InVisible Culture

Cultivating (In)attention, Listening to Noise

Emily Bock

Published on: Apr 25, 2021

DOI: 10.47761/494a02f6.eb27df12

License: [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Featured image: Chantal Regnault, Legendary Voguer Willi Ninja wearing a Thierry Mugler body piece, 1989. Photo courtesy of the photographer.

For twenty-five centuries, Western knowledge has tried to look upon the world. It has failed to understand that the world is not for the beholding. It is for hearing. It is not legible, but audible.

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

You've been invited to a ball. A friend texted you the flier earlier in the day with the address and descriptions of the categories and promises they will be there "on time" (a promise you know they won't keep). When you arrive, a little before Legends, Statements, and Stars, you meander around the room looking for your friends' house table to put down the few things you've brought along with you to survive the long evening (wallet, keys, phone, lipstick) and talk to folks about things neither of you will remember tomorrow. You won't remember, not because the conversation is lacking in wit and energy; the opposite really. Everyone around you is laughing loudly, slapping knees and hands together in exclamation. It seems as though the room is talking over each other with such speed and enthusiasm that you can barely focus on your own words as they spill out into the large room which only seems to get smaller as more and more people flood in from the outside. You hear snippets of conversations and words, the anticipatory extralinguistic excess of this extra-ordinary materiality, that mark the beginning of the event. These are the sounds that fill in the space of waiting. What do you notice? As your eyes dart around the space, taking in the iridescent decorations and glittering outfits, maybe you start to recognize a pattern in the dress, various interpretations on the theme of this evening's event. And as a shimmering, sequined top struts by, you understand why people try to capture this scene on film.¹ It is arresting: the style, the confidence, the swagger, the pure physicality of it all.

What else do you notice? The handshakes and hugs; the random shrieks of joy that cut through the atmosphere of anxious anticipation. Maybe you notice the way people stay close to their house tables, these chosen families; or the way people stop to say hello and hug the elders of the scene who sit at these tables, holding court. Or the way people walk around the space to take in and size up the competition or see friends they haven't seen in a long time, too long really. But wherever your attention was being pulled before, there is always that one moment that you can't help but feel: when the music that was bouncing off the walls of the large hall when you arrived, enfolding everyone in a common groove and rhythm, isn't playing anymore. Your attention has

shifted, has been pulled to the stage where a commentator is enthralled in an apparent one-sided conversation because you can't hear or see their partner standing somewhere off stage. Or maybe they've just called the first Legend to the stage, the volume of the beat has been turned up much higher than it was playing before, and the room is chanting their name, clapping and stomping to each syncopated step as they ascend the stairs to the runway. Captivated in a communal trance, everyone around you (including yourself) gravitates in choreographed unison toward the stage to get a better look, almost as if they are being pulled by some magnetic force that has taken over the collective body of the crowd. It is loud, deafening and driving, this noise. Do you even register when the commentator's call stops making denotational sense, when the words begin to break apart into unrecognizable clusters of sound and noise, when the stuttered repetition of bits of words grow louder and louder into a cascading crescendo? The siren song of the commentator, throwing rhyme and rhythmic twists toward the voguer/walker/performer, dances around your ears and you forget, however briefly, that you are standing still, watching from the sidelines.

*

What is "ball culture"? What is it about this group of people who participate in and belong to a community of performers and artists and who gather together at events known as balls that holds captive the imagination of popular culture? Most people familiar with this community will most likely tell you it has something to do with the rich history of black and brown queer individuals coming together to create something for themselves, a space where they could be kings, queens, and business executives. Or maybe they'll comment on the style and virtuosity of the voguing. From [Old Way vogue of the 1980s](#) to the [New Way of today](#), this style of movement appears in music videos, in advertisements, and now in the very popular television shows *Pose* (2018-) and *Legendary* (2020-).² This physically astonishing and artistically rich improvisational form has arguably been the breakout star from this underground community of black and brown queer performers, designers, and artists. But while it is a common refrain in ballroom to say that one should be able to "vogue to anything" and that a true voguer should be able to "catch the beat" regardless of the song, the sounds, music, and noises of ballroom mark a distinctive sort of blood that pumps through the collective body of the participants. Indeed, sound is perhaps one of the most powerful aspects of the sensorial experience of attending a ball—the music is loud, the audience is hollering, the emcee is chanting, the walkers are pounding the runway with every step, spin, and dip. It can be an overwhelming auditory experience for even your most experienced partygoer.

