

Transcripts: Towards A Queer Phenomenology of the Field Recording

Drew Daniel

What does queerness sound like? Within the domain of music, there are a potentially infinite number of answers to this basic question; this volume exists to thicken the possible set of responses. But what if the very leap towards music as the domain from which to draw responses is already, itself, too narrow to accommodate the fugitive movements of the queer? How might sound- not music but sound, sound itself, as such- already partake of a certain self-estranging quality of shock, difference, or resistance to normative meanings for which the critical shorthand of 'queer' remains apt? Firing up a portable digital recording device in search of sounds that might suggest answers, I recorded a walk from my house out into the street, across two major urban arteries at the heart of Baltimore, and back to the privacy of my office on campus. When I arrived at my destination, I shut the door and immediately spoke out loud about what I had just experienced while making that recording. What follows, in sequence, are two "transcripts": first, a necessarily incomplete sound-by-sound transcription or prose translation of the noises and events captured on the field recording and, second, a more literal transcript of my remarks about that experience. Taken together, these distinct transcripts can help to open out a series of theoretical and methodological questions that point towards a perhaps counter-intuitive axiomatic suggestion: sound, as such, is queer.¹ I have annotated moments in each transcript with endnotes that perform a work of

analysis, questioning, and queering in the wake of these discordant, asymmetrical texts. Some of these notes are theoretical and methodological; some are personal and descriptive. Readers are encouraged to decide for themselves how to read this text; some may wish to read the transcripts first and annotations afterwards as a causal sequence, while others may choose instead to consult each footnote as it arises, interrupting the transmission with cross-talk and commentary.

TRANSCRIPT 1:

(We are in my boyfriend Martin's office, on the second floor of our house.)²

The distant sound of an Al Hirt LP of popular favorites scored for trumpet plays in another room, with the horn sound undergoing a Doppler shift in passing as I move through the house.³ Sound of Martin speaking out loud pretending to speak “backwards.”⁴ Kissing noise. “Bye.” Door opens from the house into the ambience of everyday urban existence.⁵ Surf-like crashes of traffic noise, car horns, and the oceanic passage of vehicles. An insect chorus swoops up into the stereo field and dies down again. High whine of city bus brakes. Oddly wooden squeaking noise. Sudden bassy launch of a moped. *(young male voice)* “Are you guys registered voters?” Swell of murmuring traffic. “Well if you’d like to register in Maryland and you go to Hopkins . . .” Girls chatting in response, just out of audibility. “Okay, um.” “That’s all it is.” Odd metal tapping, in rhythm. Grinding drag of a “wheelie” suitcase across pavement. Traffic continues to rise and fall. A voice says “6” and then a

grinding purr as a bus slows down. Insects rise up and traffic fades as the environment moves from street to campus. My own breathing. *(sound of young women talking)* “. . . and you run your mouth.” “But I’m helping you out.” “You get the hell out of my face.” Laughter. “yeah, because from what we had researched, she said . . .” Campus bells toll four times, loud, indicating the hour, and the curtain of insect noise rises up in the decay of their notes. *(young male voice)* “The only one they sell, which is terrific, is . . .” Footsteps crunchier now, on a different surface, and their speed increasing. The distant city noise resolves into a flatlined tone. Sudden hush as a door is passed through. Footsteps resound in a hallway. A deeper hush. Distant speech sounds modulated, as in a hospital. Key jingle. Door unlocked. Door shuts.⁶

TRANSCRIPT 2:

(We are in my office in Gilman Hall on the campus of Johns Hopkins University in a small room with a carpeted floor that absorbs sound reflection.)

