider what happens in this gap, and raise the issue of how to unify a diverse group of people assembled into a singular entity capable of acting in the world. I further attempt to understand the meaning of protest, first with reference to the ideas of Charles Taylor concerning recognition, which, in turn, implies a quasi-Levinasian ethical position, wherein the protest stages an encounter that leads to a mutual responsibility of reciprocal care and consideration between parties. This is more effective in theory than in practice, and moreover, neglects considers the protest's content to the exclusion of its form. To remedy this deficient understanding, I draw on the ideas of Jacques Rancière to think the resulting sonic and spatial transformation, along with the political subjectivation that may ensue. Finally, I consider the problem of how to ascertain the relative success or failure of protest in general. Toward this end, I consider two additional case studies, conceding the difficulty of any immediate "diagnostic" work: Was the protest "effective"? Did it "succeed"? These, I suggest, are the wrong questions, and result again from framing protest in terms of communication and recognition (e.g., "our voices have been silenced, but we made them heard!"). Therefore, I suggest that questions of efficacy are better understood through the lens of Alain Badiou's theory of the Event, which, while accounting for chaos and contingency of the present, views things in terms of the *longue durée,* and thus represents a more useful perspective. Badiou is also unafraid to speak in terms of the

much-maligned categories of Truth and the Universal, the rejection of which we might do well to reconsider.

Chapter three presents a final pair of studies. The first deals with a counter-protest at an Alt-Right rally on Boston Common. Throughout this chapter, I draw on all of my tools: thick description, transcription, and the analysis and comparison of field recordings. I demonstrate the changes that occur in soundscapes before, during, and after the protests. The second deals with an unexpected assembly that took place in Boston on the evening of August 16, after the disturbance in Charlottesville, Virginia, in which a woman was killed and many others were injured while protesting a neo-Nazi rally. In the days following, solidarity vigils were held around the country. In this example, we see sound's capacity to provide a means for articulating grief and mourning, and also how sound has the potential to offer a means of healing after trauma. I will further suggest that sound can model not just a political project or an ethical relation, but an alternate form of life. After the cataclysm, the act of singing and the ineffable but nonetheless material quality of communal music making, wherein *something* is there that everybody perceives, acknowledges and yet which mightily resists integration into or articulation through language, might signify not only a process of grieving and mourning, but also a potential way of (re)building another world to come. Using Badiou's parlance, we might refer to Davis Square as an eventual site, a place that creates the conditions of possibility for the occurrence of an Event.

My conclusion concerns technology. I discuss the common thread running through all of my transcriptions, and indeed, throughout the project more generally. This common thread concerns the processes of sound capture (recording) and translation (from vibrations to data to visual representation to musical language). Building on the issues raised in the previous chapter, I consider what is missed in the initial recording process. These reflections raise still more questions that I hope to address in future research.

Chapter One

Towards of a Theory of Protest

This chapter sketches the outlines of a theory of protest. I begin by considering the city, the sonic and spatial environment in which protest occurs. Here I combine my own ethnographic work with some historical and contemporary descriptions of the urban experience. Next, I discuss what happens in the moment of protest itself: the effects protest has on the soundscape, and the ways in which protest transforms space physically, sonically, and symbolically by creating a break with the patterns and rhythms that structure everyday life. After this, I consider a phenomenon that can occur in the gap opened by this break, namely, the process of disindividuation that transpires in the thick of protest. This experience, charged with the energy of participatory sound, may, in turn, lead to a process of political subjectivation, wherein individual differences are suspended, but not sublated. The important point to emphasize is that this subject is not simply assumed to be unmarked, singular, white, and male (as in traditional, and justifiably criticized conceptions of the subject), but instead *multiple and indeterminate.* This is particularly salient in light of the work that has been done on the racialized and gendered voice. [28]

Finally, I examine the aftermath of the event, the return to normalcy. What has happened? What has changed? What has stayed the same? I contend that the experience of political subjectivation enacted by sound

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[28] See e.g., Kheshti, *Modernity's Ear*; Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*.

allows us to understand the world differently, by changing the symbolic

coordinates of meaning with which we structure our existence. The world

remains, yet is transformed. I attempt to think through the consequences of

this transformation throughout the remainder of the paper, drawing

variously on ideas from Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou, and the tradition of

feminist ethics

Before proceeding, let me offer a short case study as preliminary

"evidence." It is my hope that this brief episode will help to clarify and

illuminate the theoretical points I will make in the remainder of the chapter.

In describing this event, I wish to illustrate the critical transition that occurs

in protest, namely, the interruption and reordering of the sonic and spatial

environment. I further track the movement from the individuated subject to

the dissolution of the self, and then the return to normalcy in which things

appear the same, even as they are irrevocably changed. This event, in which,

quite by chance, I was swept up occurred on the Tufts University campus in

February 2017. I present this moment of protest as it unfolded to capture the

confusion of the encounter.

Encounter: Tufts Library (February 2017)

One Thursday evening, I was completing my shift working at the

music library. While preoccupied with thoughts of schoolwork, I was vaguely

aware of some sort of political event that was being held in the auditorium,

as I had seen (through the library window) well-dressed people, surrounded

by bodyguards, entering the building. Earlier, I had made a mental note that

the lobby of the building, crisscrossed with velvet ropes, contained platters of exotic meats, trays of luscious pastries, tureens of fancy pickles, and an open bar. As I was leaving, I noticed the security men looking at me—marking, no doubt, my ill-kempt wardrobe, scowling visage, and slouching personal carriage—and likely perceiving me as a possible security threat, or at least an unwelcome visitor. Their presence suggested that I would not be dining for free that evening.

As I ruminated on the luxurious meal I had lost (and the austere one that would replace it), I heard the unmistakable sound of raised voices, a disruption of the usually calm suburban evening. Although I was entirely unprepared for ethnographic work, I hurried toward the crowd gathered at the front of the building.

Fumbling to remove my phone from my pocket, I realized that this impromptu demonstration must have something to do with whatever was happening inside the building. Peeling the gloves from my hands to work the touchscreen, I plunged into the crowd where, buffeted by bodies and noise, I drank in the scene, glancing down to make sure my phone was adequately capturing the sounds of the energized gathering. After a moment of confusion during which I mistakenly thought my recording was running (it was not), I began to chant. At first, I found myself following along with the call-and-response patterns, agonizing over when to vocalize and when to remain silent. But then this self-consciousness evaporated, and I began to fade, cracks began to emerge in the unitary "I", and I felt myself dissolving into the

crowd and the crowd flowing into the place where, a moment ago, an individual stood. Voices chant, the ego overflows, becoming one of many in the crush of bodies and flesh and voice and noise, a moiling mass, invoked, bound, lashed together with sonic filaments.

The protest is ending. The mass of bodies is fragmenting, the sonic threads unravel, and I feel myself returning. The wind is cold, and I am tired. As I trudge off into the night, I vaguely remember being upset about something before, but there is a gap in my memory. Something has happened, something is changed, something is different.

The next day, I return to the protest site. It is late afternoon, and a chill descends. The sky, salmon pink, is streaked with clouds and jet vapors from the planes passing overhead. By now, I have learned that Massachusetts governor Charlie Baker was the speaker whose presence triggered the protest. A fire alarm in the distance squawks at regular intervals. Voices come and go, flitting across my aural horizon. A car trundles by. A bus rumbles. The vehicles breathe, sucking greedily at the atmosphere, blistering my lungs with acid fumes. With my regular footsteps, I sound unnatural, while the traffic quivers with energy, swelling with life and power. There is certainly nothing I can do, in my current state, to challenge the governor and his ilk. Nevertheless, the ferment of the protest has burned itself into my mind. Yesterday's event was probably not well-planned, well-organized, or even well-publicized. This is not a criticism, for despite this, it reconfigured the soundscape and the physical environment of the Tufts campus. People

assembled in an area not designed for assembly, shouted in a space not approved for shouting. Nothing has changed. And yet the crowd—yelling, chanting, and disturbing the night—has invoked *something*, has tapped into a current of some mysterious energy, a development that has changed everything.

What is this mysterious force? What catalyzed the change that one could perceive? In addition to the central point of this project—that protest creates a break with the sonic and spatial organization of daily life—in this chapter, I discuss one possible outcome of the opening of this break, namely, that participatory sound can produce a political subject comprised of an irreducible multiplicity of bodies. This subject differs significantly from "the citizen" or "the individual," not least with respect to the strength and power of the crowd, counterpoised with the weakness and fragility of the individual. Moreover, the change in the soundscape is a crucial component of this process. But we must start from the beginning: with the sounds of everyday life.

What is the Sound of Everyday Life?

The urban environment is uniquely suited to protest, and one might even infer that the city is a necessary condition for protest to arise, if only because it provides the necessary population density.[29] In any case, my fieldwork took place entirely in urban (or suburban) settings, and my

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[29] The characteristic preindustrial or rural form of expressing political dissent would seem to be some form of violent insurrection, or perhaps the various forms of non-standard resistance discussed in Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*.

findings and theoretical formations reflect this. To establish some basis for comparison (between protest and "normal" soundscapes), it will be necessary to examine the sonic conditions of everyday urban life. There is a significant literature that considers how sound constitutes our experience of the world.[30] Despite differences in focus and disciplinary approach, what much of this work reveals is an urban soundscape of chaotic plurality and chance encounters, of contingency and happenstance, of random outbursts of sound. The reader may have experienced something similar in the daily hustle and bustle of urban life.

The city is a jungle of sound. Mechanized beasts roar, metallic creatures belch acid clouds of vapor, horns screech and cry, breaks howl, swarms of traffic buzz and whine. This chaotic mode of being is the ground state, as it were, of urban life. But the important point is that this roiling chaos is not experienced as such; rather it fades and becomes a sonic backdrop. The mind filters the ceaseless small sonic disturbances until they are barely noticeable.

It would be very difficult, and, more to the point, not especially meaningful, to translate these sounds into standard musical notation. However, waveforms of field recordings can be represented visually. Figure 1 is a visual representation of a ten-minute recording that illustrates the

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[30] E.g., Feld, *Sound and Sentiment*; Sterne, "Sounds like the Mall of America: Programmed Music and the Architectonics of Commercial Space"; LaBelle, *Acoustic Territories*; Samuels et al., "Soundscapes: Toward a Sounded Anthropology"; Wood, "Soundscapes of Pilgrimage: European and American Christians in Jerusalem's Old City."

consistent, if irregular, character of the types of aural interruptions
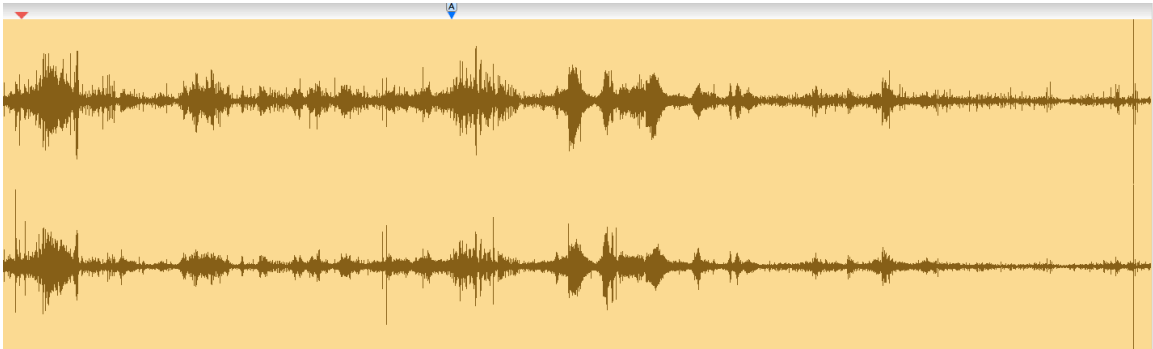
characteristic of the urban environment.

