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6

SOUND, AFFECT, POLITICS

Christabel Stirling

Introduction: what is affect good for?

The “turn to affect” in the humanities and social sciences has sparked an epistemological upheaval over the last decade. In this chapter I ask: how have sound and music been brought into articulation with affect theories? Sound’s ability to alter our bodily states—to invade us physically in ways that first become perceptible as atmosphere, vibe, or sensation—is hard to ignore. As Goodman puts it, sound has a “seductive power to caress the skin, to immerse, to soothe, beckon and heal, to modulate brain waves and massage the release of certain hormones” (Goodman, 2010: 10). Yet sound can also induce “diminished intellectual capacity, accelerated respiration and heartbeat, hypertension [and] neurosis” (ibid). In this overview, I engage theoretically and ethnographically with the implications of a turn to affect in sound and music studies. I ask, paraphrasing Mazzarella (2009), what sonic/musical affect might be “good for”: what is the socio-political power of sonically incited affect, not only as a concept but as a tangible, lived experience? And how might one go about researching it empirically?

Before turning to these issues, it is useful to consider the sorts of definitions and modes of thinking that the turn to affect has brought into being. What *is* affect? And why has it surged into fashion across so many disciplines? In the introductory paragraphs, I address these questions in relation to dominant paradigms in the new affect theories. By “new” I distinguish the recent wave of work on affect from its foundations in historical social-psychological literatures (see Blackman, 2012).

The turn to affect is concerned with how bodies and bodily matter participate in the ongoing construction of the social and, ultimately, politics and the political. The first point to note here is the specific emphasis on *bodies*. Affect is taken to refer to those elements of experience “over which humans have the least control [such as] hormonal flows, especially of adrenaline; breathing... and those absolute intensities, which cannot be contained within a logic of signification” (Gilbert, 2004: 11). Affect, then, points towards corporeal states, sensings, and auras, rather than to “their manifestation or interpretation as emotions” (Hemmings, 2005: 551). Significantly, this shift towards the body and physiology is seen by those advocating it as a counterforce to the logocentrism of poststructuralism. By attending to the non-verbal, non-conscious dimensions of living—the motor mechanisms of the body that are felt to be in excess of “the speaking subject” (Blackman & Venn, 2010)—new affect theorists are keen to stress the limits of discourse, signification, and meaning, thus largely opposing the linguistic models of experience

characteristic of much poststructuralist and deconstructionist work (Gilbert, 2004; Massumi, 2002). A primary aim of the new affect paradigm, then, is to search for “vocabularies other than those that rely on language as their master–metaphor” (Gilbert, 2004: 14), thereby moving away from the “textual” as a primary theoretical touchstone (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010).

A second key dimension of the turn to affect is its focus on what are held to be the “impersonal” qualities of bodily states, as opposed to the “personal” nature of emotions (see Leys, 2011, for a critique). Turning away from the interiorized, subject-oriented understanding of emotions found in psychoanalysis, affects are conceived as “impersonal” in the sense of being trans-subjective, shared, contagious, and tied to non-intentional, “pre-personal” forces. Affects are thus supposedly irreducible to notions of experience associated with the individual subject (Clough, 2007). The conceptual distancing of affect from emotion is, then, simultaneously a rejection of the individualizing, psychologizing, and in some traditions linguistic ways in which psychoanalysis approaches bodily, psychic, and social matters. As Gilbert notes, “this is not to dispute the importance of the Lacanian framework for understanding social phenomena. But it is to insist that such [social] phenomena possess dimensions that exhaust explanatory possibilities, in particular when [they] are irreducibly collective in character” (Gilbert, 2004: 14). New affect theorists are thus sceptical of psychoanalytic concepts of the bounded, autonomous individual subject, tracing instead the affective connective tissue that binds subjectivities to other bodies, socialities, places, technologies, and worlds (Blackman, 2012; Clough, 2007).

A third introductory point to note is the preoccupation amongst new affect theorists with how bodily states are transmitted, facilitated, or “engineered” as patterns of influence that animate social and political connectivity between humans and nonhumans. Affect theorists are thus resolutely anti-structural in their theorization of the social. Instead, sociality is conceived as inherently mobile and dynamic, constantly forming and re-forming through the associations and suggestions that unfold between human and nonhuman bodies. The question for these theorists is then not so much “what is a body?” but “what can a body do?” (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004). How does affect enliven the potential for action, relation, and encounter between humans, animals, and machines? What kinds of social matrices might ensue in a milieu where subjectivities are defined not by individuated ideologies and identities, but by their “capacities to affect and be affected”? (Blackman & Venn, 2010: 9). A third central feature of the new paradigm is therefore that it explores how affective encounters between human and nonhuman bodies mediate the social and political. What comes to the fore is a decentring not only of the logocentrism of poststructuralism and the individualism of psychoanalysis, but of the Kantian–Hegelian location of the human subject at the heart of experience.