“So a walk from my house to my office which I always thought of as taking about five minutes in fact takes nine minutes and thirty seconds.⁷ And the act of recording instantiated a basic difference between moments of synchronization between action and sound and moments where sound did not register the sort of totality of what it feels like to live in a body and move through a soundscape while being a participant in that world.⁸ It started with a kiss from Martin in which what I was seeing and

feeling was marked by a sonic spike, an event that I'm sure on the waveform will look like a thick sharp black bar.⁹ Martin's awareness of being recorded made him not speak out loud in intelligible English but instead speak in funny backward sounds like 'epp zapp wupp derp.' As soon as I was walking down the street I noticed that there was a constant kind of oscillation between moments where an action such as a car passing by would be something that I would perceive that would also register as sound, you know, on the recording levels of the input channels and then, uh, moments in which, uh, I experienced something that left no sonic trace or register. I walked by a police officer on a Segway and the police officer on the rubber wheels of the Segway made no sound whatsoever but my, you know, heart rate rose and my skin started to conduct a little more and I started to sweat so I could register in my body the kind of anxiety that the proximity of police generates in me. But if you listened to the field recording, you would never hear the sound of the police.¹⁰ You wouldn't grasp that on the recording, nor would you grasp the silent exchange of the probably gay dude that cruised me and gave me a look of recognition as he silently walked by. No sound from him at all. That again is not on the tape.¹¹ But then there are interesting moments that are. The kind of comic interaction between two women, one asking for help, the other saying "get the hell out of my face," uh, was delivered with facial expressions that suggest, you know, a lot of humor and intimacy and friendliness. But I think sonically there was actually a lot more of an edge of aggression in the way that the exchange registered, and I'll be curious to hear that when I play it back. Everywhere I was surrounded by other people, surrounded by technology, surrounded by vehicles, economies, bodies. But I was

always acting on that with the directionality of how and in what way I pointed the microphone, the little muscle adjustments, the little micro-movements that I made that would flag things as content worthy of grabbing.¹² I also noticed the sort of disjunction between what a thing is and what it sounds like in the passage of one car which made a really noticeable creaking and squeaking sound. But the creaking sound was very wooden. If you played that sound for someone you would imagine that perhaps that was a rocking chair. It didn't sound anything like a vehicle, certainly not a car in movement. So I think the recording also manifests the strange independence of sound from the cloud of, you know, associations that we tie to the signs that we affix to sounds, our sense that a certain kind of object is going to make a certain set of sounds is part of how we parse what we're hearing all the time, but everyday, there are misfits, there are points of non-correlation that emerge when you start to record.¹³ And that too is a part of what it's like to work with sound, think about sound, and think about sound in movement."

¹ I have made this case elsewhere, in a more explicitly methodological and theoretical essay to which this current piece stands as a more practical and extroverted sibling. See Drew Daniel, "All Sound Is Queer." *The WIRE*. London. Issue 33. November 2011. This initial footnote is as good a place as any to clarify my intentions in high-jacking the phrase "queer phenomenology" from its creator, Sara Ahmed; I shall define the term in relationship to its philosophical precursor first, and then re-deploy it for my own purposes. Very roughly, phenomenology refers to a philosophical tradition which typically produces so-called "thick descriptions" of the way that phenomena show up for embodied consciousness(es). Such a practice is exemplified in a famous passage from Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945): "Sense experience is that vital communication with the world which makes it present as a familiar setting of our life. It is to it that the perceived object and the perceiving subject owe their thickness. It is the intentional tissue

which the effort to know will try to take apart.” M. Merleau-Ponty, “The Phenomenal Field”, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Trans. Colin Smith. London: Routledge, 1989, 52-53. Against this backdrop, theorist Sara Ahmed has coined the phrase “queer phenomenology” in order to complicate the relationship of the phenomenological subject to her surroundings through the troping of “orientation” as both a spatial location and an index of a processual and open way of thinking about sexuality and identity as necessarily linked in complex ways with racialized embodiment and political territory. See Sara Ahmed, “Sexual Orientation”, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006; 65-109. In the work of Ahmed and others inspired by her example (and in opposition to those who might regard queerness as itself an incipient form of new normativity), the mesh of self-and-world proposed by phenomenology undergoes a re-reading which brings out the problem of “queerness” as that which resists identification and incorporation, and thus pushes back against the normative implications of belonging implicit in the “familiarity” of the phenomenal world presumed by Merleau-Ponty.