Fig. 1
Field recording of city street
Somerville, MA, evening, 3/30/17

The peaks in the above waveform pattern indicate moments when a

loud noise is registered. The higher the peak, the more violent the

disturbance. While this soundscape is chaotic, it represents neither anarchy

nor the total absence of order. Instead, it is the product of a form of

consensus, an implicit contract to abide by certain rules, under certain

conditions.[31] Maintaining this space of consensus tends to exclude modes of

politics that differ from the formal mode of democratic procedure and

participation—modes like protest. Brandon LaBelle speaks of urban

"acoustic territories" that are "specific while being multiple, cut with flows

and rhythms, vibrations and echoes, all of which form a sonic discourse that

is equally feverish, energetic, and participatory."[32] While LaBelle praises

these qualities and the sidewalk's "fragmentary and mundane democracy," it

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[31] Peterson, *Sound, Space, and the City*.
[32] LaBelle, *Acoustic Territories*.

must be said that he fails to consider how the sidewalk, this "field of local movement and sharing," is constituted by relations of power, law, and capital.[33]

Public space encourages a certain individuated mode of self-presentation and, indeed, of existence. This is not to say, of course, that city-dwellers are absolutely autonomous, or have no relations with one another, or fail to take their social and physical environment into account. At the same time, one generally does not greet—generally does not acknowledge, even—each passerby when walking down the street. On public transport, the individual wearing headphones is "occupied," and is effectively wearing a "do not disturb" sign. To disturb her or him for anything less than an emergency would be to violate a social norm. Even the most energetic defenders of Sartrean "radical freedom" would agree that human society is dependent on such habits, norms, and structures. While these abstract concepts rarely appear as direct objects of thought, I would suggest that most people are generally aware of their existence, if perhaps semiconsciously.[34]

Already in 1903, Georg Simmel pinpointed "the blasé outlook," as characteristic of the "mental attitude of the people of the metropolis… one of reserve… a slight aversion, a mutual strangeness and repulsion…" This is the consequence, he writes, "of those rapidly shifting stimulations of the nerves

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[33] See e.g., Harvey, "The Geography of Capitalist Accumulation"; Harvey, "The Urban Process under Capitalism: A Framework for Analysis."
[34] Of course, this may vary significantly across place and time, as well as across lines of race, class, and gender. The behavior of US middle class city-dwellers circa 2017 is unlikely to be a transhistorical constant.

which are thrown together in all their contrasts…"[35] I claim that this "blasé outlook," this manner of being "together, yet apart" is the default setting for urban environments. This "ground state," while by no means immutable, is likely necessary to navigate the city effectively. Simply put, stopping and greeting every passerby would be a fantastically inefficient means of urban navigation, of getting from one place to another. Sometimes, however, there is a rupture, wherein these abstract concepts—these structures, norms, and habits otherwise taken for granted—become directly sensible, and thus, contestable. A protest is such a rupture.

This rupture can be demonstrated visually, by comparing the waveforms of field recordings made during a protest with those made at the same place at a similar time of day under "normal" conditions. That the moment of protest differs dramatically from the sounds of everyday life under normal conditions should be clear.
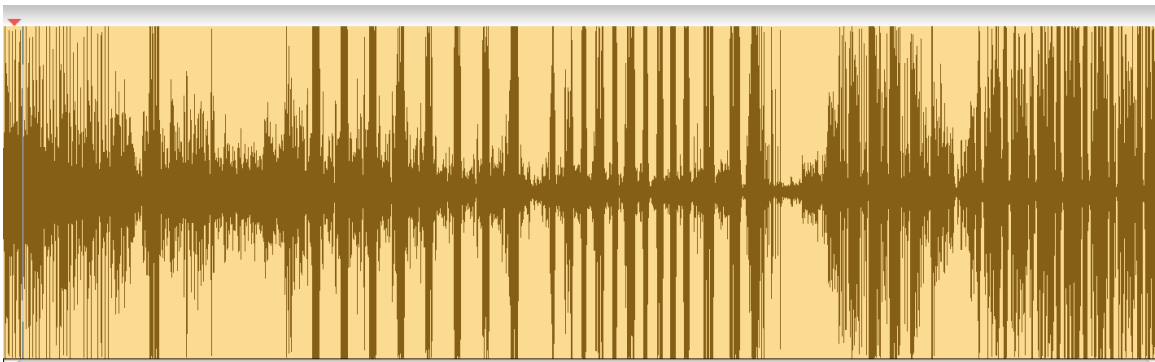
Fig. 2
Field recording of protest
Tufts University, Granoff Music Building, evening, 2/24/17

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[35] "The Metropolis and Mental Life."

The sensory difference is not just audible; with the right tools, it is visible, as well. Figure 3 (below) is a visual representation of a field recording taken in the same place at approximately the same time of day on another evening, one day after the above protest. These visual representations illustrate the degree to which protest is capable of reconfiguring the soundscape.

Fig. 3
Field Recording of evening after protest
Tufts University, Granoff Music Building, evening, 2/24/17

Beyond the notable differences illustrated by the two field recordings, it should be said that when standing amongst a group of people, one's sense of individuality is diminished. As suggested by my personal experience on that February evening, when groups become throngs, individuals melt together into a super-organism, becoming pure biomass. The process is not irreversible; after all, the organism can disintegrate back into its constituent parts. (No doubt many have experienced something of this phenomenon at sporting events, concerts, or, indeed, political rallies.)

Moreover, the experience may not be entirely innocuous, as the threat of violence is always present, at least implicitly. I am tempted to claim that, at a political protest, due to a shared sense of grievance, the proximity to violence is closer, as the ease with which protest can overflow into riot is greater than in ordinary life. This combination of excitement, energy, and danger is the unique experience of the protest crowd.[36] There is, of course, an interesting and troubling body of scholarship on the relation between sound and violence.[37] In some cases, the violence is a direct effect of sound's materiality. Suzanne Cusick, for instance, has done important work on the use of music as torture. In the examples I consider, the volume of protests is rarely sufficient to cause physical harm or permanent damage. Rather the soundscape might be better understood as contested terrain upon which acts of symbolic violence are perpetrated.[38] Sometimes, violence in the symbolic can, so to speak, return in the real, as we will see in Chapter Three.

Concluding Reflections

In this chapter, I have claimed that the sonic and spatial environment of the city is ordered by the patterns and rhythms of daily life. I have argued, moreover, that such patterns and rhythms result in a certain manner of individuated self-presentation and subjectivity, which is characteristic of

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[36] The classic treatment of the phenomenon of the crowd is Canetti, *Crowds and Power*. A provocative rereading of Canetti can be found in Dean, *Crowds and Party*.
[37] Fast and Pegley, *Music, Politics, and Violence*; Volk, *Extremely Loud*; Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*.
[38] The question of what, precisely, constitutes violence is a complex one which cannot be broached here.

urban life. Protest, insofar as it sonically and physically reconfigures that environment, breaks with these patterns and represents the opening of a gap or a rupture. This socio-spatial reconfiguration is the necessary precondition for the occurrence of the sonic subjectivation that I have outlined. But this new order is not stable. Indeed, it may fall back into the chaos from which it arose. Something further is needed to hold things in place. I will argue that this is precisely the role of participatory sound.

Chapter Two

What Does Protest Mean?

The question of how to understand protest—what protest means and does—is the central concern of this chapter. It is common to understand protest in an ethico-political sense, wherein the words of the protesters represent a demand for inclusion, an for ethics of responsibility, an acknowledgement of shared humanity. In this reading, the protest stages a sort of quasi-Levinasian encounter with the Other, wherein the protesters themselves play the role of the Other. I will demonstrate that the understanding of protest as a simple ethical demand is theoretically and practically problematic. In focusing simply on the content, on the message of the protest itself, such criticism misses the *form* in which demands are articulated. That form is sound. Why does this matter? Ignoring sound, as I have suggested, not only leaves us with an impoverished understanding of protest, but also neglects the critical positive role sound can play in theorizing and constituting an ethico-political project. First, I will demonstrate how considering meaning or content alone is insufficient. Next, I will demonstrate how considering sound can lead past some of the difficulties of the aforementioned position. Then I will return to the problem of content, as well as practical questions of efficacy. Simply put, how do we know if what we are doing is working? In considering these issues, I draw heavily on the thought of Jacques Rancière and Alain Badiou.

Protest: General Notes

While each protest I attended was unique, similarities emerged across different locations in space, size, and time. The events I attended drew a wide variety of protesters. Although I cannot exhaustively define each and every attendee, I feel confident in attempting a general typology. Given that all of the events took place in the Boston area, and more significantly, were anti-Trump events, there was a significant amount of self-selection that occurred. Some, perhaps a majority of those in attendance were fairly typical mainstream liberals or left-liberal progressives. What does this mean in Boston? Most were probably college-educated, white-collar or otherwise knowledge workers who solidly support the Democratic Party, and identify as politically liberal. They were mostly white, and likely middle or upper-middle class. This might well have been the first time some of these people had mobilized in this manner—that is, by taking to the streets. I did, however, attend a number of demonstrations that seemed to draw on a more radical crowd, judging by the signs and symbols present. While incidents of violence or property destruction were rare, the affective intensity of the space was more highly charged in these instances. It would be interesting to compare these events with those having higher political stakes—one might image that the sounds of black youth demonstrating in Ferguson or of Palestinians demonstrating in the West Bank would be substantially different.

In terms of previous experience with mass political action, the groups were diverse. There were undoubtedly a number of younger, less

experienced people, perhaps energized by the Bernie Sanders campaign. In contrast with these relative neophytes, some in attendance were clearly movement veterans. Some were members of organizations or campaigns focused on a particular issue or concern, while others were clearly avowed activists, members of social justice groups, or otherwise people for whom protest and political organizing is a serious avocation.

The overall age range of the protesters was wide, although the majority were probably relatively young, in their twenties or thirties. However, this was by no means exclusive, and some were clearly representatives of what was, at one time, called the New Left. (Riding home in the subway after one protest, I overheard an older couple exchanging words to the effect of "I thought we already did this back in the 60s," while marveling that the Bernie Sanders campaign had brought the word "socialism" to a national audience as something other than a Cold War-era bête noir.) One also detected a peculiar and characteristic strain of New England progressivism with a genealogy that might have extended back to the abolitionists.

Of course, different protests were different. At the March for Science (discussed below) there were a great number of students, scientists, and engineers. The MIT campus was surely deserted that day! A march on the evening of the inauguration, by contrast, brought out a more radical crowd, with a significant socialist and anarchist presence.