Having introduced key aspects of the new affect theories, I next point to how they can be brought to music and sound. I then extend this discussion by referencing my own and others’ ethnographic work, suggesting that when scrutinized empirically through sound and music, affect emerges as something conceptually quite different to how it is portrayed in the new paradigm. Finally, I highlight the sorts of socio-political openings that sound and music portend, focusing on how musical and sonic affect can mediate social stratifications and forms of power. A revised understanding of affect, I argue, is central to any analysis of sonic or musical publics, and therefore also to sonic or musical politics.

Sound, music, and affect

If new affect theories have tended to exclude music and sound (Kassabian 2013b: 179), sound studies and recent musicology are equally culpable of absencing affect and the body from accounts of sonic experience. Following Gilbert’s (2004) diagnosis of the linguistically oriented

poststructuralist turn in cultural studies, the postmodern and poststructuralist turns in musicology might be added to the list of epistemologies that elevate semiotics and representation over affect and sensation. This is not to minimise the importance of such work. Clearly, the deconstruction of “structural listening” played a crucial role in destabilising the ideology of the “music itself”, demonstrating that music and sound can have multiple meanings (Subotnik, 1988; Dell’Antonio, 2004). But it had little concern with bodily matters. Indeed, it is only recently that musicologists have begun fully to engage with what music and sound feel like as well as what they mean (Cook, 2013; Cusick, 2008). Surprisingly, given that it is a younger discipline, sound studies also betray a certain logocentrism. Influential sound theorist Kim-Cohen, for instance, builds his sonic anti-essentialism around Derrida’s semiotic concept of *différance* and Peirce’s “thirdness”, scarcely mentioning the body in his call for a “non-cochlear” sonic art (Kim-Cohen, 2009).

In contrast, certain areas of interdisciplinary music research pay close attention to questions of affect, albeit in very different terms to the new affect theories. Particularly notable are the sub-disciplines of music psychology and music and consciousness studies, which explore physiological processes such as mimetic desire and rhythmic entrainment (Clarke & Clarke, 2011), as well as trancing, dissociation, and altered states of consciousness (Becker, 2004; Herbert, 2011). Other precursors to a sonic affective turn include theories of corporeality in music philosophy (Kivy, 1989; Meyer, 1956); aspects of popular music studies—for example, Dyer’s notion of “whole-body eroticism” in disco (Dyer, 1979) and Frith’s concept of “physical sympathy” when listening to soul singers’ vocalizations (Frith, 1996: 192); the emphasis on Lacanian *jouissance* in writings on electronic dance music (for example Gilbert & Pearson, 1999); and the auto-ethnographies and aural psycho-geographies of sound studies scholars who document the experiential aspects of sound installation art (for example Voegelin, 2010). This diverse body of work provides some starting points for thinking about sound, music, and affect. However, the focus remains mainly on individual experiences and behaviours, neglecting how affect operates in social or collective realms of living.

Additional studies addressing sound, music, and affect come from the sociologists Bull (2000, 2007) and DeNora (2000). Working ethnographically, both writers find highly original ways to talk about music and sound’s physical effects, although again not in the terms of new affect theories. Bull’s accounts of iPod/mobile music listeners illuminate music’s ability to affectively “empower” individuals as they traverse the city, augmenting their physical and cognitive capacities (Bull, 2007: 41). In turn, DeNora focuses on music as a “technology of the self” (DeNora, 2000: 46), tracking how “people mobilize music for the doing, being and feeling that is social experience” across a range of public and private settings (DeNora, 2000: 49). Particularly striking is the resemblance between DeNora’s work and the Deleuzian strand of affect theory, given her focus on how music extends and curtails “what the body can do” (DeNora, 2000: 103). Criticising semiotic musicology, DeNora roots her analysis firmly in music’s affective agency: its power to modulate states of mood, well-being, energy, and action. Moreover, to avoid any reincarnation of the “music itself”, she invokes Gibson’s concept of “affordance” (Gibson, 1966) as a means of highlighting “the collaborative dimension of how music’s effectiveness is achieved” (DeNora, 2000: 96). For DeNora, music’s ability to move us from one bodily state to another is, then, not “caused” by musical sound, but results from the relational “partnership” that arises between music’s acoustic ingredients on the one hand, and the potentials that such ingredients “afford” to particular “situated users” on the other (ibid: 96).