This essay explores the relationship between sound and the practices of attention and inattention that they develop in ball culture, focusing specifically on how noise cultivates an ethico-political capacity that opens up a distinctive temporality in which a community assembles itself and its possible otherwise. I argue that the noises that saturate and demarcate the space of the ballroom work to train the body to respond in specific ways to its environment. Where interruption operates in the everyday as a source of temporal disruption, in the ballroom interruption becomes a tool through which this community learns how to be present and focused on the ongoing event. Classic vogue songs like MFSB's "Love is the Message" (1974), George Kranz's "Din Daa Daa" (1984), Junior Vasquez's "Work this Pussy" (1989), and Masters at Work's "The Ha Dance" (1991) all have elements of the kind of noise I'm referring to: in each of these songs, there is a point at which language begins to break down and disintegrate into repetitive and a cascading staccato of syllables.

At its most basic scientific level, both sound and noise are vibrations (sound waves) in the air that we sense with our ears. What separates noise from sound, in terms of our perception of the stimulation we experience, rests on the continuity (stability, consistency, intention) of the signal transmitted from a source to a receiver. Noise is what Shannon and Weaver would call the "unwanted additions" which distort and interfere with the signal as it moves through the air, the telephone wire, or radio, creating a veil of uncertainty when it comes to interpreting the original meaning or signal.³ In this sense, noise is most commonly understood as a negative sonic interruption in the transmission of distinct symbols that we interpret as a word or melody.

By most accounts, noise is a problem, as Garret Keizer so cheekily explains, that undermines human happiness and well-being.⁴ It prevents rest, thwarts sleep, and disrupts the natural landscape. Indeed, scholars have argued that noise, to devastating effect, is what modernist technologies throw off in their mad rush to produce, consume, understand, and conquer the Earth.⁵ Yet arguments around noise's environmental, political, or social effects rely on subjective calculations which tell us more about our hearing capacities and interpretive abilities than any authoritative measurement of sonic features. It is (mostly) not in terms of a fundamentally negative problem of modern technicity that noise becomes an interesting site for thinking about the pedagogical possibilities of ballroom. Rather, this essay explores how noise as a mode of auditory expression interrupts the normal (and normalizing) impulse to preemptively and presumptively fill in the future unknown with intelligible language

and invites a mode of listening that is decisively present. Noise has the capacity to teach us, to train our ears, to distinguish between necessary and unnecessary content, tempo and intensity, and to pay attention to the ongoing nature of the unfolding event.

*

Take a moment to listen to two examples of what I mean by the noise of ballroom. You can also (or alternatively) read rough transcriptions here:

Visit the web version of this article to view interactive content.

Kevin Aviance, "Cunty" (1996).

She's cunt. He's cunt. They're cunt. I cunt. She's cunt. He's cunt. They're cunt. I cunt.

Feeling cun, feeling ty. Feeling cun, feeling ty. Feeling cun, feeling ty. Feeling cun,

feeling ty. Feeling cun, feeling ty. Feeling cun, feeling ty. Feeling cun, feeling ty. Feeling

cun, feeling ty. Feeling cun, feeling ty. Feeling cun, feeling ty. Cun-ty cun-ty cun-ty cun-

ty cun-ty cun-ty cun-ty... Feeling like a daisy... Feeling like a lily... Feeling like a rose...

Feeling like an orchid... Feeling like a daissy... Feeling like a lily... Feeling like a

rose... Feeling, like an orchid! Feeling feeling feeling feeling. Cun-ty cun-ty cun-ty cun-

ty cun-ty cun-ty cun-ty. Yu yu yu yu yuck yuck yuck![6](#)

Visit the web version of this article to view interactive content.