The point here is not to account for every aspect of protests and protesters, but rather to demonstrate a number of points. First, the protest represents a reorganization of physical space by people. Whether it is a crowd descending on a park, a march that blocks the street, a gathering of people in a space designed for no such thing, the protest represents not only an interruption of the flows and rhythms of daily life, but a reconfiguration of the environment in which these occur. As a corollary of this physical reconfiguration, there is also a corresponding social reconfiguration. While I am not suggesting that there is a fundamental and permanent reordering of society, or that disparate groups never come into contact with one another in daily life, the scale of the encounter (and thus the possibility for novel, unusual, or unexpected interactions) is greatly increased at the protest site. If everyday life in the city represents a certain order, the protest site represents a re-ordering of that order. The air here crackles with energy, the space hums with potentiality. Moreover, the re-ordering of physical spaces effects a corresponding change in sonic space—the relationship between the two is dialectical, each always modifying the other.

Sounds of the Crowd

We have already considered the manner in which the environment is transformed and physical space reconfigured during a protest. Now we should examine the manner in which the soundscape is reconfigured. With the exception of the Civil Rights Movement's occasional silent marches, most protests involve some component that is spoken, chanted, or sung—a sonic

component. As I have already noted, there are both semiotic (linguistic) and material (sonic, vibrational) components of speech to consider.

Speech in protest situations is chaotic. One often encounters the problem of speaking in the crowd, namely, everyone raises their voice to be heard over everyone else, with predictable results. Ordinary conversation (that is, conversation in what schoolteachers everywhere refer to as one's "inside voice") is drowned out, meaning one must shout to be heard by one's neighbor. A common souvenir of such a protest is a sore throat.

Sometimes, especially in left-leaning groups, one encounters the so-called "People's Microphone." This technique was common in the Occupy Wall Street protests, and consists of a speaker (often, but not always unamplified) who addresses the crowd, which repeats the message, which spreads like a wave through the assembled masses. [39] While sometimes unwieldy, this is an effective way to address a large and dispersed group. No technologies of amplification are required, and, in addition to the logistical advantages of such an arrangement, there is a certain democratizing character to the technique. There is no separation between speaker and addressee, as anyone, in principle, can address the crowd in such a fashion. In practice, things are often more complicated, and hierarchical formations often appear.

I would be remiss not to mention that the word choice here—the People's *Microphone*—should alert us to an important question that runs

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[39] For more on the People's Microphone, see Sammons, ""I Didn't Say Look; I Said Listen"."

parallel to the question of sound: this is the question of mediation. I will

periodically return to this issue throughout the remainder of the paper. In

these cases, while most of those attending a protest will use the same PA

system (if available, there are dramatic differences in the type of

amplification different groups and organizations can procure. A large-scale

demonstration like the Women's March would have had many resources

available that a group of radical anarchists would not. The question of how

sound is mediated is a crucial one, to which I will return.

Protest Speakers: A Typology

In addition to the People's Microphone, many events evince more

traditional speeches as well. Here, I identify five ideal types of speakers

typically found at protests. These composites are based on my aural

observations across many different events. While all may not be present at a

given event, these archetypal figures appeared at many different events, and

all play an important role in contributing to the unique soundscape of the

protest. More significantly, all attempt to unify the assembled protesters in

different ways, with varying degrees of success (discussed below).

Activists: Such speakers typically represent an advocacy group, a social

justice organization, or a small political party—that is, one with slim hopes of

electoral victory. As such, their rhetoric often makes appeals, whether

implicitly or explicitly, to tropes of justice, fairness, and the like. Depending

on the precise ideological coordinates of the group or party they represent,

their appeals may be less or more radical on the axis of (as someone once put

it) reform or revolution.

Politicians: while there is perhaps some proximity with activists, I define

politicians as representatives of a political party (whether currently in power

or not) with a reasonable chance of being elected to public office. This

criterion has some bearing on the types of statements they are willing to

make. They are less likely to call for grand, sweeping change and more likely

to endorse specific positions already circulating in public discourse—a $15

minimum wage, for instance. Of course, a local politician in the Boston area is

likely to make more liberal or left-wing statements than a politician at the

state or national level. There seems to be a direct relation between distance

from power and the radicalism of political claims made. As the former grows,

so, too, does the latter.

Religious Leaders: These are people generally, but by no means always,

associated with a Christian church. They are often stirring speakers, adept at

capturing the attention of the crowd, no doubt due to their ecclesiastical

experience. There is also a tendency to appeal to certain vague or abstract

notions ("justice," "humanity"), which may be the result of their theological

orientation.

Experts: Experts serve to articulate a message while also making a tacit

appeal to authority. For instance, at one protest, a Harvard law professor

read a litany of complaints against the Trump administration. Many of these

were similar to those one might hear on MSNBC, his remarks gained

rhetorical heft due to his profession and institutional prestige. The same message from a different speaker would have been perceived as less weighty.

"Regular People": The most variable category. They may be concerned citizens of one sort or another, meant to provide an "everyperson's perspective." They may be representatives of a historically marginalized or disenfranchised group, an underserved population, or a threatened community. A recurring example at many events was an immigrant (often Latina) whose status was threatened under the Trump administration.[40] A somewhat different and unexpected (from my perspective) instance of this phenomenon was at the March for Science, when the winners of an elementary school essay contest read their prize-winning submissions to the assembled audience of thousands. The rhetorical strategy here is obvious: truth from the mouths of babes. Nonetheless, this display, while endearing, seemed to me to have a palpable negative (soporific) effect on the crowd.

A final noteworthy subcategory here consists of poets, musicians, and other creative types. While the level of their performances varied in proportion with their ability, talent, and charisma, they captivated one's interest in a manner altogether different than the aforementioned speakers. Given the recurring appearance of these folks, one might reasonably conclude that many organizers and attendees felt that an artistic contribution

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[40] A cynic might suggest that this stages a kind of vulgar morality play or a white-savior narrative, wherein the privileged spectator comes to the rescue of the poor, vulnerable immigrant woman of color. The dominant position of the spectator (assumed to be male, naturally) is reinforced by virtue of the fact that he is able to "save" the benighted victim, who, in this scenario, remains the object with respect to which the spectator constitutes himself.

was significant. (A cursory glance at the history of protest music and art serves to confirm this intuition.) Still, one might reasonably ask: what was the point of their presence? While some might venture a quasi-functionalist explanation (We want people to come to the protest, people like music, so we play 'em music to get 'em here!), such an explanation is rather unsatisfying. People like many things; the recurring decision to include sound and music suggests something deeper going on here.

Tensions

Although the task of these speakers and performers is nominally to unite, they sometimes exposed tensions within the ostensibly unified body of protesters. At the Tax Day Protest, for instance, a freestyle rapper performed. In the course of his performance, he made a reference to Hillary Clinton and her infamous campaign in the 1990s against so-called "super-predators," which disproportionately targeted black youths. After making these critical remarks, a person in the crowd shouted, "She wasn't talking about you!" The performer became agitated and responded to the heckler, before continuing with his performance. Although this interruption was brief, it served to highlight a noteworthy characteristic of the socio-racial dynamics of many of the protests I attended, namely, that they largely comprised white middle or upper-middle class professionals. Such fault lines within the body of the protest itself are worth exploring further. The key question for the time being is how, sonically, to unite this fractured body? To answer this question, we

must consider music, sound, and language. I will begin by considering the meaning of the message delivered by the protesters.

Here, I will sidestep the fraught question of precisely defining music, choosing instead to focus on two instances of "humanly-organized sound" that I believe are of particular significance: song and chant. (Other forms of sound, like drumming, are doubtless also significant, but are outside the scope of this study.)

Song

At the events I attended, song was a less common occurrence than chant. This is likely a result of the difficulties inherent in coordinating the performance of hundreds or thousands of participants, as well as the challenge of repertoire, i.e., there are comparatively few songs that everybody is sure to know.[41] Consequently, song was most frequently encountered as a component of the protest, a performance within a performance wherein a select ensemble performed for the entire group. Paradigmatic in this instance was a performance at the "Tax Day Protest" (about which more below). After a series of speakers had addressed the crowd, a choir by the name of "Vocal Opposition" performed. This group travels around New England singing protest songs— "Bread and Roses," "If I Had a Hammer," and so on. As such, they represent an interesting mix of whatever remains of the labor movement, the back-to-nature wing of the

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[41] This may well be why sound is, in some sense, "more important" than music in these settings. It may also explain why musicologists have tended to overlook the sonic and focused instead on protest songs and the like.

anti-war 1960s folk music counterculture, and a certain old-time Yankee progressivism, which is perhaps unique to New England.

Chant

Chants are also a common occurrence at protests. There are a number of go-to standbys that reappear time and again at the events. One perhaps encounters the same participants at multiple protests, which would certainly help explain this continuity. There are also certain phrases and rhythms that seem inherently more "chantable" than others.[42] "From Palestine to Mexico, these border walls have got to go" practically trips off the tongue. An important component of this is the placement of accents, as demonstrated below. Accented syllables are placed on downbeats (with the exception of the syllable "co" on beat four, which is anticipated by a sixteenth note).

This pattern of accents is a common feature of many chants. Perhaps the most basic feature of chants is this repetitive strong/weak accent pattern.

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[42] It is fortunate that these also lend themselves well to transcription in standard notation.

While different chants may deviate in one way or another, this feature is present in many chants, as we can see in the following example.

Understanding Protest

How should we understand such chants? One common way is to frame them, and protest in general, in essentially ethico-political terms, as an opportunity to be seen and make one's voice heard, as a way to articulate dissent. This formulation is generally a result of considering the linguistic or symbolic content of the chant only. I outline this position, demonstrate why it is incomplete, and then offer an alternative.

The ethico-political position rests on several related presuppositions. Such an understanding would seem to imply that, insofar as one's voice is not being heard, some kind of non-recognition is at the root of the problem. Charles Taylor is perhaps the most well-known (although by no means the only) contemporary thinker to emphasize the importance of "recognition" not only in politics, but also in society more broadly, and as an important component of the psychic health of the individual.[43] Taylor argues that

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[43] Keucheyan, *The Left Hemisphere*. Taylor's major work on this topic is *Sources of the Self*. An introduction to his thought can be found in Abbey, *Charles Taylor*.

recognition is crucial to one's identity, which is itself shaped by the presence or absence of recognition. Thus, "a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm…"[44] Protests, demonstrations, and chants, then, all allow this misrecognition to be redressed.

This claim presupposes that addressing the problem of recognition establishes some kind of ethical and communicative relationship between the parties involved, a relationship that can then serve as the foundation for further dialogue and exchange. In other words, it presupposes that some kind of deliberative process is both possible and desirable. These positions loosely correspond with those of Emmanuel Levinas, and Jürgen Habermas. Thus, taking these figures as ideal types, I briefly sketch an outline of the "protest as ethical demand" position. I will then demonstrate that framing the issue in ethical terms not only results in an impoverished understanding of protest (as it misses the crucial sonic component), but is also practically insufficient. Finally I suggest that considering the sonic component can lead us towards a more theoretically rigorous and practically grounded formulation.

