

“Dirty dirt” and sonic relationality: The politics of noise in a London estate community

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Jane¹: “You know mine is strong [how I feel about noise] because it made me ill. She [upstairs neighbour] gave me a stroke. Broke my ceiling in the kitchen. Loud music, I could feel the vibrations in the chair, you know, zzzzzzzzz. *In the chair*, that’s how loud it was. I can feel it in my body too. Bugging my brain, I’m still trying to recover from this, stroke thing, and it keeps adding blood pressure. I had a letter from the doctor sent in because of it” (coughs).

Jane’s account is poignantly indicative of the bodily and spatial effects of sonic violation on the integrity of the self and the home. Noise acts as a vibrational connecting channel coursing through the chair and the body sitting on, fusing the porous conduit of the skin with the physical space of the home. This paper is an excerpt of a larger work on the dynamics and politics of noise in the construction of a council estate community in North London, where I lived for a year and conducted fieldwork. It will focus here on the nature of sound as a tactile nexus of relationality, and explore the way in which domestic space and its dwellers become sensing subjects through the perception of noise as an embodied and affective practice of sonic sense-making in neighbours relationships - which proves problematic in a context where intimacies are *forced* but actively resisted and denied.

What follows is not so much an exposition of ‘data’ as an attempt to evoke for the reader a grounding in place through hearing “sound making as place making”, as proposed with sound recordings by Feld and Brenneis (2004:465), here in the writing of the ethnographic material itself. It is hoped that the “embodied sense of being *on the ground*” (Labelle 2010:136) that produces sonic bodies-in-place and out-of-place, lost in the recording, can be retrieved in the immersive resonance of the words themselves, as an evocation of sound’s anchoring of my informants’ bodies in the production of ‘place’.

¹ All names are fictional to preserve the anonymity of my informants.

The estate, closed off by six blocks of identical appearance facing one another in an architectural dialogue of stiff glass-windows and outside corridors, borders a main road whose continual, lulling sounds submerge it in anaesthetic flow, streamed into the small entrance gates, pouring onto the central courtyard, gently seeping along the narrow corridors and rushing back through the common staircase. A surprising tranquillity in the midst of a metropolis: a peaceful backdrop against which the sharp reality within the private sphere of the home, punctuated by irruptions of shouts and shrieks, thumps, knocks and 'hums', can only resonate with increased heftiness. The apparent thickness of the walls, solidified by various enclosures of bricks and gates – and the circumvention of each block by one or more blocks, functioning as different peelings enclosing one another – remains a deceiving visual comfort, for their “aural porosity” (Argenti-Pillen 2003:87) readily betrays their putative promise of privacy. The sounds of domesticity and differentiated bodies fuse together, diffusing a vibrating community difficultly perceived by the eye alone, resonating “in that rather inaccessible area behind the front doors” (Miller 1988:355). This promiscuity inherent in the “we-ness” of sound (Adorno in Back and Bull 2003:6) is compounded and in part produced by a spatial and visual proximity. The disposition of the blocks assures constant monitoring of every flat: “It’s so open, you can just see everything that’s going on in the estate” (Ben). Flats are literally attached to one another by corridors, throwing the tenants into a difficult, and sometimes actively resisted, ‘forced togetherness’: “You always know what everyone’s up to. It forces connections, intimacies you might not want to have...” (Isabel).

Noise emerged as an interesting pivot in conflicts that *would not* follow visually. My informants denied knowing their neighbours or talking to them, and refused any contact with them. Yet they described them to me in ways that contradicted this refusal:

“She dresses up short skirts and high heels and... I think men come to pick her up sometimes. She’s that kind of girl. *Black girl*. Black born here. Likes drinks, smoke,

drugs and ... maybe... the rest! She's one of those, you know. But sorry love, yes!

Back to your subject. But ***this is what it's all about, isn't it??***"

When I asked my Nigerian informant about such findings, he replied:

"There have been a few issues with antisocial behaviours. Young people, young Asian, young Asian lads".

And for my informant Dave, from Bangkok, noisy people were "Chavs. Wannabee-guys, public school boys, you know' I mean".

These accounts suggest that noise is the sound of otherness; *Noise is sound out of tune that forms dissonant bodies or bodies out of place*. Sonic otherness is dissonance that betrays one's engrained auditory habitus, standing out within the tuned environment of the estate, and granted imagined somatic form. A 'somatic norm' is naturalized by a collective sonic consciousness that casts dissonance as bodily difference, as a specific cultural and historical construction.

What I want to stress here is that while the nature of sound as 'ephemeral' and transitive has often been viewed as an obstacle to its analysis, this transitionality is precisely the locus of sociality, of relational contact. Sound precedes its form, it is primarily received and transmitted as a visceral, redundant, embodied affect pregnant with possibilities of cultural meaning. And this 'transmission' is cumulative; noise's affectivity is accumulated within bodily memory as an internal sonic hard drive, as another informant, Laura, expressed in relation to her noisy neighbour:

"It was just a case of *building up, building up*, so every time she made a noise it was everything else she'd done in the past built up *so the anger slowly accumulated through that*."