That said, what does queer phenomenology have to do with sound? Insofar as phenomenology analyzes the way that perception creates both self and world in a co-constitutive loop, there is a basic sense in which “thinking about sound” and “doing phenomenology” are more than kin and less than kind. This tense kinship brings us to a long-simmering methodological tension that surfaces when the subject is sound, which is nicely epitomized in that pseudo-profound chestnut of low-brow philosophical musing, the question “if a tree falls in the forest and there’s no one there to hear it, does it make a sound?” The answer depends upon who counts as “one”, and the reason hinges upon the basic conceptual distinction between “sound” as a signal that is audible to living systems such as humans and animals and “vibration” as a spectrum of ontological force that extends below and above the range of audibility. This occasions a splitting of interpretive labor between *phenomenology*, defined above as the description of the way that phenomena show up for embodied consciousness, and *ontology*, the free-standing metaphysical inquiry into the nature of being or beings as such. So far, phenomenology has been the default setting of sound studies, even when it gets inflected with historically specific arguments; the listening mind is the implied reference point and destination for the field. This attitude is epitomized in the confident declaration of Jonathan Sterne that “human beings reside at the center of any meaningful definition of sound.” Jonathan Sterne, “Hello!” *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2003, 11. Sterne has a more nuanced position than this anthropo-centrist slogan lets on, presenting sound as necessarily subject to change when placed against an evolutionary historical backdrop in which species themselves are always altering; as species evolve, what can show up as “sound” will itself necessarily adjust. But the emphasis upon sound as something which is “for consciousness”, to take up the language of phenomenology, persists regardless of these niceties.

Against this tendency, in the past few years sound studies has seen the entrance of other philosophical and disciplinary commitments which are not

necessarily tethered to phenomenology but which think, as it were, from the ground up rather than from the mind down. In a manifesto-like chapter titled “13.7 Billion B.C.: The Ontology of Vibrational Force” from his text *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect and the Ecology of Fear*, Steve Goodman articulates the possibility of a sound studies no longer held captive to any insistence upon listening minds and firing nerves:

An ontology of vibrational force delves below a philosophy of sound and the physics of acoustics toward the basic processes of entities affecting other entities. Sound is merely a thin slice, the vibrations audible to humans or animals. Such an orientation therefore should be differentiated from a phenomenology of sonic effects centered on the perceptions of a human subject, as a ready-made, interiorized human center of being and feeling. While an ontology of vibrational force exceeds a philosophy of sound, it can assume the temporary guise of a sonic philosophy, a sonic intervention into thought, deploying concepts that resonate strongest with sound/noise/music culture, and inserting them at weak spots in the history of Western philosophy, chinks in its character armor where its dualism has been bruised, its oculo-centrism blinded.” Steve Goodman, “13.7 Billion B.C.: The Ontology of Vibrational Force” *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect and the Ecology of Fear*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010, 81-84.

Suitably chastened by the metaphysical reminder that there are other zones of vibration than those audible to humans, a “queer phenomenology” might thus name a practice with a doubled mission. First, by way of response to Goodman, queer phenomenology can complicate the allegation that human interiority is simply a “ready-made” by registering the differences within and between subjects as a result of the incompleteness of the sex/gender system’s operations upon consciousness; there is no “ready-made,” no universally available subjectivity in the first place, only a multiplicity of lived differences. But in learning from and listening to Goodman’s critique of the phenomenological limits of sound studies as a human-oriented practice, a bringing to bear of vibrational ontologies onto the scene of sound studies might ontologize the very queerness operative in “queer phenomenology” itself by forcing it to acknowledge its barriers, limitations, and assumptions anew- in particular, its over-emphasis upon cultural determination and human historical narratives at the expense of a host of non-human actants and agents. I am hoping that a re-calibrated mode of queer phenomenology might let us think both gender and sexuality as a self-differential system *and* think about the expanded scene of ontological materiality that is free-standing and mind-independent. Accordingly, I am arguing for a “both/and” approach of inclusivity and connection rather than for a forced choice between distinct critical vocabularies and concerns. Queer phenomenology must thus become, as Bikini Kill put it, “worse than queer” if it wants to do justice to both the messy experience of lived sexuality *and* the extra-human borders of the sonic.