The uptake of Gibson’s “affordance” by music scholars such as DeNora and also Clarke (2005) provides fertile ground on which to begin theorizing sound and affect. For one thing, it offers a way of talking about music and sound’s physical properties as agential, but not essential:

not reducible to the “object itself”. In this way, sonic materials can be seen to “afford” particular affective and practical “potentials” (for example dance-ability), while the manner in which those “potentials” are actualized remains contingent on the encultured listening subject and the context of their encounter (cf. Born 2010a). But more than this, “affordance” opens up unprecedented routes in the music disciplines for thinking about how sonic properties such as rhythm, pitch, texture, and timbre can inspire and modulate a body’s capacity to *act*, *do*, and *become*. It is, then, the closeness of the relations between touching, feeling, and doing that makes “affordance” such a useful concept (cf. Sedgwick, 2002). In this light, “affordance” provides two key tenets for a theory of sonic affect. The first is the notion of sound–subject–context contingency (DeNora, 2000: 43). What matters, in short, are not only the potential capacities that a sound “affords” but the radically variant ways in which those potentials can be realised depending on who encounters them and in what circumstances. The second is the emphasis that affordance places on sound’s relationship to action. By stressing sound’s materiality, “affordance” shifts the focus away from any semiotic probing for immanent meanings to the sensory, tactile, and textural motivators of affect, practice, and performance.

Where affordance is less effective conceptually is as a basis for understanding musical and sonic socialities. DeNora’s own primary concern is with how music functions as a resource for modulating psychological states of being—that is, with music’s links to subjectivity and identity at an individual level (DeNora, 2000: 130). But affordance is less useful for understanding the socio-political implications of musically animated affective contagion and other rapid, non-conscious processes, or for examining how music and sound can afford collective experiences that affirm, entrench, or destabilise normative social hierarchies. For all its significance, then, it is necessary to look beyond this sociological work to comprehend how music and sound influence socio-corporeal relations, and to what political ends.

New affect theories

The obvious place to look for a conceptual vocabulary that moves beyond the individual to address how affect mediates the social and political is the new affect theories. To my knowledge, the first writer to bring affect theory to music and sound was Grossberg. In an early paper on rock and roll, Grossberg rejected the idea of a split between “signification” and “materiality”, noting that “[i]t is not that rock and roll does not produce and manipulate meaning but rather that meaning itself functions in rock and roll affectively” (Grossberg, 1984: 233). Rock and roll, he argued, is not a semiotic “text”, but a set of “networks” through which pleasure, desire, and “strategic empowerment” are made “possible and important for its audiences” (ibid: 227–8). Moreover, such networks of empowerment—or “affective alliances” (ibid)—are, he suggested, potentially generative of oppositional strategies that are “removed from the hegemonic affective formation” (ibid: 235–7, 240). As early as 1984, Grossberg thus not only broke with linguistic Althusserian concepts of “ideology”, invoking instead a “flat-ness” between the discursive and material that prefigured his turn to Deleuze (Grossberg, 2010: 323). He also recognised music’s “affective alliances” as inherently social and political, implicated in the reconfiguring of embodied social boundaries and power relations. Pursuing Grossberg’s work in the early 2000s, and drawing again on music, Gilbert then advocated a Deleuzian “shift” in cultural studies, referencing Williams’s “structures of feeling” (Williams, 1977) as well as Deleuze to point to the intertwining of the discursive and material (Gilbert, 2004: 12–13). Through this anti-dualistic approach, Gilbert argued for the “sociality” of musical affect—its social, cultural, and structural-historical mediation (ibid). At the same time, like Grossberg, he recognised that affective investment in music could itself potentially “re-structure” the social by mobilising groups

into counter-hegemonic political positions. As becomes clear later, this work is crucial both for its relationality and its socio-political grounding.

Moving into music and sound research, Goodman's *Sonic Warfare* (2010) was also among the first to engage with sound and the affective turn. In contrast to Grossberg and Gilbert, Goodman explores the deployment of sound as a "weapon" to affectively manipulate and deceive populations in late capitalism via machineries such as sonic branding and the Mosquito Anti-Social Device (Goodman, 2010: xvi, 146). Most significant, here, is Goodman's attunement to the "ambivalence" of sonically induced affect (cf. Hemmings, 2005): its ability to generate repetitive, pestering, and overpowering experiences via the implantation and arousal of embodied memories, and thus its alignment with stasis and fixity as much as novelty and change. Further developments have arisen with the flurry of work on sound and affect that has emerged in Goodman's wake (Thompson & Biddle, 2013; Kassabian, 2013b; Jasen, 2016). In their 2013 edited volume, Thompson and Biddle provide the first comprehensive introduction to sound, music, and affect theory, tracing dominant and marginal antecedents to the current affective turn, and locating a genealogy of affect in the history of musical aesthetics. Like Goodman, Thompson and Biddle raise the issue of affect's "ambivalence", problematizing—through a discussion of affect's role in boundary rituals—the constant theorization of affect as transformative (for example Massumi, 2002), when, as they put it, "[musical] affect... provides no such always-already radicalizing dynamic" (Thompson & Biddle, 2013: 7, 13). Their statement finds support in chapters by Kassabian and Jarman, who, developing Goodman's work, examine how music and sound are increasingly commoditized and distributed according to "a logic of affect"—for example in Sleep Apps, Compilation CDs ("Smooth Classics for Rough Days") and listening technologies such as Moodagent (Kassabian, 2013a; Jarman, 2013: 184).

