

## NOISE

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“**WHAT DOES QUEERNESS** *sound* like?” This is a key question that we explore and theorize as sound artists in our queer noise project Seroconversion and it urges us to pay attention to an often neglected aspect of queerness: the sonic dimension. The question also proposes an alternative practice: *listening* to queerness rather than *looking* at or *feeling* it. Here, listening (in contrast to hearing) turns into a critical and methodological practice of actively paying attention to what is being repudiated by dominant discourses of gender and sexuality as noisy and therefore also is being silenced. In other words, queerness is experienced sonically and thus, we contend, we have much to gain from theorizing queerness from a sonic perspective. We propose “noise” as a concept and part of a queer noise theory concerned with both the noisy politics of sexuality and the sexual politics of noise.

To “be silenced” and to “make one’s voice heard” are well established sonic expressions of marginalization and of the political organizing of groups that historically have been repudiated to the abject outskirts of discourse. However, while these sonic expressions are well established and both marginality and political organizing have been researched extensively in different scientific fields and from critical practices, much about queerness remains to be explored from a noise perspective. We contend that a queer noise theory should not just consist of reframing queerness in aural terms, it should focus on those aspects of queerness that work on an aural level and thus cannot be adequately approached by

other sensorial perspectives. It should not only metaphorically give voice to those who have been silenced, but it should also theoretically attempt to explain the aural-political processes of voicing and silencing and their respective relationships to noise. By exploring the aural dimensions of queerness and the queer dimensions of aurality, it sheds light on power dynamics relating to norms of gender, sexuality, technology, and sound.

“Noise,” much like “queer,” is a highly contested term (Kahn 1999; Hegarty 2007; Goddard et al. 2012; Goddard et al. 2013; Hainge 2013; Thompson 2017). One of the most common definitions is that noise is unwanted sound. But this unwantedness is not a quality of the sound *in itself*; rather it is about the sound’s relationship to norms of time and space. A sound can be(come) unwanted if it is “wrong” in relation to a space or situation or occupying a space for “too long.” Another common definition of noise can be found in communication- and information theory, where noise is the (unintelligible) opposite to (intelligible) signal; anything that has the potential to disrupt a message (information) being delivered from a sender to a receiver (Massumi 2012). Yet the very defining of what is signal or noise constitutes a political practice of setting boundaries between what is wanted/unwanted, intelligible/unintelligible, desirable/undesirable, and, as we will try to show here, straight/queer. What is defined as signal/noise, wanted/unwanted, or intelligible/unintelligible, always depends on the situation and context, thus there is always information to be found in noise and noise to be found in information. A queer noise theory account cannot be satisfied with simply trying to pinpoint and define noise and queerness in a definitive and universal way but rather to point to these contingent qualities. And the critical task at hand, as part of a queer noise theory, should perhaps not only be to ask the crucial and critical questions: “What is (made into) signal?” and “What is (made into) noise?” but to also resignify and revalue what is currently being perceived as signal (straight) and noise (queer) as part of the noisy politics of sexuality and the sexual politics of noise.

To do all this requires diving into the specific materiality of sound as it articulates with gender and sexuality. Sound is a physical phenom-

enon, consisting of vibrations and movement in time and space. Unlike visual impressions, where those who can see can avert their eyes or even close their eyelids to ignore what they see, sound is always present for those who hear. This is a unique quality of sound in contrast to vision. We cannot shut the aural world out; it is constantly acting upon us. As Drew Daniel (2017) has pointed out, it is this inevitability of sound that makes it queer. In a similar way, Guy Hocquenghem (1993, 50) wrote: “In its endless struggle against homosexuality, society finds again and again that condemnation seems to breed the very curse it claims to be getting rid of.” Therefore, while both sound and queerness might be unwanted, they are also both hard to control and tend to break through sonic and social barriers and restrictions. In this way, noise (as inevitable sound) and queerness (as inevitable desire) mirror each other, both in their inevitability, in the trickiness of controlling them, their shared unwantedness and by (hetero)normative society’s repudiation of them as sonic and bodily forms of excesses.

The concept “noise” already acts as a transdisciplinary node in the discursive networks of sciences and cross-references multiple fields of scientific inquiry, such as noise studies, media- and communication studies, feminist sound studies, science and technology studies, art history and aesthetics, philosophy and linguistics. One example where this kind of cross-referencing has occurred is within a subgenre of feminist sound studies. Whether it is scholarly work on the gender of sound and the gendered voice in classical Greece (Carson 1995), women labor machines (Power 2009), female sound artists’ practices (Rodgers 2010; Thompson 2013; 2016) or femininity as a glitching technology (Sundén 2016), feminist noise scholars have not only shed light on how femininity and the category “Woman” constitute forms of pink noises. They have also turned feminist theory into a form of pink noise making on its own in the shape of a counter discourse that creates dissonances and interferences within dominant, phallogentric, scientific, and artistic discourses.