² This room, like all rooms, has its own sonic signature that is complex and individual. As a physically bounded space, it has a resonant frequency, which could be drawn out through practices of recording and re-recording sound within the room. See Alvin Lucier's seminal work of process music, "I am Sitting in A Room" (1980) for an example of how this might be done. But the sonic specificity of the room only partially touches its lived particularity as the room of my boyfriend Martin, his office on the second floor of our home in Baltimore, the house where we make electronic music together as Matmos. He has used maps of the world as wallpaper, and they cover every surface with a multi-colored assemblage of different locations. Would this alteration of the surface itself impact the resonant frequency? It isn't likely. Things can be visually garish and sonically flat. Listening back to the recording I have no way of hearing the sound as "the sound of Martin's room," and so the need to insert a parenthetical explanation of where we are indexes the haplessness, or indifference, of recording as a memorial practice to the human needs that motivate it. See Alvin Lucier, "I Am Sitting In A Room", *Lovely Music*, 1980. For a reading of this work and its implications, see Brandon Labelle, "Alvin Lucier and the Phenomenal Voice", *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art*, London: Continuum, 2006, 123-133.

³ The practice of making field recordings constitutes a useful means of re-mediating and estranging recordings themselves, necessarily including recordings of music. Hearing a recording- in this case, an unusually loud vinyl pressing of pop instrumental kitsch- within a domestic space produces a *mise-en-abyme* effect of recordings nested inside other recordings. In moving the microphone across the speaker field, I effectively filter and color and transform the given-ness of the original Al Hirt LP. The manic exertions of Hirt's braying tones show up as camp when played back across the distance between the present and their origins in the postwar boom of "swinging bachelor pad" albums that would presumably allow heterosexual male nerds to demonstrate their hi fi systems to would-be conquests; when re-recorded in the acoustic space of a home, that functionality is foregrounded and rendered both pathetic and even more comic. Putting a flamboyantly "large" sound into the *verité* of a small space demonstrates the gap between the fantasy worlds proposed within art and the lived spaces in which those fantasy worlds are consumed and experienced. The practice of re-recording is becoming more frequent as a compositional response to a world that is increasingly colonized by the sound of playback. On his "Amateur Doubles" double LP, the experimental musician and sound artist Graham Lambkin documents the audio generated by various car trips in his Honda Civic, including the re-recordings of cassettes of music by Phillippe Besombes and Jean-Louis Rizet as re-played by the car stereo and the resonant chambers of his car's interior; Lambkin's archive offers a particularly cryptic example of remediation-as-composition (Graham Lambkin, "Amateur Doubles", Kye, 2011). Sound becomes re-placed through this act and, in the process, the original changes.

⁴ If a “field recording” is simply any recording that is not done in a purpose-built recording studio environment, that hardly explains what is or is not included within “the field,” and on what terms that inclusion or capture takes place. Here we encounter a basic ethical issue implicit in the practice of field recording: the problem of consent. Do we need to ask for permission to record the sounds around us? Whose sounds are they? If in storing and re-using sound, we take something external and render it “ours” and subject to our control and repetition and re-use, ought we to give fair warning to any living agent within the radius of our microphone? The history of “field recording” as a practice is itself caught within a sticky web of proximity with ethnographic discourse, and thus stands in a potentially compromising embrace with the often racist histories of ethnographic capture and control of native peoples as objects of knowledge for the human sciences. Bracketing these longer intellectual histories of anthropological encounter and historical archiving, it is simply obvious that people who do not wish to be recorded can justifiably feel violated by the act of recording the sounds they make. My boyfriend’s solution when he sees that I am making a recording in his proximity is to either remain silent, refusing to participate in the generation of sound, or to speak out loud only in nonsensical noises which flag his recalcitrance. This is a means of “opting out” which is both funny and obnoxious and a kind of running private joke between us, but on the other side of that intimacy there stands a strong feeling that it is un-ethical to be recorded without one’s consent. Yet I do not warn the strangers on the street that I record while walking past them. This can simply be an index of the feeling that public space is shared space, and that public sounds are a common held by no one and everyone who participates in and moves through public space, a space that anyone can document as they so choose. At a certain point, the size and obviousness of recording devices become ethically significant. A large woolly looking wind-sock or wind-baffling device over a conspicuously large and expensive microphone is hard to miss, and reveals to passerby that recording is taking place. A small handheld device that could be a phone of some kind is less likely to trigger this sort of recognition. There is then a kind of choice about self-revealing or remaining “in the closet” which is particular to the identity of being a sound-recordist which takes on its own epistemological drama, the feeling of being in on a secret that others are imagined not to grasp, which resembles the cycles of concealment and disclosure generated by non-normative sexual identities.