This recent sound/music-based work is therefore attentive to the collective, relational nature of affect—the ways in which sonically generated affects "extend beyond the individual towards the bodies of others" (Thompson & Biddle, 2013: 8). Kassabian, in particular, develops an important sonically derived theory of "distributed subjectivity"—a "nonindividual" subjectivity in which bodies and subjects are strengthened and impeded by the "ubiquitous musics" that hail from cafés, games consoles, smart phone apps, and even clothing (Kassabian, 2013b). Yet while this engagement with the social and bio-political aspects of musical affect is welcome, concerns are raised by the lack of empirical grounding for key arguments. Indeed, the majority of writers mentioned tend to import pre-existing affect theories into their work as a way of articulating sonic experience in novel ways. Goodman, for example, adopts the Deleuzian concept of affect as "pre-personal" (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004) as a means of suggesting that people's individual histories and social identities have no bearing on how, whether, or by what they are affected. The consequences are manifest in universalizing claims scattered throughout his book, such as that "certain frequencies... produce an affective tonality of fear", or that infrasound "arouses anxiety" and "[makes] you shake" (Goodman, 2010: 66, 189). In short, by assuming that affect is "pre-personal"—that it does not need a subject to register—Goodman implies that sonic materials can affect the body in ways that are unmediated by personal history, socio-cultural milieu, genre, and situation. Sound thus becomes a "force" like gravity, and the body becomes "dumb matter" (DeNora, 2000; Blackman, 2012: 17). The effect is a re-emergence of the essentialist ideology of the music or sound "itself"—an archaic approach that is in marked friction with empirical work like DeNora's that goes to great lengths to illustrate the sound-subject-context "partnership" by which music's efficacy is achieved.

If others such as Jarman and Kassabian are sceptical of the notion that particular frequencies induce particular affects in listeners, their work is nonetheless speculative. While this is perfectly reasonable, it lacks the kinds of empirical insights that could fuel further conceptual

development in new affect theories. Instead, they and other contributors to Thompson and Biddle's volume tend to adhere to one or other variant of affect theory, presenting the editors with what they call a dilemma of "definition": "Where does one draw the line between affect and emotion? Are we following a Freudian or Deleuzian/ Guattarian trajectory?" (Thompson & Biddle, 2013: 23). This body of work thus reveals the limits of purely theoretical approaches: by continually returning to abstract philosophical ideas to explain affect's social and political power, these theorists risk advocating a politics that may be unviable—"a theatre of concepts the power of which... is matched only by their powerlessness to transform" (Stengers, 2011: 380). Thus, while conceptual work is vital for enlivening our intellectual paradigms, it must also be put to work and recalibrated through an engagement with the empirical, rather than simply "followed" (Born, 2010b). As Grossberg notes, "a better understanding of the present is the condition of possibility for a better [political] imagination. Imagination involves empirical labour" (Grossberg, 2010: 322).

Building on this, I next want to show how ethnographic work enables theoretical developments beyond those pioneered by new affect theorists. Along with my own fieldwork, I refer to other ethnographers of sound, music, and affect: *inter alia*, Henriques's (2010) work on affect and/as the spread of vibrations in Kingston's dancehall scene; Hirschkind's (2006) ethnography of sermon tapes and affective listening practices amongst Muslims in Cairo; Overell's (2012) research on "brutal belonging" in Japan and Australia's grindcore scenes, which develops the key ethnographic observation that "[p]ower relations mediate affect", and, specifically, that "gender identity... enables or restrains scene-members' ability to experience [such] brutal belonging" (2012: 216–7); and Stokes's (2010) analysis of Turkish popular music, which draws on Berlant's (1997) concept of "intimacy" to emphasise the life-affirming potentials that music's "affective alliances" afford amidst sectarian clashes. Importantly, in all of this ethnographic work, musical affect in some ways articulates and is articulated by the social.