Legendary Kevin JZ Prodigy, "Show Me Ya (MAGIC TRICK)," (2011).

*Te di te di gggrrrrrr ow! Te di te di gggrrrrrr ow! Now show me ya magic trick, oh!
Show me ya magic trick, ow! Show me ya magic trick, oh! Show me ya magic trick, ow!
She she she she show me... She she she she show me... Grrrrah ka ka ka ka ka ka!
Grrrrahh ka ka ka ka ka ow! Grrrrah ka ka ka ka ka ka! Grrrrahh ka ka ka ka ka ow!
Now show me your m- m- m- magic! Now show me your m- m- m- magic! Now I'm the
bitch that's got the magic!*[7](#)

*

Notice how the sensation of feeling “cunty” gets broken up into “feeling cun, feeling ty.” How the position of the words “daisy,” “cunty,” and “yuck” creates a strange juxtaposition of meaning, as if feeling cunty should be understood as simultaneously feeling flowery and nasty. Or notice how “magic” falls apart into “m- m- m- magic,” further complexifying our limited understanding of such a mythical (mystical) request. In a Wittgensteinian register, one could say that there is no necessary correlation between concrete statements (“show me your magic trick”) and their propositional interpretation because symbols acquire meaning through context and use.⁸ And yet, these different strategies for playing with language’s form and structure point to, and undermine, a set of agreed upon meanings, meanings that have stiffened over time. What is revealed in this extralinguistic improvisation? What happens when snippets of sound that make up words begin to break apart? What kind of noise is this? Noises push the walker down the runway and mirror the twists and turns of a voguer. The commentator is the ringmaster, the choir director, the final arbiter of all battles. These flashes of vocal gymnastics carry you throughout the ball, keeping time with the beat and bellows of the crowd. These sounds stay with you, lingering in your unconscious. They take up space in such a way that no matter where you go in the large hall (or crowded basement) they follow you. Coupled with the crashing cymbals, the whoops and hollers, and the side conversations, you will most likely still hear the ringing in your ears hours after you’ve gone home to bed. And then it stops. The music, the chanting, the whoops and the hollers. It all comes to a screeching halt when a voguer lands their final dip and the DJ cuts the music and the judges deliberate. *That’s a chop* says the commentator and it all starts again with a new voguer and a new beat.

These improvisatory sonic illuminations, the slippery move from signal to noise and back again, defer a kind of meaning making and in so doing, show the existence of the boundaries around what is possible to imagine, what is possible to say. When language dissolves into a series of nonsensical syllables, the impulse toward trying to grasp the structure and code intensifies—we try to find a pattern in these Ursonate-esque recitations.⁹ But what if what you’re listening for (the meaning) can’t be determined against the backdrop of phonotactic criteria? What if this noise is training you to hear differently, is communicating something else? Perhaps we could read these vocal musings as carving out sonic space in the ball, drawing everyone’s attention to the runway, connecting the ballroom community together in an affective field. Similar to what Saidiya Hartman and Stephen Best describe as “black noise,” the commentator’s seemingly unintelligible sonic sparks gesture beyond sense making in the linguistic register – obscuring any intelligible political or ethical salience.¹⁰ Indeed, what kind of

utterance is “*Grrrahh ka ka ka ka ka*”? The repetition of the consonant, vowel, consonant expands and slightly changes form as the cluster of noises build and dilate. In an endnote to the article entitled “Fugitive Justice,” Best and Hartman write, “What we call ‘black noise’ Robin Kelley would describe as a ‘freedom dream,’ or Fred Moten would describe as ‘the surreal utopian ‘nonsense’ of a utopian vision, the freedom we know outside of the opposition of sense and intellection.”¹¹ How might the enactment of repetition, change, and time dilation admit the “nonsense” between sense and intellection? For Hartman and Best, black noise exceeds normative understandings of what is possible in the political, ethical, and social realm, and operates as an imaginative potential instead of an actionable set of commitments. How does this potential begin to elaborate a world? Could these noises of the ballroom commentator cultivate a sensual relation to space and to other bodies not governed by referential signs?