Similarly, noise studies can also inform the field of queer sound studies by adding questions of *sonic* normativity and the dynamics of breaks,

interferences, and glitches in relation to norms of gender and sexuality. Conversely, we can use queer sound studies to inform noise studies by adding questions of *gender- and sexual* normativity and the dynamics of discourse, deviations, and power structures in relation to technologies of communication, information, and noise. In short, noise theories are implicit theories of queerness and queer theories are implicit theories of noise. Therefore, they are potential theoretical tools of each other's inner workings.

To show how theories of noise can be useful for queer theory and vice versa we can do a queer noise reading of one of queer theory's key concepts, namely Judith Butler's (2006) "heterosexual matrix," and how it acts as an information system that is complicit with the political practice of defining what is signal and what is noise in its attempts to produce straight subjects.

### **Queer Noise: Signal-to-Noise Ratio As Straightness-to-Queerness Ratio**

In engineering and theories of information, the term "signal-to-noise ratio" is used to measure the ratio of information (the desired) and noise (the undesired) between two points in a system. The aim is usually to maximize the ratio to make way for a more "perfect" transmission of a message (Goddard et al. 2012, 3). A queer noise theory can reconceptualize this as a "straightness-to-queerness ratio." Michael Goddard and colleagues (2012, 2–3) define noise as the "Other" of information, language, and music and queerness functions similarly as the "Other" of straightness. To become an intelligible subject one has to follow the established gendered norms of (un)intelligibility. Within the heterosexual matrix (a form of information system), through which some gendered bodies are made intelligible and others unintelligible, it is straightness (as a compulsory order between sex/gender/desire) (Butler 2006, 208), which is the information that needs to be both transmitted and received while queerness is the residual noise that keeps interfering with this matrix's continuous attempts of transmitting normative heterosexuality and consolidating heterosexual hegemony.

For straight subjects to emerge, through the heterosexual matrix, the noisiness of queerness must be defined, located, and repudiated. The process of subjectification is thus the process of straightening out that which is bent in order to form a coherent (straight) Subject distinct from its (queer) Others. Queerness is the residue or residual noise of such attempts to transmit straightness. Rather than being successfully eliminated, queerness makes a perpetual and haunting return constituting glitches and interference in the flow of information transmitted by the heterosexual matrix. In other words, *queerness is the social and bodily noise produced by straight society in its continuing (but failed) attempts to produce straight subjects*. And since both queerness and noise are inherent and inevitable parts of communication and the production of meaning, *any attempt to transmit a (straight) signal simultaneously breeds the very (queer) noise it aims to eradicate*.

Queerness shares subversive characteristics with noise. As something unwanted, noise is experienced as a violent aural intrusion upon the Subject, endangering the integrity of it and thus threatening its very existence through an eradication of its making of the border between “me” (signal) and “not-me” (noise). If queerness, in turn, can be interpreted as a form of sexual and gendered noise, it would seem that queerness can be interpreted as a violent intrusion upon the *straight* Subject, endangering the integrity of its naturalized heterosexuality and threatening its very existence through an eradication of its border between what is straight (“me”) and out of line (queer, “not-me”). Therefore, the making of queer noise can be part of a cyborg politics, as formulated by Donna Haraway (1991, 176), that “insist on noise and advocate pollution,” a politics that is “the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism.” In this way, to insist on *queer* noise and advocate *sonic* pollution is, much like Haraway’s (1991, 150) cyborg manifesto, “an argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibilities in their construction,” to create interferences in the heterosexual matrix and thus to continuously remind it of its own mortality.

## **Silence = Death; Or, Noise = Life**

ACT UP's slogan "SILENCE = DEATH" points to the sonic and political relevance of speaking up and making one's voice heard and how political manifestations constitute noisy disruptions of public space. Through their activism during the HIV/AIDS-crisis of the 1980s and early 1990s, ACT UP showed that silence literally meant death for us queers and the emerging queer politics of life manifested in their activism was an acute response to a deadly silence, making us aware of what the phrase "to make noise" means in a wider queer political context:

*To make noise is to take space sonically*

*To make noise is to take space bodily*

*To make noise is to take space politically*

and that

NOISE = LIFE

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