Transforming new affect theories

The key aspect of new affect theory that I wish to contest is its tendency to conceptualize affect as "pre-personal" or pre-mediated, which is to say, in excess of the ideologies and intentionalities of individual subjects. The popularity of this stance is attributable to neo-Deleuzian affect theorists such as Massumi (2002), who have projected ontological Deleuzian concepts onto the empirical. For Massumi, a sociality flowing out of "pre-personal" affective intensities that operate autonomously to individuated ideologies is not a potential or "virtual" realm as it was for Deleuze, but a persistent empirical reality—one that he "proves" in a series of questionable laboratory-style experiments (Massumi, 2002: 25). Rather than testing the feasibility of Deleuze and Guattari's political ontology in a rigorously empirical and historically situated manner, Massumi thus takes their concepts verbatim. The same can be said of cultural geographers Amin and Thrift (2013). By using artistic practice to "tap into the pre-personal plane", they argue, new modalities of belonging can be forged that do not begin with the individual subject and identity (Amin & Thrift, 2013: 72, 158). Again, "pre-personal" ontologies are empirically assumed, and invented philosophical concepts become a basis for politics.

In my ethnography, passages into the Deleuzian plane of "pre-personal" affect and bodily anomaly did not make themselves apparent in any substantial way. On the contrary: the personal histories, psyches, and social positionalities of encultured subjects frequently emerged as resilient, working to align affective experience with fixity and "stickiness" (Ahmed, 2004) rather than change. Asserting that the pre-personal can be invoked or "engineered", as Massumi and others do, is thus problematic. As feminist, queer and critical race affect theorists put it, to claim that it

is possible to summon a set of milieus in which experience is detached from individuated identities (gender, race, or any pre-existent “we”) is to undermine affect’s role in the reproduction of social oppressions—its tendency to circulate along already existing lines of social and cultural investment, and thereby to perpetuate or entrench social relations of domination (Berlant, 1997; Blackman, 2012; Brennan, 2004; Hemmings, 2005). While Massumi does, notably, acknowledge the existence of socio-historical stability and inertia, he attributes this to an apparently different mechanism: embodied “habit” (Massumi, 2002). Meanwhile, the virtual, pre-individual Deleuzian concept of “affect” is treated as an empirical constant through which such rigid, subject-bound, socially conditioned “habits” can be escaped (ibid: 236). In short, the claim by neo-Deleuzians that pre-subjective delirium and fluidity are empirically immanent, brought into existence through “experimentation”, implies a world in which the territorializing dimensions of history, social identity, institutionalization, and ideology are avertable. My ethnography suggests otherwise.

In making this argument, it is not, however, my intention to suggest that affect is fully determined by the social, or that it resides purely “within” the physiological body, immune to suggestion and imitation (Brennan, 2004). Such a perspective does not allow for the question of how we become open to change: how a person’s prior sense of self and sense of “we” can be overturned and permanently altered by a musical or sonic encounter. What I specifically object to, rather, is the unmediated manner in which neo-Deleuzian theorists depict such moments of change. In fieldwork, affective difference and suggestibility certainly did manifest, but not via a radically autonomous, indeterminate body. Rather, such processes tended to arise out of a porous merging of old and new: a psychic-somatic attunement in which robust musical-affective habits became flexible, sometimes temporarily, sometimes on a long-term basis, creating openings into emergent socialities in which new socio-musical bodily habits were formed. Thus, against Massumi, habitual affects are not the closure or “blockage” of some vital unmediated “becoming” (Massumi, 2002), but rather can be the very condition of possibility for change. Sonically embodied habits can become “un-stuck” and susceptible in ways that shift normative hierarchies; while suggestible affects can solidify, at times “becoming-stuck” and entrenching wider social divisions (Blackman, 2012). Affect’s confounding, transformative capacities are not, then, the result of an unruly, unmediated logic, but evolve out of a multiplicity of intersecting histories, habits, and stabilities. This importantly nuances the socio-political potentials that are at stake in discussing musical affect.

To illustrate my position, I will now give three ethnographic examples. All relate to a particular musical assemblage—the London Lucky Cloud parties.¹ In the first example, I show how sonic affective attachments can become ingrained at a bodily level, working to entrench social relations of difference. In the second, I illustrate the conditions under which such attachments can slide and mutate, overturning generic preconceptions and enlisting people into new socialities. In the third, I trace how such moments of “sliding” may gradually become stable again, but in this particular instance, in a way that is socially and politically transformative, working to connect a socially emergent assemblage.

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Rooted in the principles of the late David Mancuso’s New York Loft parties (see Lawrence, 2003), the Lucky Cloud parties privilege high-fidelity audio, social experience and egalitarian musical practices. Records are played through Klipschorn speakers and other audiophile equipment with the level of sound not exceeding 100DB—a paradigm that enables highly detailed musical reproduction but at a volume where people can still dance and talk comfortably

without shouting. There is no mixing or other technical intervention, orienting the focus towards the dancers and dancefloor rather than the DJ/their skill. And musical selections—which are generically expansive, but which tend to fall into the rare groove/disco/deep house continuum—are rigorously “programmed” for their perceived ability to take the listener on a dramatic sonic-psychedelic journey or trip, aided for some by psychedelics and empathogens. The parties can thus loosely be defined by their kinetic and sociable dancefloor energy; their anti-hierarchical, anti-egoist ethos; and their seamless, holistic musical aesthetic, which aims to trace the emotional contours of an evening.