When we encounter these noises during a ball (repetition, the cutting up of words, and the blending of sounds), phrases that were at once familiar lose their commonplace semantic meaning and we are left with a series of rhythmic and syllabic sounds that nevertheless draw us into an affective fold that catches our attention. Following Fred Moten, one could argue that what we encounter in the commentator’s calls are particular sonic resonances that exceed music and speech. He writes that in black music, there is a specific kind of sonic excess which disrupts and resists, “certain formations of identity and interpretation by challenging the reducibility of phonic matter to verbal meaning or conventional musical form.”¹² Like other activities in ball culture, there is a trickster quality to this noise, playfully manipulating the phonic matter in order to disrupt or reject verbal meaning.¹³ In speaking of how sounds test the limits of traditional modes of communication, Moten writes:

Above all, they open the possibility of a critique of the valuation of meaning over content and the reduction of phonic matter and syntactic “degeneracy” in the early modern search for a universal language and the late modern search for a universal science of language. This disruption of the Enlightenment linguistic project is of fundamental importance since it allows a rearrangement of the relationship between notions of human freedom and notions of human essence. More specifically, the emergence from political, economic, and sexual objection of the radical materiality and syntax that animates black performances indicates a freedom drive that is expressed always and everywhere throughout their graphic (re)production.¹⁴

Moten might argue that it is not simply that these sounds and noises mess with syntax, words, and phrases. They do, but in their disruption, they also play with structure and grammar, probing the foundational logics by which we have arrived at concepts like “freedom” or “magic” or “cunty”— or to be less dramatic about it, in their excess, noises fiddle around with conventionally agreed upon codes of referentiality. Put differently, these noises are not necessarily a move *toward* different ideas of freedom, magic, or cunty; rather, they suggest a new avenue for discovering the conditions or boundaries of these concepts. These noises are themselves a critique of how we fill in these categories and concepts, they provide new ways of seeing, hearing, and feeling (at) the *limits* of our conventional understandings.

But consider for a moment how the interpretation above hinges on the idea that what we *ought* to do, in terms of our common relation to and use of language, is to decipher meaning or try to recuperate some forgotten or inaccessible understanding from that which exceeds the sonic landscape. I want to ask that we take a step back. I want to ask that we consider not the content of these noises but the form they take and relations they cultivate (we could call this a distinction between reading these noises in terms of *interruption* instead of excess). If we read the breaking apart of language in terms of the way they refigure our temporal relations, noises of ballroom do something more mechanical, more rooted in the body, to our experience of listening. A thought experiment: you’re having a conversation with someone, perhaps a conversation you’ve had many times before. Let’s say you’re ordering coffee at a shop. How often do you, dear reader, preemptively fill in the words of your partner in your brain? How often can you guess what they are about to say before they ever utter the words? I would venture a guess that this happens more often than you might think. Heidegger writes that this is because we do not simply hear others when they speak, “we hear language speaking”: speaking “is a listening not *while* but *before* we are speaking.”¹⁵ Heidegger argues that there is an interesting temporal dimension to the act of listening. Listening to language is an activity of letting language *speak* to us and we listen for the language we know (past) at the same time that we wait (in the present) for language (in the future) to encounter us. “What [language] says,” Heidegger writes, “wells up from the formerly spoken and so far still unspoken Saying which pervades the design of language.”¹⁶

Built into the grammar of communication is a temporal slipperiness that anticipates the future while extending the present. We might hear language in the present, but communication works because we inhabit language and discern its meaning based on our past experiences with it. And when we guess at what our partner might say—when

we are at the counter about to order a coffee—we are guessing at our understanding of the logical unfolding of the common linguistic form. So, what, you might ask, does this have to do with the noises of ballroom? I want to focus on that moment when the commentator begins to chant and language begins to break apart and break down in order to draw our attention, as members of this community of listeners, not to the content of what is being communicated but to the way we listen. Listening in the ballroom is an activity of learning how to encounter a sonic interruption, is a practice of refusing to fill in what we might think will (or should) come next. This means that listening is less tied to what is being communicated, and should rather be thought of as a kind of pedagogy of attention.