⁵ There is something infuriatingly vague and impotent about the capacity of this phrase to stand in for what it supposedly represents upon the page; the entire problem of replacing sounds with words nestles here. Which urban space? Beirut? Sao Paulo? Gaza? Manhattan? Shanghai? Lhasa? What does “urban” mean? Frequency of car sounds? Population Density? The aura of crime? The promise of shopping? Do cities necessarily sound like human beings? Machines? Animals? Which species are present and included within that acoustic space, and subject to what environmental threats and constraints? What kinds of vehicles are moving and what is their source of fuel? How frequent are the sounds of public transportation, and what might their frequency tell us about the economic grids, tax bases, and

infrastructural supports that make that city possible? What non-human material agents (oceans, rivers, other species) are present within the sound of the city? What languages are being spoken, and what does their ratio of representation tell us about the mesh of race and class? See “The Post-Industrial Soundscape” from R. Murray Schafer’s *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*. Rochester: Destiny Books, 1977, 71-103.

⁶ The door constitutes one of the crucial sound-objects dis-located by the compositional practices of *musique concrète* on the contested border territory between sound as the given-ness of what surrounds us and music as an aestheticized domain of choice, mastery, control and reproduction. This is the case because of Pierre Henry’s foundational composition “*Variations Pour Une Porte et un Soupir*” (Variations for a Door and Sigh, 1963), one of the masterpieces of music created through the manipulation and processing of sound on magnetic tape. Henry’s sound sources are minimal: a door, the sound of breathing, and a kind of metallic “sigh” noise created with a musical saw. These simple sounds are subjected to a dizzying range of mutations and transformations of pitch, timbre, and attack, with each parameter morphing and mutating as the sounds originally created by the door, the saw and the voice are re-located in various unreal acoustic spaces created with tape echo effects and reverberation chambers. The queerness of the border zone between sound and music abides in neither the comfortably human sigh nor the comfortably material (thus “dead” and “non-human”) door with its repertoire of familiar squeaks and creaks. Rather, queerness abides in the hybrid capacity of the metallic saw noise to be a kind of interstitial hybrid, a quasi-object which is neither fully a material object nor fully human, but somehow expressive and thing-like at the same time. The sighing metal is caught up in a kind of “uncanny valley” of the life-like through Henry’s labor-intensive processing and studio manipulations, which force this sound to yield increasingly athletic and expressive responses to the (real, human) sigh and the (real, inhuman) door noises that surround it. Gradually, this hybridity becomes transferable, and the sigh sounds less and less necessarily human and alive, while the door comes to seem increasingly animate and, to use Aristotle’s term, “ensouled.” In the process, Henry’s work chafes against the key Aristotelian distinction between voice and other kinds of sound: “Now voice is a kind of sound of an ensouled thing. For none of the things without soul gives voice, though some are said by analogy to give voice, such as the flute and the lyre and whatever other of the things without soul have the production of sustained, varied and articulate sound.” Aristotle, *De Anima (On the Soul)*, Trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred, London: Penguin, 1986, p. 178. Pierre Henry’s work, and much of the ontologically engaged work in *musique concrète* which was created in his wake, constitutes an expansive attempt to complicate the range of possible analogical extensions of “voice” towards the inhuman components of the material world. This orientation towards the musical affordances of everyday objects stands in a practical tension with the initial theorization of *musique concrète* by its inventor and first practitioner, Pierre Schaeffer, who longed to disconnect the “*objet sonore*” from

its referential ties to its particular sources. But even Schaeffer thought of his project as a kind of inquiry into the basics of materiality as such, noting in 1948 that:

Sound material in itself has inexhaustible potential. This power makes you think of the atom and the reservoir of energy hidden in its particles, ready to burst out as soon as it is split. Instead of composing a series of studies I would do well, if I were logical and worked without bothering about an immediate result, to record only “samples,” each one taken from an initial noise. After all, isn’t this noise the same as an orchestra makes?

Pierre Schaeffer, *In Search of a Concrete Music*. Trans. Christine North and John Dack. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012, 15.