For Levinas, ethics is first philosophy (that is, it precedes any questions of ontology), and the idea of the "encounter" is crucial, as it not

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[44] Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," 26.

only institutes an ethics of "infinite responsibility" for the Other, but also constitutes the subject.[45] With this move, Levinas sidesteps two bugaboos that have bedeviled twentieth-century thought. On the one hand, he does not seek any uncritical reinstatement of the Cartesian *cogito* (which, in its traditional form, has suffered a devastating critique by various currents of poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, and feminism). On the other hand, in founding his philosophical project on an ethics of infinite respect, he avoids the difficulties that the aforementioned critical positions encounter when attempting to establish normative principles.

One difficulty with Levinas is that he offers precious little in the way of practical modes of resistance. The Levinasian position of ethical resistance "is construed by Levinas not as power resisting power, but as the resistance of the completely powerless".[46] This is all well and good in the seminar room, but makes for an unsatisfying position elsewhere. An uncharitable reader might even claim that it is precisely the powerful who can afford to take such positions. Instead of providing an ethics of weakness, Levinas merely disavows his own position of strength, and winds up advancing a theory for the powerful only. The displaced, the disadvantaged, and the disempowered may have serious reservations about a project that is so eager to (nominally) proscribe power to maintain moral purity.

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[45] Gutting, *Thinking the Impossible*. Levinas' major works are *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*; *Totality and Infinity*. An overview of his life and work can be found in Malka, *Emmanuel Levinas*.
[46] Hoy, *Critical Resistance*. p. 182

Also troubling is the psychoanalytic critique of Levinas.[47] Such a critique would mark an interesting characteristic of Levinas' relation with the Other, namely, the presence of a third, another Other. Such an arrangement constitutes a destructive "triangle of moral relations" of oppressor, oppressed, and spectator. We (the spectator) demonize the villain while feeling compassionately identifying with the (idealized) victim. In identifying with the victim, we imagine ourselves to have nothing in common with the villain, onto whom we project our negative feelings, while keeping their energy, which is now converted to indignation. This process allows us to feel simultaneously undivided (that is, not split between id and superego) and absolutely righteous and good, a seductive, but ultimately dangerous position. Thus, we should question any practice of ethical resistance that overly praises weakness, while flattering the probity of the critic. A cynic might even remark that this is an ideal position for the white, upper middle class protester, who is more or less unthreatened by the turpitude of Trumpism, but who wishes to demonstrate that they are not "part of the problem."

The question would seem to be, then, whether protest *actually* stages an encounter with the Other in the strict Levinasian sense, and if so, whether this is a useful way to think about politics?[48] Do chanted slogans really

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[47] This point is drawn from Flahault, *Malice.*

[48] In a withering critique, Alain Badiou argues that Levinas slips from philosophy into theology: "in order to be intelligible, [Levinasian] ethics requires that the Other be in some sense *carried by a principle of alterity* which transcends mere finite experience. Levinas calls this principle the

provide an injunction for responsibility and community? Moreover, one

could ask whether (in Taylor's terms) nonrecognition is *really* the most

serious problem faced by women whose reproductive rights are imperiled,

by the poor who stand to lose access to healthcare, or by immigrants who

face newly emboldened violent xenophobes. More problematic still is the

question of how, precisely, this position accounts for the possibility of

intentional nonrecognition. What, if anything, can such a position accomplish

in the case of simple bad faith? Finally, we ought to consider the limitations

to recognition itself.[49] Surely for the undocumented immigrant, recognition is

a danger, not a panacea.

One might supplement any shortcomings of the purely ethical position

with a Habermasian solution to this problem, acknowledging that, while

absolute certainty with respect to meaning and intent is impossible, perfect

communication can remain a regulative ideal against which we measure our

communication in the lifeworld.[50] A problem with this approach is that it

relies on the good faith of all parties in a given speech situation. Therefore, it

does not adequately address situations with significant power imbalances,

inequalities, and so on. Thus, rational discourse is always in danger of

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'Altogether-Other', and it is quite obviously the ethical name for God" *Ethics*, 22.

[49] For a fuller discussion, see Markell, *Bound by Recognition*.

[50] In an otherwise critical discussion, Gopal Balakrishnan observes that Habermas "is the only contemporary philosopher whose *œuvre* could withstand comparison to the encyclopaedic accomplishments of German Idealism." Of his many works, among the most important are *Knowledge & Human Interests* and the two volumes of *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Habermas responds in depth to the challenges of poststructuralism in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*.

becoming merely the discourse of the strong. Such a position is troubling, given that power imbalances are what often give rise to protest in the first place. Finally, and most important of all, what is to be done in the case of an actor who actively exploits the limits of communicative reason?

Against this position, we should bear in mind the developments of twentieth century Anglo-American ("analytic") and Franco-German ("continental") philosophy. Both of these traditions have demonstrated the instability of language and symbolic communication, while poststructuralism, in particular, has challenged traditional notions of subjectivity, knowledge, and truth.[51] These critiques have called into question the possibility of establishing first philosophical principles or of justifying normative grounds for action. If protest is understood as having symbolic currency, as a communicative situation, is it not vulnerable to the numerous challenges to speech, language, and meaning posed by twentieth-century philosophy?

Considering Sound

To avoid these impasses, we must consider sound. Let us return, then, to Eidsheim's vibrational theory of sound. The key point here is that sound is constituted by a real material disturbance. That this disturbance exists is uncontestable, and, while the content of the sonic message might be misplaced, misunderstood, or misconstrued, its presence is undeniable. This

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[51] A few of the best-known examples include e.g., Derrida, *Of Grammatology*; Foucault, *The Order of Things*; Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*; Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*.

presence (even if mediated by mechanical instruments) is ultimately registered directly via the senses—sound, touch, sight, and so on.

As anyone who has suffered the aural slings and arrows of a noisy neighbor knows all too well, the senses cannot be turned off at will. A vibrational disturbance, then, must necessarily trigger recognition not merely in an ethical sense (i.e., we ought to acknowledge these people), but in an ontological sense, in the register of Being (i.e., it is not possible to deny that there is a claim being made without contradicting a fundamental axiom by which we comprehend reality). Thus, we avoid the twin challenges of nonrecognition and indifference. Sound, in its materiality, thus represents an undeniable speech-act, a declaration of unimpeachable bodily presence.

This formulation bears many similarities with Jacques Rancière's closely related ideas of dissensus and the distribution of the sensible. For Rancière, the "distribution of the sensible," refers to that which "defines the forms of part-taking" of the world and the community. This distribution or "partition" should be understood on two levels: first as that which separates and excludes; and second, as that which allows for participation—for taking part. The second of these has, as its condition of possibility, a division between that which can be seen, heard, sensed, and that which cannot—i.e., between that which is and is not available to the senses.[52] Simply stated, the distribution of the sensible refers to the absolute limit of that which is available to the senses in a given setting, which determines that which can be

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[52] Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," 44.

thought, said, or done in that setting.[53] That this limit is significant for political questions should be self-evident.

There are two ways, Rancière suggests, of constituting this division. The first, which he names "police" is "a partition of the sensible that is characterized by the absence of void… It is this exclusion of what 'is not' that constitutes the police-principle…"[54] In other words, the police order presents the world as a closed totality; there is no gap, no empty place for those absolutely excluded from the part-taking (those Rancière refers to as the "part without part") to appear.

By contrast, Ranciere avers, "the essence of politics consists in disturbing this arrangement by supplementing it with a part of those without part [i.e., those who are not given a part in the part-taking]… Politics, before all else, is an intervention in the visible and the sayable."[55] This is precisely the kind of break I have argued occurs through the sound of protests. In other words, those excluded in the division of parts demonstrate the hitherto unseen gap in the police order, the place of rightful appearance as subject. Rancière calls this dissensus, the demonstration of the gap in the sensible itself. The act of dissensus represents a rupture, a break with the current order.

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[53] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 85. "Strictly speaking, 'distribution' therefore refers both to forms of inclusion and to forms of exclusion. The 'sensible', of course, does not refer to what shows good sense or judgment but to what is *aisthêton* or capable of being apprehended by the senses."
[54] Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," 44.
[55] Rancière, 44–45.

It is those excluded, oppressed, and immiserated by the current political regime who demonstrate, through protest, their right to appear, to be counted, to be given a part. Regardless of our choice of terminology, however, this might represent a more desirable and, indeed, effective way of thinking about protest. Under a political regime that excludes the demands and concerns of protesters, we might understand the sounds of the protest, then, as an act of dissensus, a rupture with an order that excludes the protester and relegates the protesters' concerns to marginal status, and, ultimately, challenges their right to appear as equals.[56] Perhaps those nominally included (but effectively excluded) from the "conversation" must disrupt the normal functioning of "business as usual" to demonstrate the contingency of an arbitrary order that consigns them to subordinate status. It would seem, moreover, that the soundscape is uniquely capable of functioning as a medium to register their concerns, as it has the capacity to be both symbolically meaningful and materially undeniable.

This would be the charitable reading of Rancière. However, it can sometimes be illuminating to read a thinker uncharitably, to draw out any weaknesses in their position. In this spirit, then, could we not understand the reprehensible actions of the man in Charlottesville (murdering an innocent woman, and injuring many others) as a sort of perverse dissensus? Indeed, is not the whole Trump phenomenon consistent with Rancière's logic? In some sense, it represents a redistribution of the sensible, an act that reconfigures

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[56] Of course, Rancière's position is not immune to critiques, some of which I raise below.

what is permitted to appear in the sensorium. The vile behavior of Trump and the Alt-Right—the explicit racism and misogyny—were, for a time, impermissible utterances by political figures. Trumpism, then, represents the dissensus of the bigots and the xenophobes, demonstrating that they, too, have a wish to speak and to be heard. I recall flying down to Washington DC for the SEM conference the day after the election, my volume of *Dissensus* in hand and having this troubling thought, which I attempted to put out of my mind at the time. Rancière is no bigot, of course, and it is well within the spirit of his intellectual project to supplement it, so as to make it more rigorously egalitarian.

To answer this question, I will slightly modify the theoretical framework I have established. I have argued that Jacques Rancière's idea of dissensus provides a useful lens through which we can perceive and understand these breaks with the everyday. However, to hold open the space opened by the break, something more is needed. Sound, the form, must now be filled with suitable content.

Content and efficacy

The act of dissensus allows for what Rancière calls a "redistribution of the sensible," a fundamental change in the manner in which the world appears to the senses. This change may present new opportunities for engagement and action, and might even suggest different ways of being in the world. Having demonstrated the importance of form—sound—we must now return to content. The point is not to produce an artificial choice

between one and the other, or to suggest that that content is unimportant—

the white nationalists marching in Charlottesville chanting "Jews will not

replace us" should serve as adequate reminder of this fact. Moreover,

Rancière's acts of dissensus, appealing as they may be in one sense, should

lead us to ask the obvious question: How can we ascertain the relative

success or failure of any given protest? How are we to know if what we are

doing is working? I will consider two examples.