It is through this *relationality*, through the auditory channelling of bodily affect that enables the endowment with and production of cultural meanings that sounds are 'formed' as somatic figures within sonic and sensory consciousness.

Dirty Dirt

Sonic matter is inherently transitional and transformative. Noise, as disorder, has “unlimited *potential* for patterning” (Douglas 2002:117), and it is in the very process of the reiterative translation of sonic matter into *different modalities*, in the endless possibilities for re-materialization, that noise is most threatening *and* productive. Thus noise is not simply othered as somatic form: it precipitates a whole *domain* of abjection. In relation to what Mary Douglas refers to as the creative capacity of dirt to ‘compost’ itself productively (Douglas 2002:202), I propose the following: noise is not only ‘dirt’, it is *dirty dirt*. Noise ‘composts’ itself into *more* dirt and potentially *dirtier* dirt. Indeed, in my informants’ narratives, noise events were complemented by anecdotes on actual littering. My informant Alex had received noise complaints from his neighbour, when people on the estate started noticing that “she was throwing rubbish out of her window”. Jane, that I quoted before, suddenly shifted the conversation from noise to rubbish: “I see condoms on the stairs. What are they up to? Dis-gus-ting, isn’t it”, also mentioning that one time “They set fire to the garbage!”. “Noise” as a sonic event acts as a catalyser for further pollution, be it racialised somatic matter, actual litter, or deviant behaviour. Noise therefore constitutes a threat for further offences, “spiralling downwards”. It is through this reiterative and degenerative matrix that a tenant becomes ‘evictable’: this reiteration of deviance appears as a foregrounding of his failure to approximate tenancy norms. But *why* is noise perceived as *dirtier* than dirt? And what are the implications of this contagious defilement of *other domains* on the constitution of the ‘sonic self’?

I suggest that a potential answer lies in the nature of sound as sticky and motile *touch*, which in the case of noise becomes polluting, contagious or even lethal. Noise as dissonant ‘dirt’ extends its polluting substance: it sticks to matter and contaminates it. For noise to cause a *stroke* to Jane, for her to *feel* the vibrations in the chair, through her hands, bouncing along her arms and eventually to her heart and head, ‘bugging her brain’, noise cannot operate otherwise than tactually, in a very material and affective

sense. Thus, this outcast noisy tenant is not only deviant: it is also harmful *to others*. It is only through granting sound its tactile materiality that its *relational* affectivity can be recognized, as a connective and contagious fluid connecting and disconnecting bodies to and from bodies, in place and out of place.

This connectivity acts as a relational flow of substances in a manner that resonates with Marilyn Strathern's account (1999) of "relational knowledge" among the Hagen people. Similarly to body decorations of Hagen dancers as assemblages of 'life-forces' gathered from various people, which are relational not as *representations* but as *activations* of those bonds, sound works as a vibrational nexus of *relations*, circulating sound bites as extended particles of bodily touch charged with affectivity. Moreover, following Strathern, sounds do not "reify society or culture", but rather "reify *capacities* contained in persons" as affective possibilities of informing.

The difference here, of course, is that this relationality is actively problematized and refused: *noise* events impose a disruptive violation, discharging sonic scraps of the othered and *dissonant body* "whose presence is summoned thereby" (Strathern 1999:38). If following Butler (1993), we can consider noisy tenants as the 'abject outside' that fails to comply to auditory norms of tenancy, as the 'haunting spectre' of the normative subject, then we can understand noise events not only as invoking this spectre but as harmful *penetrations* of this 'polluting outside' *into* the subject, *producing* it partly from its very own defiling substance.

Recalling noise's productive capacity to transition tactually and translate into further matter its own polluting substance, one could say that noise is most powerful when it *ceases to be sonic*, and becomes perceived as effectively and problematically materialized into other material and sensorial domains. When noise, reiteratively stored within bodily memory, achieves *permanent* engraving within the body it violates, as a stroke in Jane's case, and cannot thus be *rejected* from it, it performs what Butler might call the *materialization* of the harmful and 'haunting spectre of the subject's

deconstitution'. Otherness is threatening because this dissonance is perceived as *immovable*, as effectively materialized within one's very own body. Noise is the perceived realization of sound's de-stabilizing potential; noise is perceived as *fixed instability* that disorients one's making of the self-in-place. In that sense, whether or not a conflict leads to the literal eviction of the noisy tenant from the estate is in fact of little importance. What matters is what *remains* as an effect of this cascading chain, as a sedimentation of noise's effects, in its infiltration and corruption of *attuned* bodies – those that strive to conform to the normative ideal of tenancy.

Noise's affective, embodied, 'sticky' reiteration has formed a swelling knot in the transitional process of its translation, which bounces back as noise's indeterminate and potentially permanent return: the 'object' has triumphed when it springs back *from within the very body that it haunts*.

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