One of my experimental methods for researching affect was to invite participants to musical events with which they were unfamiliar or socially affectively disconnected from. In so doing, the aim was to test these individuals’ affective thresholds: their ability to attune to, or “make sense” of sonic social spheres that were not their own. In one case, I invited Simon²—a 30-year-old man whose musical biography revolved around Britpop, ambient, noise, and dub music—to participate in the Lucky Cloud parties. His initial response was one of genuine interest and openness. Though he confessed to having held a disdain for house music, garage, and disco for much of his adult life—an antipathy rooted in teenage perceptions of these genres as “townie”, “commercial”, and “cheesy”—he felt that these “embarrassing preconceptions”, which, he admitted, were classed and gendered in undertone, were behind him. After a number of hours on the Lucky Cloud dancefloor, however, Simon professed that he was unable to sink into the vibe of the party, and described feeling isolated from the affective contagion palpably germinating around him. He attributed this in part to the bias that he had held against house and disco as a teenager, which, he felt, continued to endure “in his body”, if not in his intellect, impeding his ability to “tune in”. But another obstacle for Simon was what he referred to as the “bodily pressure” from those around him to achieve affective communion through dancing and physical movement. In the musical spheres to which he had become attached (particularly ambient and dub), collective musical pleasure is accessed through bodily stillness, introversion and controlled transfixion, rather than psychosocial communication—a distinction moderated by the use of mild psychoactive substances like marijuana rather than empathy-enhancing psychedelics. Finally, he felt discomfited by the low volume of sound at Lucky Cloud, having acclimatized to a certain “sonic dominance” (Henriques, 2010) in his own “affective alliances”, where the sheer immersive power of sound precludes socializing through talking.

Simon’s experience illustrates how musical affectivity is contingent upon the precise ways in which an encultured, historicized subject comes into relation with an encultured, historicized musical “event”—how music’s affective capacities are sound-subject-context contingent (Born, 2010a; DeNora, 2000). Further, in this case, Simon’s inability to attune to the sonic affective atmosphere around him was not only tied to personal history and socio-cultural location, but to socio-historical processes of genre formation (Born, 2005, 2011; Overell, 2012). As Simon himself reflected, his orientation away from the sounds, genres, and social vibes prevalent at the Lucky Cloud parties had to do with an inability to detach from his early experiences of disco and house—experiences that were, in turn, marked by the reified gendered and classed connotations that these genres had accrued for him via the historical context of their emergence, particularly their reputation for producing women-friendly, pan-sexual, musically anti-elitist spaces. The point, then, is that multiple histories—personal, social, cultural, institutional—enter into sonic affective experiences; and, in this instance, they did so in a way that affirmed pre-existing sonic affective dispositions and generic biases. Simon was not, then, able to simply overcome prior differences by succumbing to a “pre-personal” affective register. Rather, his affective attachments and disassociations manifested as “sticky” (Ahmed, 2004), corporeally ingrained, and enduring in the face of socio-musical influence. What thus emerges is an affective mechanism analogous to

Hirschkind's "somatic learning" (Hirschkind, 2006: 76): a training and inculcation of the body by historically and socially mediated sounds. Not only did Simon's affective robustness engender an experience of repetition and stability; it also affirmed prior socio-cultural differences and ideologies at a corporeal level.

Sonic affective attachments do not always manifest as "sticky", however. They are not, that is, reducible to "blockage", social reproduction, or physiological automatism (Massumi, 2002). On the contrary, under certain conditions, such attachments can "slide", become flexible and vulnerable, sometimes working to introduce elements of uncertainty into socio-musical formations. This became apparent in fieldwork when tracing out the individual histories of those collectivized by the Lucky Cloud parties. It transpired that of the many Lucky Cloud participants that I interviewed, most hailed from radically divergent and often incongruent personal and socio-musical pasts, each one punctuated by "turning points", "epiphanies", and the breaking of embodied, psychic, and social habits. In other words, the affective attachments that these individuals shared towards the Lucky Cloud assemblage did not simply reflect or reproduce a shared set of socio-cultural histories, ideologies, and tastes, but were preceded by incidental and often-unforeseen personal routes and paths. The question is, how had these particular encultured and historical individuals, who had travelled such different socio-musical trajectories, come to aggregate around a shared musical sphere as a distinctive "affective alliance"? What had facilitated their individual-collective openness? And why was Simon unable to experience a similar openness?