"Tax Day Protest"

This demonstration, held on April 15, 2017, was meant to protest

Donald Trump's refusal to release his tax returns. (It was not clear to me

whether the intent was to get him to release them, or merely to voice

dissatisfaction.) It had been planned well in advance; I saw a notice online

some months before the event took place. The protest occurred at Cambridge

Common, a site rich with Revolutionary War-era history—a nearby church

has a hole in the wall made by an errant British musket. The Common is a

central public park perhaps a few acres in size, with paths, lawns, a baseball

diamond, and a children's playground. It is a place where one commonly sees

students, young couples, and families. It is also a place where Cambridge's

homeless population sometimes congregates when the weather is good. This

dichotomy—extreme wealth and privilege dotted with jarring reminders of

grinding poverty and desperation is characteristic of Cambridge, and greater Boston in general.[57]

There were perhaps several thousand people in attendance, surrounding a stage where a number of speakers addressed the crowd. A local political official acted as the master of ceremonies; I was immediately struck by his lack of rhetorical skill. Perhaps he was more accustomed to giving prepared speeches or engaging in town hall-style question and answer sessions, but he was quite untalented when it came to the freewheeling improvisatory style I associate with effective MC'ing. To be fair, he was not the only one who had this problem. (It is noteworthy that so many activists and organizers are relatively poor speakers, at least in a traditional oratorical setting.) Some speakers seemed not to have collected their thoughts beforehand, others seemed unsure of the best way to structure their delivery, while still others were simply uncharismatic.

March for Science

The March for Science took place on April 22, 2017, on Boston Common, a public park, which is considerably larger than Cambridge Common and more topographically varied. There are playgrounds, paths, and green spaces, but there is also a bandstand, a pond, a carousel, and other public amusements. Many of the same pathologies—extreme and jarring

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[57] It requires a particular kind of doublethink to pontificate on obscure and esoteric subjects in a setting where, not far from the seminar room, people are concerned not with abstract theories, but whether they will eat that day.

wealth discrepancies and so on—which afflict Cambridge Common also afflict Boston Common, perhaps even more so.

The event was planned well in advance (I had heard about it online several weeks previously), and there were at least ten thousand in attendance. A significant number of those attending were undoubtedly from the math, science, and engineering departments of Harvard, MIT, and other Boston institutions. In addition, many attendees were undoubtedly part of Boston's booming private science and technology sector. It is difficult to say whether these protesters replaced or crowded out the more radical elements present at some other protests, or whether the radical elements (always marginal in terms of pure numbers) were simply harder to spot. In any case, the event itself was publicized as "non-partisan," and was ostensibly devoted to discussing issues like climate change.

This brings us to the fundamental contradiction at the heart of the event. It is not possible to discuss climate change as anything other than a political issue, simply because the issue has been so tightly lashed to political discourse, that any attempt to separate it from politics also represents a political position. (Moreover, while no serious commentators deny the existence of climate change, the question of politics emerges immediately when we start to ask how—or if—we should *respond* to climate change.)

Insofar as the event was a political gathering that repeatedly attempted to deny its political character, the March for Science was existentially confused. One speaker (an expert, as per my previous

categories) recited a staggeringly obtuse litany of reasons for the necessity of depoliticizing science—his examples included eugenics, women's rights, the Tuskegee syphilis experiments, and so on. He seemed unaware of the fact that these perfectly exemplified exactly the kind of politicization of science he was arguing against. Moreover, he stressed the importance of "including all voices in the conversation" (about the dangers of climate change, for instance). "But surely," I said to a friend, "we *do* want to exclude certain perspectives. We don't want to hear from climate change deniers and the public sphere would be better off without their 'contributions.' We would be better off without them!"

Given these contradictions, perhaps it is unsurprising that the event seemed confused and, on one level, disappointing. The public space was indeed reconfigured, but only into an amorphous and disordered assemblage of loosely connected persons. The crowd, while large, felt disconnected, an unorganized array of groups. There were masses of people but they seemed fragmented, even if they were ostensibly united under the Flag of Science. Uninspiring speakers were followed by readings of the winning submissions to a children's essay contest. And, while the occasional chant broke out, it lacked the truly transforming, unifying quality that binds together individuals. While both the Tax Day Protest and the March for Science had moments of excitement, wherein a particularly talented or effective speaker tapped into and heightened the energy of the crowd, they were, by the

criteria I have established, of decidedly mixed success. How, then, can we say whether a protest "succeeds" in its purpose?

The Protest as Event

To address this insufficiency, we should further consider the site of protest with respect to Alain Badiou's theory of the Event. While there can be no question of a full exegesis of his philosophical project here,[58] we can productively draw this idea into our ethics of protest. For Badiou, the essence of Being is pure multiplicity. By situating difference and multiplicity at the center of his ontology, Badiou attempts to refashion and rehabilitate the categories of universality and truth, while not discounting the vitally important poststructuralist critique of these concepts.[59] People and places, objects and things differ from one another and—crucially—from themselves. Sometimes, however, this infinite play of infinite difference is interrupted by an Event, which may fall into one of four generic categories: art, science, politics, and love. The Event is "an occurrence that introduces radical novelty into existence, an occurrence that is literally unintelligible in terms of the conceptual structures that define the situations from which it emerges."[60] We will focus our attention here strictly on the register of Politics.

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[58] This project is developed in Badiou, *Being and Event*; Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*. A further major work, *The Immanence of Truths*, is forthcoming. The standard overview of Badiou's philosophical output is Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject To Truth*. For a fuller account of Badiou's political philosophy, see Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics*.

[59] Of course, we sophisticated postmodernists have abandoned such notions. Perhaps in our post-truth era—in the shadow of what one might call the vulgar postmodernism of Donald Trump—we ought to revisit them.

[60] Gutting, *Thinking the Impossible*. p. 173

For Badiou, "the essence of politics is not the plurality of opinions. It is the prescription of a possibility in rupture with what exists."[61] A political Event is "a politics whose prescription is universal, but which is also capable of being conjoined to the particular in a form wherein situations are transformed in such a way as to rule out the possibility of any non-egalitarian statement."[62] Thus, we might understand the site of a protest as what Badiou refers to as an evental site, a place that creates the conditions of possibility for the occurrence of an Event.[63]

Central to Badiou's theory is the crucial importance of what he terms "Fidelity to the Event," the sustained struggle towards realizing the Truth of the Event. As it is impossible in any given moment to know whether one is in the midst of an Event (we cannot know the future), this fidelity, in the form of a willingness to subsequently understand one's life through the lens of the Event, is required if the Truth of the Event is to be realized.[64] Ongoing fidelity to a genuine Event can trigger what Badiou calls a Truth-Process,[65] wherein the Truth of the Event is inscribed in reality itself.

Perhaps, then, we should understand protest sites as possible evental sites, as places where a genuine political Event may have already occurred. It falls to us, then, to pledge fidelity to realizing the Truth of the Event. It is this fidelity that provides the crucial continuing momentum for the movement,

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61 Badiou, *Metapolitics*. p. 24
62 Badiou. p. 92
63 Gutting, *Thinking the Impossible*. p. 176
64 Gutting. p. 180
65 Badiou, *Ethics*. p. 67

while also ensuring a more rigorously egalitarian frame than Rancière's formulations.

Conclusion

We have further discussed the weakness of considering only the meaning or symbolic content of protest. At best, it can lead to ethical appeals that are insufficient in effecting change. The way past this impasse is to consider form, as we have done by incorporating ideas from Rancière. We have also seen that content is nonetheless still important, and supplemented Rancière with Badiou. And where is sound in all of this? Sound physically reconfigures space, opening a place for a political subject to appear. Participatory sound is an undeniable speech act, a vibrational disturbance in the material of the world. The participatory character of the sound in these provides the participant the *choice* to lose their individuality, to experience subjectivation, and become multiple. Sound acts as the bridge between material form and symbolic content, between body as flesh and the self as mind. Most importantly, it binds together singular individuals into a singular multiplicity that holds together the symbolic and the material. This process, which we might call a vibrational politics, allows the subject to tap into a certain energy that, as we will see in the next chapter, can be directed toward very different ends.

Chapter Three:

Vibrational Politics: Violence or form-of-life

In this chapter, I analyze two possible ways in which vibrational politics might manifest. Both occurred this past summer in the immediate aftermath of the events in Charlottesville, Virginia, where a woman was killed and a number of others were injured while protesting a neo-Nazi rally. I describe, transcribe, and analyze sounds using waveform comparisons, standard notation, and qualitative description of the events. In both instances, voices bound together bodies, and individuals melted together into something more than themselves. This produces a subject irreducible to the level of the individual, which is, in turn, capable of harnessing a certain force or energy, which can be directed towards a number of different ends. In the first example, this subject seems to be motivated by aggression and anger, which leads to conflict and violence; in the second, it is motivated on the one hand by grief and loss, but also by an affirmative sentiment—we could do worse than to describe it as hope—a sentiment that could, perhaps, model not just a political project, but an alternate form of life.

Violence: "Free Speech Rally" (8/19)

In the aftermath of the Charlottesville events, a group affiliated with the Alt-Right was scheduled to hold what they dubbed a "Free Speech Rally" on Boston Common. While the event had been scheduled prior to the violence in Charlottesville, it would take on a far more sinister and menacing tenor. There was significant concern on the part of local officials that the

demonstration would attract violent elements: neo-Nazis, the KKK, or other similar right-wing extremists. There may also have been concern among some that a minority of far-left groups would choose to engage with right-wing elements by force, instead of peacefully, like the majority of participants. Furthermore, the specter of a recent terrorist attack in Barcelona, in which a man killed and injured dozens by driving a truck down a pedestrian thoroughfare, loomed large in the collective memory.

That day, a march from Roxbury to Boston Common was scheduled to take place between 10:30 and noon, whereupon the marchers would connect with other protests at the Common. I was unable to make the march at 10:30, so I planned to arrive later and connect with the main demonstration, which was meant to run from noon until 5 o'clock.

Arrival

It seemed the Boston police had responded to fears of violence by taking extreme security measures. Initially, there had been some question as to whether the rally would occur at all, due to complications with event permitting. Ultimately, it did take place, and security was high. The nearest T stop was closed entirely, and those wishing to attend had to take the train to another stop, then walk to the protest site. The streets surrounding Boston Common were entirely blocked off with concrete barriers, and the entrances to the Common itself were barricaded with enormous trucks and construction vehicles. Police were everywhere, and the area where the rally was to take place was separated from the area reserved for

counterdemonstrators both by distance and barriers. That the Alt-Right required a safe space was richly ironic.

I was lucky to arrive when I did—shortly before noon—as things were already finishing up. The Alt-Right, it seemed, were relatively unpopular. There were perhaps fifty of their number in attendance, versus many thousands of counterdemonstrators. If Charlottesville was the tragedy, this was the farce.

Moreover, the Alt-Right had some trouble procuring amplification for their rally. A small but well-amplified group could have challenged the sonic dominance of the far greater number of counter-protesters. With the aid of technology the soundscape might have been vigorously contested territory, but it was ceded to the counterdemonstrators without a fight.[66] As we can see from this example, to properly attend to the sonic dimensions of protest, we must ask who has access to the soundscape, who is equipped to make a disturbance with the daily order of things.

Upon arriving, I walked up a hill to survey the crowd. A sea of people stretched far in front of me—all counter-protesters. Down by the barricades, I noticed an Antifa contingent, and made my way in their direction. It seemed that there were at least as many of them as there were Alt-Right protesters. Despite the summer heat, they were dressed entirely in black, and many had their faces covered.

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[66] That technology and media play a crucial role both in constituting the field and determining the outcome of conflict is a point that cannot be repeated often enough.

"¡ALERTA!"