Attention is not a morally neutral state and its failure (inattention) suggests a sort of inability to or disinterest in maintaining concentrated sensory perception. Indeed, Jonathan Crary argues that since the nineteenth century, “Western modernity [...] has demanded that individuals define and shape themselves in terms of a capacity for ‘paying attention,’ that is, for a disengagement from a broader field of attraction, whether visual or auditory, for the sake of isolating or focusing on a reduced number of stimuli.”¹⁷ In this way, modern subjectivities have largely been defined by and through their relationships to attention and inattention—as labor, education, and mass consumption developed under modern capital, so too did institutional technologies which sought to manage populations such that they would remain productive and, importantly, predictable.¹⁸ Creating a standard in terms of productive output requires establishing a common way of being *in* time so many of these technologies were developed to measure the duration of attention.

There is a substantial body of scholarship that has long since identified the multiple ways in which minoritarian subjects have been differently yet uniquely affected by and constituted through such technologies of temporal surveillance.¹⁹ Black feminist writers have argued that throughout history blackness has been articulated through a kind of temporal lag (slowness, delay) characterized as a failure to properly participate in social, political, and economic life; thus time itself has become an important tool for resisting the totalizing force of normative renderings of time.²⁰ However, minoritarian subjects are not simply *positioned* in time (tempo, pace, slowness) in ways that are racialized (not to mention gendered and sexualized).²¹ They also operate within time, time their activity produces (duration, suspension, attention) and this requires further consideration. If we agree, as Crary reminds us, that attention, as the capacity to take note of someone or something, simultaneously demands that we “effectively cancel out

or exclude from consciousness much of our immediate environment,” and we agree that noise is most often experienced as a sonic interruption that primarily affects attention, then what kind of training is happening here? What practice of listening is being enacted at the ball?

Balls are a different form of interruption: the kind of interruption you desire. For the black and brown, queer community of people who come together at balls, the everyday is so often overwhelmed by moments and scenes of violence and violation, moments and scenes both big and small. Some of them personal, others more distant and abstract. The latter scenes are the ones we know: mass incarceration, systematic and sustained disinvestment in education and healthcare, the over-policing and hunting of black and brown queer life. These are the devastating narratives that give content to the experience of living in the afterlife of slavery. These viscerally overwhelming moments often interrupt the everyday, manifesting as intimate experiences. This is why balls are so much more than good parties. Beyond the glitter and glamour, balls are episodic sites of relief where who you are—as fact, aspiration, work-in-progress—is not a given, not always already determined from the outset.²² In my larger project, I argue that balls are laboratories for developing skills for living—and flourishing—in the afterlife of slavery.²³ Learning to listen to the noises in ballroom is one such technique through which the body is invited to a collective.

The complex mix of sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell that merge and mingle together make ball culture a sensorially rich environment. When the commentator spits sweet fire pulling the audience into an unfolding and repetitive web, they are also inviting those crowded around the stage, sitting at tables, and walkers alike to participate in a particular mode of attention and inattention, opportunities to (re)group and (re)direct. It is a style of listening that summons a mode of being present in ways that don’t wear one out, don’t require a total accounting of one’s intentions and motivations. Individuals are hailed into this collective by noise or, to say it differently, a world throws itself together when they turn toward this noise.²⁴ There is something almost meditative about the way the noise pulls each individual into a communal experience. Even though it is loud and energetic, this noise elicits a kind of calm concentration, an active idleness. It transfixes, holds captive, and fades into the background. And through practice, this community of listeners learns how to navigate those movements—they learn to listen for when their own reaction is called forth.