The case of one Lucky Cloud participant, Danny, is illuminating. Danny, also in his early 30s, shared a similar musical biography to Simon. Growing up as a metal head and drum 'n' bass head, Danny had "absolutely abhorred" house and UK garage, seeing these genres as "tacky" and "handbag". For him, it was the emergence of dubstep in the early 2000s—a genre that blended UK garage with the darker edges of dance music—that created an interstice in his sonic affective register. Dubstep's innovative aesthetic amalgam opened Danny's psyche/body to UK garage for the first time, amplifying his capacity to affect and be affected, and thereafter turning him onto deep house, disco, and rare groove. As he described, the feeling of "being on the edge" that dubstep's emergence engendered was coaxed by the spaces and atmospheres that he subsequently "discovered" in the disco and house scene—particularly the contagious energy that "propagated" from one body to another across the Lucky Cloud dancefloor (Henriques, 2010). It was, in his words, a "massive turning point" that he "couldn't have foreseen", and constitutes an instance of how robust sonic affective attachments can become flexible, overturning not just personal-somatic orientations and tastes, but, in this case, a gendered and classed generic-affective bias against so-called "handbag" musics like garage. This example, then, illustrates how an historical event—in this case, the emergence of a genre—can create a crack in the genres of normative socio-musical life, a fissure in a person's psycho-affective index. In such a moment of "suspension", what happens next may be uncertain and unstable, but it is not random or a-subjective; it is contingent upon the specificity of a person's socio-musical-affective history. That is to say, habit and invention, stasis and change, repetition and difference emanate out of the same processes, each oriented by intersecting personal and socio-cultural histories, the history or path-dependency of genre, and the movement of historical conditions. Knowing which prevails and why is not something that can be decided in advance, but requires empirical research.

In the final example, I reflect on the social and political implications of the sonic affective processes I have just described. The moment of affective "suspension" experienced by Danny during the advent of dubstep made perceptible something important: namely, his capacity to diverge, to create, to make a connection where one did not exist previously. This is what Stengers, after Deleuze and Guattari (2004), calls the capacity to resist: "[not] to denounce or to

criticize but to construct” (Stengers, 2005: 122). In this vein, I want to suggest that sound and music’s potential to engender moments of affective “openness”, to divert the socio-historical trajectories in which a person’s life-making practices are cast, to trigger shifts in a person’s affective register that move them into new kinds of collectivity where new social alliances can be forged, are what endow sonic affect with a socio-political capacity. At the Lucky Cloud parties, a significant proportion of those collectivized have, at some point in their lives, lived through a personal and/or socio-musical-affective “suspension”: an interruption that opened them to the possibility of “something else”—of making connections that confounded previously embedded sonic attachments, selves, socialities, and hierarchies; of living and loving otherwise. Largely for this reason, the sociality summoned into being by the parties is one that is refractive of numerous social identity formations, namely sexuality, class, age, nationality, and gender. As one interviewee, Cora, put it:

The [Lucky Cloud] parties are unique, because... people are all different ages, sexualities, backgrounds... some of them have kids, and bring [their kids] earlier in the night, so... there’s this whole close-knit community of people that you wouldn’t really find anywhere else. A lot of them I see away from the parties too.

Where this stance differs from new affect theories is in its emphasis that such sonic affective “openness” is not anomalous or pre-mediated, but contingent upon multiple, often-constraining histories. It is noteworthy, for instance, that while aggregating an unusually diverse demographic, the Lucky Cloud parties are also predominantly white, with only a small number of ethnic minorities regularly in attendance. This “whiteness” in turn has to do with complex histories regarding the relative lack of genealogical tie between black British communities and black American-originating musics such as disco, house, and jazz—histories that, for now at least, appear relatively defiant. Moreover, it would be naïve to think that sound and music’s ability to generate emergent socialities is solely contingent upon affect. The reason that the Lucky Cloud parties are significant as opposed to, for instance, the London electronic dance music scene generally, is because of the highly specific protocols, rituals, and histories that prefigure it as an assemblage—its commitment to egalitarianism and community-building via the legacy of Mancuso; its accessible modes of publicity and ticketing; its anti-corporate ethos, which places the crowd at the centre of importance; its inclusion of children for the first few hours—all of which *combine* with the affective dimensions of sound quality, musical “programming”, social and spatial atmosphere to configure a socially atypical and anti-normative coalition of people.