In this clip, a man can be heard saying "This kind woman wants to know: who are the people wearing masks?" A few people reply that the masked protesters are Antifa. But then, the Antifa group breaks into a chant: "Alerta! Alerta! Antifascista!" The sea of black-clad protesters become a singular entity, a black bloc, a mass of bodies woven together by sound and voice. A waveform demonstrates the sonic transformation, while the chant is transcribed in standard notation below.

"WE GOT SOME NAZIS OVER HERE!"

By midday, things were going poorly for the "Free Speech" crowd. Turnout had been low on their side, while counterdemonstrators, in their thousands, filled the park to oppose their message. At some point, it seems the Alt-Right decided to cut their losses and wrap up early. Cheers of victory, as well as hoots of derision echoed across the Common, as the Free Speech Rally ended not with a bang, but a whimper.

The Alt-Right were picking up to leave, and, in the process of doing so, some made their way in my direction. The counter-protesters around me erupted into shouts and jeers. While the gun-toting thugs who marched on Charlottesville had been, by all accounts, an intimidating crew, the Alt-Right in attendance that day were, in my estimation, a singularly unthreatening and rather pathetic assemblage.

In the waveform below, a voice can be heard to exclaim, "We got some Nazis over here!" The cry is taken up a moment later—and much louder—by a woman, who screams, "We got some Nazis over here!" with a combination of outrage and something like glee. The singular cries meld together into an incoherent frenzy. Meaningful speech is dissolved into pure sonic force.
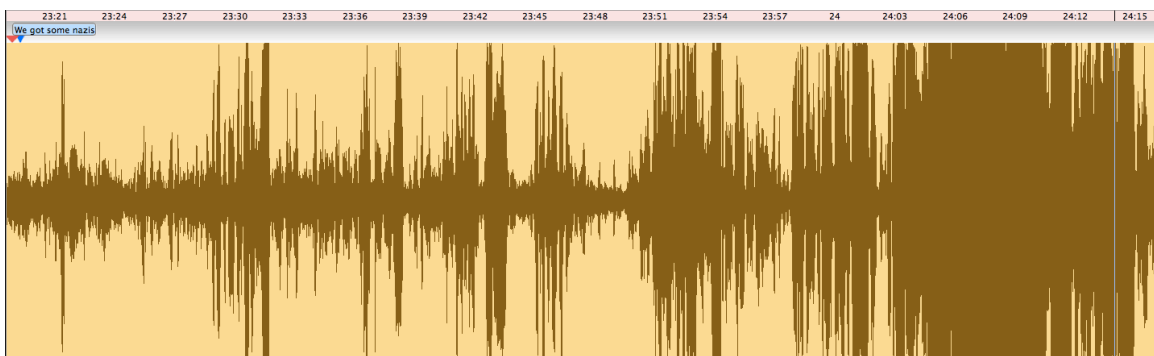
Meeting the Alt-Right

While many of the Alt-Right contingent slunk out of the park quickly, a few lingered and engaged with the counter-protesters. I saw a handful of these Alt-Right demonstrators, who seemed simply to be aggrieved malcontents. One protester was the perfect embodiment of an internet troll, as he seemed primarily interested in offending people. (He even looked a little like a troll—the kind of one expects to find living under a bridge

harassing, billy goats.) In one hand, he was holding a sign that read "I'm with stupid," and in the other, he had a megaphone that he used periodically to repeat a handful of sophomoric provocations like "I'm in Antifa and I have Downs' Syndrome." In the waveform below, a counterdemonstrator aggressively confronts him, asking him why he is there, and whether he has anything to say. "I'm with stupid," he replies, again and again. "The voice of the Alt-Right," exclaims the counterdemonstrator, his voice dripping with contempt.
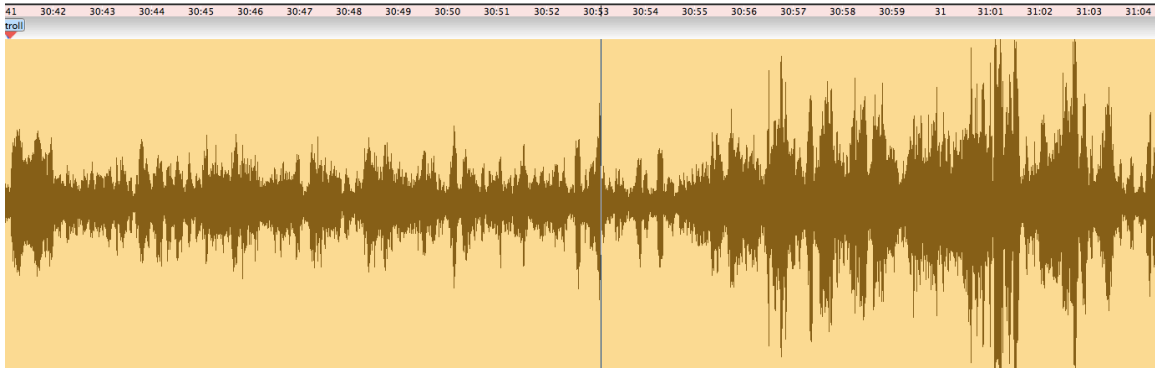
"I don't want to hear any opinion that isn't my own," smirked the troll. He was wearing a body camera, and no doubt feared violence at the hands of the counter-protesters. This fear was not unwarranted, as we will see below.

ATTACK!

A final protester, a scrawny, bearded man in his mid-20s was wearing a bicycle helmet and had a body camera strapped on his denim vest. He seemed to be some sort of right-libertarian, and was evasive and non-committal when asked if he was a Trump supporter. Nevertheless, he had attended, he claimed, not because he sympathized with racists per se, but

because he wanted to "see what they had to say." Was he there to change their minds? It was unclear. He looked extremely nervous, and with good reason. Surrounded on all sides by aggressive and hostile counter-protesters, the intensity—and, indeed, the volume—of the confrontation rose until something exploded, and he was tackled by a black-clad antifa member; a waveform of this moment can be seen below. There is an audible cry of "Police!" at 35'29".
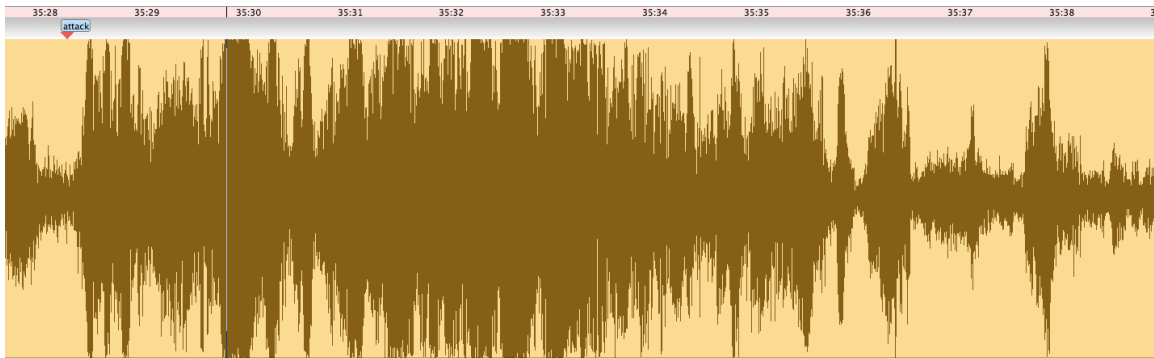
As stated earlier, a great number of police were present at the event, and they quickly stepped in and broke things up. Eventually, they walked off the protester (though not the antifa member, who vanished into the crowd) in handcuffs.

"SHAME! SHAME! SHAME!"

A recurring tactic, when a far-right demonstrator approached, was to chant "Shame! Shame! Shame!" This disturbance can be seen in the waveform below. Each peak is a cry of "Shame!" This recording was made as a "Free Speech" demonstrator was leaving. Thus, we can see an increase, then a decrease, in the amplitude of the recording as he passes me by.

The chant is transcribed below.

When a similar occurrence transpires under slightly different circumstances, the contrast is even starker. In the example below, we see the chaotic mass of sounds. On the recording, there is a roiling mass of voices, screaming and shouting obscenities. Over the din, a man can be heard shouting "Go home Nazis! You're not welcome in Boston!" But then something happens. The crowd begins to chant together: "Shame! Shame! Shame!" This happens at approximately 24' 52", and can clearly be distinguished by the dramatic change in waveform pattern from solid mass to jagged sawtooth.
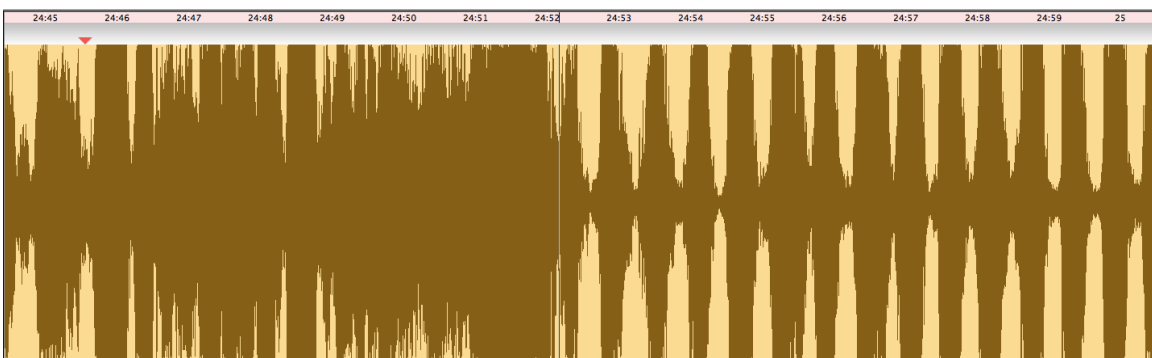
"GTFO!"