The commentator’s quick and improvisational chanting forestalls the listeners ability to fill in future utterances or rely on past utterances as locations for understanding the

present and this noise promotes a practice of listening that is active and attentive to the moment. Charles Hirschkind describes a distinction between inattentive (merely hearing) and attentive listening.²⁵ Listening, he argues, is a “complex sensory skill” one learns through practice that creates the conditions under which one develops an intimacy with what is being communicated. In the ballroom, listening is an embodied practice of refiguring one’s attachment to the normalizing logic of communication such that the body responds to the present unfolding of the sonic landscape. For Hirschkind, the development of attention posits listening as an embodied practice and as a technique of the self which influences the subject in terms of how they move through the world.²⁶

This mode of interacting with this acoustic environment inflates and extends a region of the present such that one can occupy its boundary. Because balls are episodic, there is a heightened desire to stay present, even in moments of stillness, as a collective, all working to produce a world, however fleeting it may be. Lauren Berlant argues that an episode is “a perturbation in the ordinary’s ongoingness that raises to consciousness a situation that follows from something without bringing with it conventions or prophecies about what its ultimate shape as event will be.”²⁷ If an event is described as a situation that holds fidelity to a future object/scene or a “genre calibrated according to its intensities and kinds of impact,” episodes are instead “occasions that make experiences” without completely breaking from what comes before or after.²⁸ When you are suspended in the episode of the ball, you can be anything, do anything, try on and out anything. Noise is an experiment in trying out and (re)invigorating ways of using what is ready at hand to create something new. In this way, balls are a kind of laboratory for developing skills and trying out techniques of living well in the afterlife of slavery. By refusing to establish a set of pre-existing conditions and thus changing our temporal relation to the activity of hearing, collective desires and imaginations in the ballroom community are able to take shape in the possibilities presented by noise. The pedagogical power of noise is its continued unfolding, creating the conditions for imagination to flourish.

In the breaking down of language, we see the work that goes into the development of skills for experimentation and improvisation. Rather than forging a new language, a new logic, and a new way of sensing the possibilities of flourishing, members of the ballroom community find ways of messing with and refiguring the materials of the world. When the materials at hand (of language, of dress, of prestige) rest on anti-blackness and anti-queerness, the improvisation required to dream of an otherwise

demands a kind of side-stepping, a kind of theft, a kind of fugitivity that we see when language breaks apart. The noise of the commentator, which is the space between the sayable and that which cannot be fully realized, invites new ways of hearing the unfolding present. By cultivating aural attachments and learning how and when to pay attention to the breaking up of linguistic patters, one develops techniques for listening not for a pre-given projection into the horizon but to whatever comes next. Listening, in this way, is an activity which elicits a response and an embodied practice that inspires a sensibility. To think of this as an ethic of the self is to see a community embodying noise in the pursuit of another life *in* time. Building an affective community happens when we embody and learn how to respond to noise during a ball, happens when we encounter the ephemeral resonances of noise, happens when we move in and out of the sensation of being present differently in time, together.

Emily R. Bock is a PhD candidate in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Chicago whose research is situated at the intersection of critical race theory, black studies, queer theory, performance studies, and ethnographic methods/writing. Her dissertation, *Ordinary Queens: the ball, the streets, and the beyond of survival*, is an ethnographic investigation of the everyday lives of members of the underground ballroom scene in Chicago and New York, tracking the diverse aesthetic and performative practices this community has developed for imagining, performing, and securing the “good life.” Before securing an MA in Anthropology from the University of Chicago, Bock danced for choreographers and performance artists in New York City including Douglas Dunn, Jin Ju Song-Begin, Hadley Smith, and Johanna Meyer. She continues to make dance in Chicago.

Footnotes

1. See *Paris is Burning*, dir. Jennie Livingston, 1990; Ryan Murphy, *Pose*, (FX, 2018-).

¹

2. There is no question that the ballroom scene has been taken up and appropriated in popular culture. Most notably, people often refer to Madonna’s music video “Vogue” as a good example of how people have profited of the creative work by those in the community—Willi Ninja was her choreographer. This is why shows like *Pose* on FX and *Legendary* on HBO Max have been so exciting for people in the ballroom

scene. Members are involved with the writing and production and are the stars of the shows—telling their stories and being allowed to take credit for their talents. [↵](#)

3. Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1964), 7-8. [↵](#)