The bringing into existence of a new social public is only part of the socio-political question, however. It also matters how people relate to one another on a microsocial level. A second way that sonically incited affect plays a key role at the Lucky Cloud parties, then, is by “sticking” the heterogeneous group of people that aggregate together. That is, the diverse social groups that gather on the Lucky Cloud dancefloor do not simply bifurcate into socially distinct micro-publics, as is often the case at club nights, but affectively encounter and attune to one another. One way this is achieved is through the cyclic repetition of certain tunes—tunes that have, over time, become ingrained in the personal histories and psyches of the regulars who make up the majority of the crowd. These “Classics”, as they are known, function as “affective anchors”, heralding an explosion of jubilant energy as soon as they become audible, pulling people from all corners of the room into a shared sonic-bodily familiarity. As well as affirming musical affinities, the “Classics” help to forge powerful social bonds by affectively grouping people of different ages, sexual orientations, nationalities, gender identities, and class positions together; binding

them through their implicit corporeal-collective attachment to particular records. As Danny described:

One of the first [Lucky Cloud] parties I went to, I heard Tamiko Jones “Can’t Live Without Your Love”. The room literally exploded with this... almost *spiritual* energy! [...] In the next year or so, I heard that tune and some other [Classic] tunes again... And each time, that same energy would re-appear and spread across the room, and each time... I felt as though the loose friendships I was making were sort of made stronger... Just by getting to know the tunes [...] and feeling that shared, kind of instant elation with other people around you.

This, then, is an example of how repetitive-habitual sonic affects—when collectively embodied or shared by a counter-hegemonic social assembly—can simultaneously be transformative. Through the collective investment of embodied psycho-corporeal memories in “Classics” such as Tamiko Jones “Can’t Live Without Your Love” and Karma “High Priestess”, music and sound, in this assemblage, help build affective and social alliances that not only contradict certain pre-existing social hierarchies, but that also spiral outwards from the events themselves in the form of enduring friendships and solidarities (cf. Born, 2011; Grossberg, 1984). As an empirical example, this importantly demonstrates that, contrary to Massumi, affective repetition and “habit” do not necessarily act as an imposition to novelty and change, but can themselves be collectively empowering and life-changing (cf. Stokes, 2010: 3–5).

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In sum, two key insights emerge with regards to what sonic/musical affect might be “good for”. The first relates to the bringing into existence of subjectivities and socialities that are *emergent*, and that might be in contradiction with existing power structures (Born, 2011). Through the example of Danny, I have shown how music and sound, by virtue of the vibes and social spaces that they generate as well as sounds, can create a “suspension” of social subjective continuities that may, for a specific person or people, open up connections that were not previously perceptible. When combined with a musical event’s multiple other mediations (publicity, promotion, policing...), such affective “openings” *may* bring people into association in ways that put existing social orders into question. Recognising, however, that pluralism, difference and co-presence mean little if the encounters that manifest between bodies continue to legitimize relations of hostility and domination, the second insight relates to the nature of the social relations that are brought into play within a specific sonic social space. Through the example of “Classics”, I have shown how music has the capacity to engender channels of affective and psychic communion between socially heterogeneous individuals who may not otherwise encounter one another. By rousing what Gilbert calls affective “collective retentions” (Gilbert, 2013: 688), the “Classics” take on an adhesive function by binding a not-quite-pre-existent collectivity together. In so doing, they provide the means through which to encounter difference in rewarding, non-verbal ways, while also offering opportunities for group life that potentially re-organise prevailing social divisions and disconnections.

Conclusion

The implications of using music and sound to research affect are considerable. Conceptually, affect emerges as an ambivalent “threshold condition” (Blackman, 2012) that is personal,

socio-cultural and historical, as well as psychically volatile. It is thus a mechanism capable of cementing social relations of difference as well as transmuting them. Crucially, however, I have argued that even where it is socially transformative, affect is not pre-personal in origin. Rather, it is pre-disposed by multiple personal, social, cultural, and institutional histories, with their variant temporalities. The questions that follow are thus not simply “what can a body do?” but who or what—at any given time—is able to become affectively open to new connections, why, and to what social and political ends? This approach differs significantly from dominant affect theories. On the one hand, it suggests a need to move beyond the reification of movement advocated by neo-Deleuzians, who preclude the reality of stasis and hierarchy. On the other hand, it diverges, if only marginally, from feminist, queer, and critical race affect theorists, whose work occasionally borders on social reductionism. Instead, it seems necessary to look to new paradigms that advocate a generative relationship between empirical research and conceptual development (Born, 2010b: 27–28). In Born’s (2005) theory of music’s social and material mediation, for instance, which emerges from what she calls a “post-positivist empiricism” with inventive conceptual effects (Born 2010b: 28), socio-historical conditions are understood to inherently intervene in affective experience—not in a way that is causal or deterministic, but in a way that refuses a conceptualization of “becoming” as random. Instead, suggestibility and emergence are seen to radiate out of history, as—in Lefebvre’s words—“possibilities, uncertainties, opportunities and probabilities” (Lefebvre, 2003: 66). These writers thus provide the basis for a conceptual framework that comes closer than any contemporary affect theory to accommodating sonic affect’s contradictory, but not haphazard social and political effects.

Notes

- 1 See www.loftparty.org/about.html.
- 2 All names have been changed to protect the privacy of my participants.

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