Sometimes, the chants were more obscene. In this example, also made as the
Alt-Right protesters were leaving, a man can be heard yelling "Go the fuck
home!" The crowd then begins chanting "Get the fuck out!" for four beats,
followed by four beats of handclaps. As we can see here, there need not be
any particular linguistic content attached to the sonic disturbances for a
symbolic message to be conveyed.
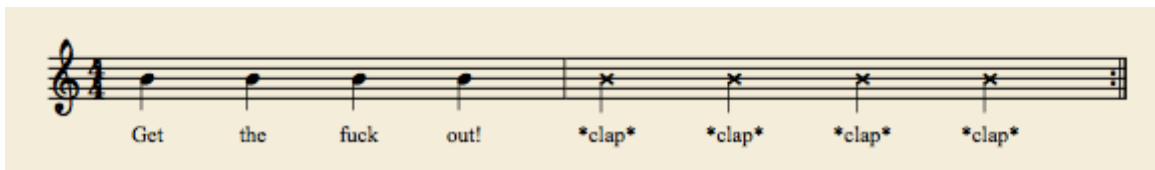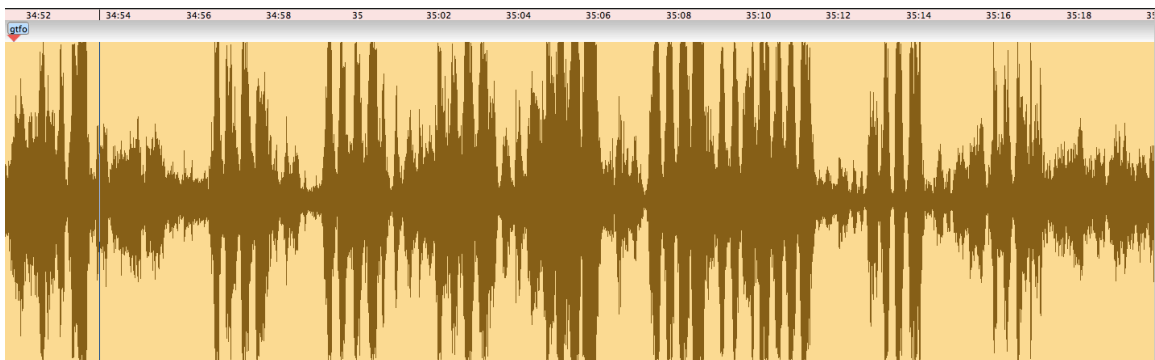

And After…

The following recordings, made shortly after 2 PM, just as the protest was
beginning to break up, illustrate the transformation that occurs in the
soundscape. In the first example, we see the energized state of protest. In the
example below, one person calls "Whose streets?" and protestors reply "Our
streets!"
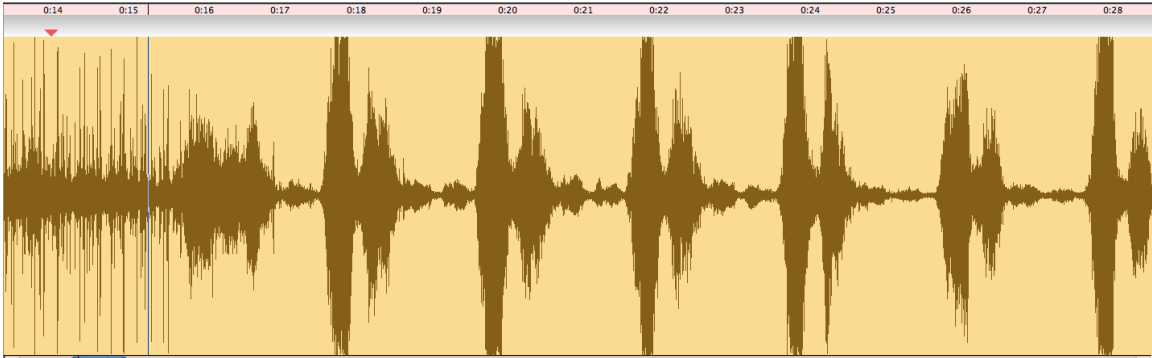
The chant is transcribed below.

In this final example, below, we see how we have a return to normalcy, the return to the everyday background hum of the city where, moments ago, there was a significant disturbance.
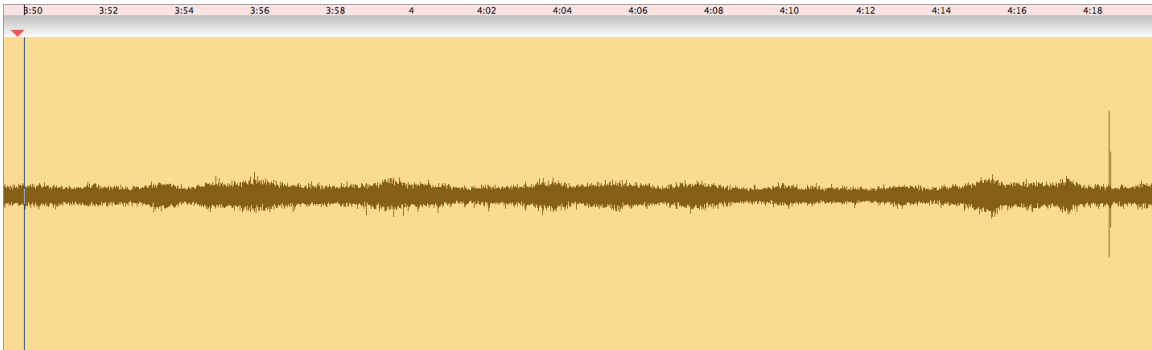
Final Thoughts

Clearly, this was a complex event. On the one hand, it was clearly an important symbolic statement against the odious politics of the Alt-Right. That tens of thousands turned out to take a stand against hatred, racism, and bigotry is significant, and worth celebrating. On the other, some might be dismayed by the undercurrents of violence, which sometimes flared to the

surface of the protest. Of my many recordings, the most striking moments are those in which chants break out, in which the chaotic sounds of the crowd coalesce into something *more*. This energy, while powerful, was often directed toward violent verbal and physical confrontations. What would happen, then, if we harnessed this energy towards other ends? It is with this question in mind that I offer this next example.

Form-of-Life: Charlottesville Solidarity Rally (8/16)

I stumbled across this event while heading to a local coffee shop to get some work done. Ironically, I was speaking on the phone to my sister, telling her about my plan to attend the rally described above. As she was urging me to be careful, I arrived at Davis Square, where the solidarity event was unfolding.

It is worth briefly considering the physical layout of Davis Square. While there is a small square with a few benches, it is not designed to be a place amenable to large gatherings of people or to be a destination in itself. If one goes there, it is likely to patronize one of its restaurants, bars, or coffee shops (depending on the time of day). There are a few other shops, but in general, the space is not conducive to group assembly, or to the idea of "going nowhere in particular," that is, to roaming, lounging, and so on. The *flaneur* would find it most inhospitable. In some sense, it is akin to Marc Auge's notion of the "non-place," insofar as it is a between space that we only occupy en route to a destination, an elsewhere.[67] Of course, that this is so is the

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[67] Augé, *Non-Places*.

result of decisions made by planners, architects, city council members, businesses, and the like.[68] Notwithstanding its unsuitability for mass gatherings, hundreds of people were packed into the square, bordered by a busy intersection. I eagerly joined the crowd, and made my way into the crush of bodies.

I arrived when the event was well underway. There were a number of speakers: the Somerville mayor, various local politicians, community organizers, a woman whose immigration status was now threatened, and a singer-pianist. As is often the case at these events, the speeches were uneven. Some were rousing, others less so. There was some occasional crowd participation, but it remained rather predictable ("Are we going to fight racism?" "Yes!"). It almost goes without saying that mention of large-scale, systemic change was absent, save for a single reference to "economic justice" by one speaker. Would the reaction be similarly ebullient if the call was not just "black lives matter," but also for massive wealth redistribution, nationalization of major industries, abolition of police and prisons? It is easy to disavow racism; even our president has done it. Some would claim that more must be done.

An interesting wrinkle appeared when a speaker referred to a period, in the early 1990s, when Somerville was "changing"—that is to say, gentrifying. (While I am unsure of what the ethnic and economic demographics used to be, I gather the town was once a working class place.)

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[68] See e.g., Harvey, "The Urban Process under Capitalism: A Framework for Analysis."

The speaker recounted how there was some racial unrest and discontent—conflicts in schools and the like—but that these were resolved. How, precisely, these conflicts were resolved remained unclear. The explanation that seemed to me most plausible was that some populations were displaced as a result of rising rents, ending the conflict. It is worth noting that the crowd was, from my vantage point, not only relatively racially homogenous (majority white), but more significantly, represented the kind of people who would, themselves, be gentrifiers: liberal social values, middle or upper middle class, probably employed in knowledge industries of one kind or another, and (why not?) equipped with a certain minimal critical awareness so as to be able to articulate the process of gentrification in an academic paper.[69]

Music and Song

I found much of the event underwhelming until the Somerville mayor spoke:

> I ask you to hold hands with the person next to you, to your right and your left…I want you to look to the person on your right and left, and in front and behind you. Look in their eyes. Look in their hearts. Feel their flesh. Feel their humanity. For those who chant 'Blood and Soil!" we *are* all creatures of the same blood and the same earth. Let's let them hear that loud and clear.

I held hands with a slight teenager to my right. The pianist began to play, and we sang "We Shall Overcome" (a song with its own history). And then something happened. Initially, I felt a moment of trepidation. I am not inclined to sing in public, but after a moment's hesitation, I took the plunge

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[69] A cynic might even go so far as to suggest that the most visible beating of breasts and gnashing of teeth concerning gentrification is done by gentrifiers themselves.

and joined the song. A feeling of profound calm washed over me in a way that is difficult to put into words. In this moment, the order of daily life began to slip away, I felt myself overflowing the bounds of my singular physical body, my sense of myself as an individual faded. I was enveloped in sound, seized with a sense of belonging to something greater and larger than myself, of becoming part of something more, beyond the fear and pain of the terrible events that had brought me to this rally. A waveform of this moment is below.
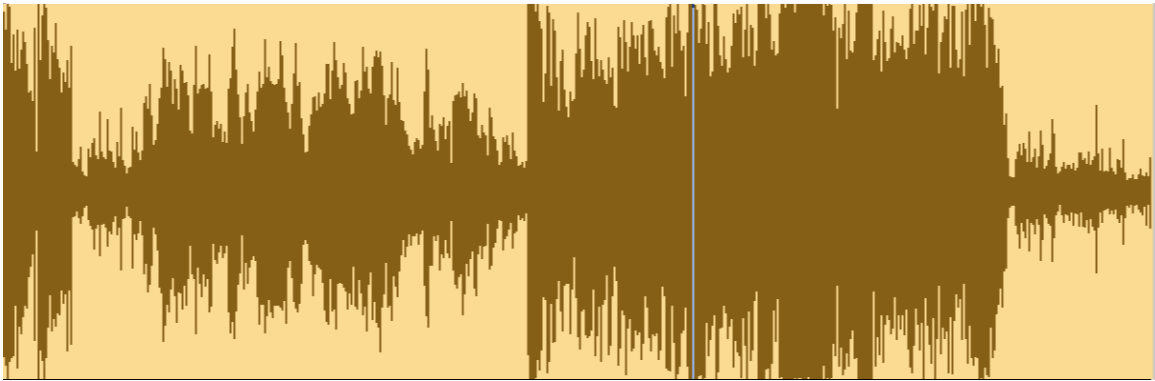
So what is this moment when the crowd begins to sing? After the tragic events, the act of singing together harnesses this collective energy, this *something* is there that everybody can perceive, acknowledge, and take part in, yet which resists articulation in language. In this instance, the energy seemed to be directed toward the important process of grieving and mourning—and also toward the potential for (re)building the world to come. In other words, the decision to sing could signify the belief in a different possible future.

I could not bring myself to join in the second number: "America the Beautiful." Despite the fact that one speaker had, echoing Hillary Clinton, claimed that "America is already great," it did not feel particularly beautiful or particularly great at that moment, and of course, the pathologies that make it look so ugly are hardly anything new.

On the other hand, perhaps one answer to the old question "what is to be done?" would be to reclaim the idea of "America," to redefine it in such a way that it becomes *possible* to feel good about singing "America the Beautiful." At the very least, it seems dangerous to cede this (powerful) symbolic territory to right-wing nationalists.[70] In any case, if such a thing can be done, I suspect it will not be by saying "No, you white nationalists are not real Americans, you are not what this country is about," as this simply mirrors, in inverted form, the racist argument: "No, you immigrants/people of color/sexual minorities/ethnic minorities are not real Americans, you are not what this country is about". There must be some other way beyond this impasse. Perhaps the way to do this is through sound. We might ask, then, what would a vibrational politics look like—or sound like?