4. Garret Keizer, *The Unwanted Sound of Everything We Want: A Book About Noise* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2010), 20. There is a reason why so many different techniques of torture have involved noise and why “noise pollution” has become a major problem for cities across the world. See Greg Hainge, *Noise Matters: Toward an Ontology of Noise* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013). [↵](#)

5. See George Prochnik, *In Pursuit of Silence: Listening for Meaning in a World of Noise* (New York: Anchor Books, 2010); Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985). [↵](#)

6. Snippets from the one and only Kevin Aviance. This is a crude transcription of one of Aviance’s most famous and classic beats, “Cunty (The Feeling)” from 1996. [↵](#)

7. A transcription from the Legendary Kevin JZ Prodigy’s “Show Me Ya (MAGIC TRICK).” [↵](#)

8. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, ed. P.M.S Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). [↵](#)

9. I am interested in the breaking apart of language presented in Kurt Schwitters’ sound poem *Ursonate* (1922-1932): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6X7E2i0KMqM>. [↵](#)

10. For Best and Hartman, black noise “represents the kinds of political aspirations that are inaudible and illegible within the prevailing formulas of political rationality; these yearnings are illegible because they are so wildly utopian and derelict to capitalism.” As they explore the abolition of slavery in relation to its redress, Hartman and Best describe how black noise emanates from the space between the “limited scope of the possible” and a deep desire to repair that which has been forever altered. Stephen Best and Saidiya Hartman, “Fugitive Justice,” *Representations* 92, no. 1 (2005): 9. [↵](#)

11. Best and Hartman, “Fugitive Justice,” 14. [↵](#)

12. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 6. [↵](#)
13. For Moten, these resonances might best be described by what Jacques Derrida refers to as “invagination,” or the process by which something participates but remains distinct. [↵](#)
14. Moten, *In the Break*, 7. [↵](#)
15. Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1982), 123-124. [↵](#)
16. Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 124. [↵](#)
17. Jonathan Crary, *Suspension of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000), 1. [↵](#)
18. Crary, *Suspension of Perception*, 4. [↵](#)
19. Here, one could think with Elizabeth Povinelli who explores how tense (the grammatical formulation of past, present, and future in language) shapes relationships between event and narration. Povinelli argues that indigeneity is often linked to a pastness, making (im)possible certain forms of political discourse around questions of sovereignty, thereby holding steady the grammar of settler colonialism. Elizabeth Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011). See also Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015). [↵](#)
20. See Robin D. G. Kelley, “‘We Are Not What We Seem’: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South,” *Journal of American History* 80, no. 1 (1993): 75-112; Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—an Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257-337; Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Kemi Adeyemi, “The Practice of Slowness: Black Queer Women and the Right to the City,” *GLQ* 24, no. 4 (2019): 545-567. [↵](#)
21. There is a large body of queer theory that works through questions of time/temporality and the (im)possibility of a queer futurity. See Lee Edelman, “The

Future Is Kid Stuff: Queer Theory, Disidentification, and the Death Drive," *Narrative* 6, no. 1 (1998): 18-30; Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009). I am particularly interested in black feminist scholars who are similarly invested in working through various grammars as a way to understand the complex timespace of black and brown life. See Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe Number 26*, 12, no. 2 (2008): 1-14; Kara Keeling, "Looking for M - Queer Temporality, Black Political Possibility, and Poetry from the Future," *GLQ* 15, no. 4 (2009): 565-582; Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics*, Special Issue, *Culture and Countermemory: The "American" Connection* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64-81. [↵](#)

22. Here, I am referring to Frantz Fanon's work in thinking through the "fact" of blackness, the always already overdetermined problem of epidermalization. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask* (New York: Grove Press, 1967). See also Kara Keeling, "In the Interval: Frantz Fanon and the 'Problems' of Visual Representation," *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (2003): 91-117. [↵](#)

23. This essay comes out of a larger project which tells a story of how a group of black and brown, queer people, whose lives have been shaped by particular sets of historical, political, and social conditions, have created and continue to create a world. It is about how the ballroom becomes a site in which a group of people who live in proximity to various forms of violence, poverty, and illness find ways of living full and playful lives and argues that the ballroom should be thought of as a laboratory for articulating, experimenting, and living the good life in a world structured against the very notion of black and queer flourishing. Following Lauren Berlant, I understand the "good life" to be a fantasy object/scene created and sustained through the play between moral, economic, social, familial, public, and private imaginaries. Berlant argues that good-life fantasies arise within distinct contexts and work to structure the way people organize their lives as they struggle to attain some sense or measure of success: from where they choose to live and with whom, to what sorts of jobs might provide them with proper access to upward mobility or even mere stability. It is helpful to note that when I say "the good life" in the context of this work, I am also gesturing toward what we colloquially known as the American dream—a particular version of the good life that is distinctive in terms of its optimistic reliance on gaining material success through hard work and

perseverance. See Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011). [↵](#)

24. In his investigation of ideology and the state apparatuses, Louis Althusser argues that ideology interpellates individuals as subjects through processes of recognition. When we are hailed (by a police officer or friend) in the street, we recognize ourselves as the subject of the address. He writes, “ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing.” Louis Althusser, *On Ideology* (New York: Verso, 2008), 48. This circuit of recognition that transforms individuals into subjects happens differently for Frantz Fanon who describes a similar example of being hailed in the street (“Look, a Negro!”); but where for Althusser the individual becomes the ideological subject of the address, for Fanon, the individual recognizes himself not as an ideological subject but rather as a black body whose subjectivity is an impossibility. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 112. [↵](#)

25. In describing how the practice of listening to sermon tapes shapes a particular “ethics of listening” for young Muslims in Egypt, Hirschkind argues that actively listening to the teachings of the Quran (versus hearing which is a “passive and spontaneous receptivity,” promotes a practice whereby the listener not only receives the messages of the tapes but is also called to respond as a godly subject, cultivating a “moral physiology” or sensibility. Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 70, 75. [↵](#)

26. Here I am also thinking with Brian Larkin who argues that the relationship between attention and inattention have a different effect on the development of the self and the self’s relationship to the world. In his article “Techniques of Inattention” he describes how in Jos, Nigeria, loudspeakers playing various religious sermons are a ubiquitous part of urban, everyday life. He argues that in a place that has survived and continues to live under the threat of religious violence, it is important to cultivate an attitude of inattention. He writes, “inattention is part of the process of ‘attunement’ (Elyachar 2011) to living in a city technologically mediated by the loudspeaker; it is a conscious, willful act and not simply an inability to attend as a result of the distractive nature of modern stimuli.” Larkin argues that inattention is also a skill for living well, a sensory technique one cultivates through practice. For both Hirschkind and Larkin, there is an ethical and political relationship to

soundscapes that shape and are shaped by the self, but Larkin understands that inattention does not always signal a failure to pay attention; rather, it is useful to remember that inattention can sometimes be an important mode for living in a world where sounds hold complex cultural meanings and where the stakes of being addressed carry political (and at times sacred) consequences. Brian Larkin, "Techniques of Inattention: The Mediality of Loudspeakers in Nigeria," *Anthropological Quarterly* 87, no. 4 (Fall 2014): 1006-7. [↵](#)

27. Lauren Berlant goes on to say that, "episodes are defined first by causality, but their affective charge derives from confronting the enigma of their ultimate shape. Something has an impact: What will happen? I call this process the becoming-event of the situation. A situation usually gets its shape from the way that it resonates strongly with previous episodes {...}." See Lauren Berlant and Jordan Greenwald, "Affect in the End Times: A Conversation with Lauren Berlant," *Qui Parle* 20, no. 2 (2012): 72. [↵](#)

28. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 100-101. Alain Badiou writes that "there is an intelligibility of the event, but one that is created, and in many ways, this constitutes one of the definitions of fidelity: fidelity is the creation in the future tense of the intelligibility of the event." The event, then, is something that we can only ever know in hindsight. See Alain Badiou, Tim Appleton, David Payne, Joël Madore, "After the Event: Rationality and the Politics of Invention: An Interview with Alain Badiou," *Prelom: Journal for Art and Politics* 8 (2006): 180-94. [↵](#)