Relational ethics, vibrational politics

As history has amply demonstrated, the category of "humanity," far from representing the possibility of universalism, opens the gates to atrocity. A time-honored method of justifying odious crimes is by designating a group of people (women, people of color, Jews—the list could be extended) as

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[70] This idea is developed much more fully in Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

lacking some key criterion of "full" humanity. The poststructuralist move to anti-humanism, in denying any normative grounding to the category of "the human," solves the problem at the cost of severely compromising the potential for politics. The rhetoric of human rights represents one attempt to navigate this impasse in a juridical sense, but the category has been so much abused by the cynical politics of humanitarian intervention that there is cause to doubt its efficacy. Meanwhile, the emergent new materialisms that attempt to collapse the distinction between subject and object—that is, by treating all things as objects—might reasonably be criticized as a worrying foreclosure of politics. (What need for justice when all objects are created equal?) Does temporary recourse to strategic essentialism with respect to the category of "the human," then, represent the best option for an effective ethico-political program? There may be another alternative. A definition of the human that proceeds from the relational first principles (discussed below) may present a solution to this difficult problem.

At this point, it must be acknowledged that Badiou's militant approach to the Event as discussed in Chapter Two is perhaps not ideal for a continuing ethical practice.[71] Indeed, Badiou himself suggests three situations in which a (compromised) Fidelity to the Event can yield terror, betrayal, and disaster.[72] Elsewhere, he seems to tacitly suggest that behavior, carriage, and comportment appropriate to the specificity of the Event itself

[71] French intellectuals' enthusiasm for extreme political positions is well-documented, in, for example, Wolin, *The Wind from the East*.
[72] Badiou, *Ethics*. p. 71

may not translate outside its evental coordinates.[73] A more critical reading might suggest he perpetuates a kind of intellectual Leninism, with the philosopher, the bearer of crucial knowledge, as substitute for the revolutionary party. To address these criticisms, we might draw on the rich tradition of feminist thought, particularly the current known as relational or care ethics.

While a full account of this tradition is not possible here, a number of familiar themes can be identified.[74] Care ethics does not attempt to found ethical practice in any singular subject, but rather takes relations as fundamental.[75] Beginning from the uncontestable claim that all humans spend some of their lives dependent on others for survival, care ethics aims to move beyond the idea of the autonomous individual as foundation for ethical practice. Similarly, far from censuring emotion as irrational (and thus irrelevant), relational ethics understands emotions, feelings, and affects as central to the types of relationships that are its inspiration—for instance, the relationship between parent and child. Furthermore, these types of

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[73] Badiou. p. 70
[74] In this section, I draw heavily from Held, *The Ethics of Care*.
[75] While there are similarities here with Levinasian ethics, we should also note a number of differences. While relations are primary, unlike with Levinas, these relations are not necessarily between humans (which also creates intriguing overlaps with ecological ethics). There are, moreover, intersections between care and virtue ethics (the latter of which emphasizes moral excellence as a quality one ought to strive towards, while also allowing excellence to be particularly—indeed, tautologically defined, thus avoiding foundationalism, and, potentially, allowing for particular universals to emerge. Finally, there are similarities with certain non-Western traditions (Confucian ethics, African ethics), which also decenter the individual and emphasize one's duty to the community.

relationships emphasize the particular over the universal, the concrete over the abstract, the context over the rule. As with much feminist thought, it rejects traditional notions of the "public sphere" (of politics, commerce, discourse, for instance), and the "private sphere" (of domestic work, affective labor, child-rearing, and so on). In brief, care ethics "builds concern and mutual responsiveness to need on both the personal and the wider social level."[76]

While care ethics should not be understood as an ethical panacea,[77] in outlining a positive, rather than a simply negative program, in saying what it is for, rather than simply what it is against, in articulating a vision of the future rather than simply critiquing the present, care ethics provides not just a model for engaging in protest and resistance, but for an ongoing normative ideal for "the morning after the revolution," so to speak.

Finally, one cannot help but notice how elegantly it dovetails with the vibrational theory of sound outlined above. If, following Eidsheim, our relationship with sound "could productively be understood as an expression of how we conceive of our relationship to the world," then perhaps the vibrational and ethical spheres can play a co-constitutive role.[78] As a

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[76] Held, *The Ethics of Care*. p. 28

[77] A few concerns: How do we address resentment that may arise *from* relations of care? What about social antagonisms and inequality? How does care ethics handle the threat of violence, transgression against the law, and so on? Does the relational imperative—Care!—merely represent a kind of crypto-Kantianism?

[78] Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound*. p. 6. The events I have attended have been entirely homogenous politically (or rather, the political divide was between the liberal left and the radical left). Would the same type of effect happen in a

vibrational-material phenomenon, the sound-event of protest creates a communicative situation that makes an undeniable statement of presence, underwritten by the axiom of equality. Instantiated by the sound-event, this axiom of equality—if collectively articulated, faithfully reiterated, and tirelessly pursued—may give rise to a political Event, a fundamental reconfiguration of our understanding and experience of the world. Finally, as a vibrational-relational phenomenon, sound can provide us with a conceptual model for reorganizing our mode of existence, of thinking towards a relational way of Being-in-the-world. The protest, then, may be far more than a simple airing of grievances in the present. It may also be a zone of potentiality, a crucible of Truth, a clarion call heralding a brighter future.

Over the course of this chapter, I have demonstrated the manner in which two different demonstrations, one in Boston, the other in Somerville, reconfigured the soundscape of the city. In both instances, voices bound together bodies, and individuals melted together into something more than themselves. We might say that the first instance was oriented toward the present, while the second was oriented toward the future. The former led to conflict and violence; the latter presented—or at least suggested—a vision of an alternate form of life, a different way of being in the world. The aim is not to suggest that we can have either anger and violence or peace and harmony.

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case where real profound disagreement existed between people—that is, singing with Trump supporters? Such an occasion would be worth investigating.

I prefer instead to think of these as two among many possible tools or

techniques we might use to build different worlds.

Postscript:

The Question Concerning Technology

Of course (and at the risk of stating the obvious), all of the

transcription, all of the thick description, all of the waveforms of all of the

field recordings fail in a fundamental way to capture the singular character of

the protest qua event. The same would be true of the other forms

representing the event: photos and videos, too, are limited in what they can

show us. In fact, it may be the case that there is an excessive element, an

unrepresentable kernel to *every* event that always and forever escapes

representation, eludes our attempt to isolate it. And, although there may be

no satisfactory way of articulating such a thing, I suggest that it is the

encounter with this element beyond language—unsayable, but nonetheless

palpable—which is the key to the power of these events. Beyond the absolute

limit of signification, meaning, or representation, matter begins to vibrate in

synchronicity. This is the moment of disindividuation, of becoming multiple,

of the encounter in which nothing is changed, and yet everything is changed

is the essence of the subjectivation process I have been describing. This

excessive element preempts the obvious deconstructive critique of my

approach (namely, that in considering soundscapes, I simply reproduce the

classic form/content binary and privilege the form).

Although this remainder may be unrepresentable, we need not pass it

over in silence. Rather, we might reformulate the question and ask how the

tools used to perform these operations (recording, analysis, and so on) affect

the questions I can ask, the information I can access, and the information I cannot? What questions become (un)available as a result? Let us take a step back, then, and ask a simple question: How is it possible to do this project at all? What set of steps is necessary for me to register and record sound as I have been doing? My project is fundamentally one of transcription. Transcription implies some kind of writing.[79] In its simplest form, transcription involves translation of sound waves to symbols, that is, to musical notation. As anyone who has ever transcribed music knows, this is fundamentally impossible. One can never capture music or sound in its totality on the page. Something is always lost.

For me to transcribe these protests, a series of actions must occur. First, I must attend a demonstration, recording device in hand, press the button, and let the device work its magic. I make my recording and the device captures the sound waves. How does this happen? This recording is a process of capture, a translation from sound waves into data in binary code, which is stored in audio files. These files also follow the rules of higher-level codes (more symbolic language). Unfortunately, these languages are unknown to me, and, although I know that something must be lost in translation, I cannot even begin to grasp what it might be, unlike in the example of simple musical transcription, where I can at least say, "well, the notation does not adequately

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[79] See e.g., Marin Marian-Bălaşa, "Who Actually Needs Transcription? Notes on the Modern Rise of a Method and the Postmodern Fall of an Ideology," *The World of Music* 47, no. 2 (2005): 5–29; Philip V. Bohlman, "Music as Representation," *Journal of Musicological Research* 24, no. 3–4 (October 1, 2005): 205–26.

convey the precise timbre of the note," for instance. The complications do not stop there. I must transfer these audio files onto my computer, on which I use a program called Transcribe to translate them into the language of waveforms. I read, compare, and interpret these, translating them into prose. In some cases, I translate them a final time into musical notation, (as in the chants, above). This is quite a process, moving, as we do, from sound to data to computer code to visual representation of waveform to written description, and perhaps from one type of notation to another: phenomenological description in English to musical notation. This introduces a great deal of room for error. One has only to take a paragraph of text and send it through six different languages in Google Translate to appreciate this. We should ask, then, what gets lost in translation?

There is also the question of the technological means by which I record, document, and process these events, and whether these means are as neutral or transparent as they sometimes appear to the untrained eye. It is my sense that, in some cases, technology, media, and infrastructure have been treated as either neutral or transparent means of communication or recording—that is to say, as empty containers for information. But these technologies are hardly neutral. Not only are such services developed, influenced, and operated by various concentrations of power (political, economic, and the like), but they also reflect political or ideological positions on a more formal level, that is, on the level of their construction and design.[80]

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[80] See e.g., Galloway, *Protocol.*

What does it mean that, in terms of transmitting information across digital networks, there is no ontological difference between a Trump rally and a Trump protest? That is to say, both are reduced to binary code and transmitted over fiber optic communications networks owned and operated by the same small handful of media corporations. Given the explicitly political nature of the event, the often occluded or obscure political implications of technology are easy to miss. We will not have an adequate understanding of the event without accounting for such implications and considering how they feed into a larger media system.

The transitions sound makes—from vibration to information and back to vibration—is also worth unpacking. We begin with sound moving from the world, where it is recorded, to the inside of the machine, where it becomes information, then back to the world again where I listen to it. We have already discussed the process of translation this implies. We could say this is a movement from the register of ontology to the register of epistemology, and back again. This occurs not only in the recordings I make, but also in recordings that are then played for profit on the news and so forth. I would be remiss not to mention, moreover, how neatly this relation maps onto the familiar M-C-M' relation from *Capital, Vol. 1*, the derivation of surplus-value.[81] This seems a most curious coincidence, especially given the manner in which spectacular media events are big business. Indeed, we would do well to mark the seeming paradox of using spectacular tactics to

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[81] See Chapter 4, "The General Formula for Capital" in Marx, *Capital*.

protest a president who is the very product of a media apparatus that

cultivates and valorizes spectacle. I suggest that this apparent contradiction

disappears if we refer to CBS chairman Les Moonves' remarks concerning

Trumpism: "It may not be good for America, but it's damn good for CBS."[82]

The implications of these comments are at once far-reaching and thoroughly

unsurprising, and I suggest that future scholarship will necessarily have to

consider their implications.

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[82] Collins, "Les Moonves."

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