⁷ Experienced in realtime, the entire recording takes fourteen minutes, and divides unevenly into nine and a half minutes of sound and four and a half minutes of speech. When rendered in language, the differences between the first and second half of the recording are immediately apparent. The sounds could be transcribed in an infinite number of ways, with more or less attention to subtleties of timbre and the grain of the sound, with more or less nuanced accounts of the attack, duration and decay of particular sounds, and with more or less care to the question of how best to articulate complex phenomena of simultaneously experienced multiplicities as a linear, one-word-at-a-time string of signifiers. No such basic conceptual difficulties attend the transcription of the second half, which renders itself rather neatly into words, but which, in the process, suppresses its own status as also always sound. The transcript does not convey the cadence and emphasis and inflections of spoken utterance, nor does it render the breathless rush of certain passages and the languor of others, nor the swirls and eddies of affective change afoot within the emotional and embodied act of speaking, the little crests of feeling localized within each syllable.

Distinct in both their provenance and their plausibility, the asymmetry in place between these two transcripts is as obvious as it is misleading. I’ll flag the asymmetry first. Speech is at once language, and hence subject to transcription and silent dissemination as print, and yet it is in its moment of utterance materially expressed as sound. But sound isn’t yet language and perhaps cannot ever be except through a process of attenuation, filtering and translation so lossy as to foreclose the very premise of transcription or translation as such. Accordingly, with respect to their reliability as accounts of “what happened,” these two transcripts unzip from each other quite easily. We ought to be skeptical of the capacity of the first transcript to stand in for what it represents, while, assuming there was no deliberate scribal error, we can probably rely upon the second transcript. Yet, at a more microscopic level of focus, the very act of digitally recording audio is itself already a kind of inscription, for the smooth analogue waves of sound as vibrations in the world are themselves being attenuated and rendered into a digital approximation, a string of encoded zeros and ones which are also, themselves,

already lossy with respect to the originals they store and preserve. So the distinction between the two transcripts can itself be made to soften and blur.

⁸ As film-sound theorist Michel Chion has pointed out, the practice of watching films encourages the expectation that visual events and sonic events will somehow correspond in intensity, producing a sense of simultaneity and connection across registers which Chion terms “points of synchronization”; against this media-primed expectation, real life shows up as disjunctive or impaired, insofar as visually striking events do not necessarily have an equally striking sonic accompaniment, and vice versa. See Michel Chion, “On Synchronism.” *Immediacy and Non-Simultaneity: Utopia of Sound*, eds. Diedrich Diederichsen and Constanze Ruhm, eds. Vienna: Academy of Fine Arts / Schlebrugge, 2010. 20-26.

⁹ The failure of the sonic register of experience captured on the digital sound file to correlate with the subjective memory of how experience emerges was most marked at precisely the points where “sexuality” was at stake: the kiss was something that I didn’t see (I closed my eyes), but something that I felt as a bodily event of contact, and sonically, it sounds like almost nothing, a faintly smudged percussive non-event which only stands out when I play it back because I know what to listen for. If played to a stranger, they would not recognize this as “the sound of a kiss,” though that is what it is. The difference between the generation of sound artists who worked with magnetic tape and the present generation is most marked in the re-ascendance of the visual as part of the way in which we work with sound now. Whereas a musique-concrete composer working with a field recording in the 1970s would have anticipated playing back the sound of the kiss recorded onto tape, someone working in a digital environment at the present time looks forward to seeing the waveform on a screen and using their capacity to see differences in the level and character of the signal as part and parcel of what it means to edit and isolate sound. We look at sounds, and in so doing the question of what it means to expect synchronization between the sonic and the visual undergoes another turn of the critical screw.

¹⁰ The phrase “the sound of the police” is hardly accidental, but is, of course, a citation of KRS One’s anthemic hip hop single “The Sound of Da Police,” a song about the institutionalized racism of police presence in African-American communities, with its insistently catchy chorus “Woop! Woop! / That’s the sound of the police / Woop ! Woop! / That’s the sound of the beast.” KRS One, “Sound of Da Police”, *Return of the Boom Bap*, Jive Records, 1993. KRS One’s song is a complex artifact of its own, and worthy of a separate essay, but for my purposes here it usefully remediates a signature noise of urban existence: the police siren. KRS One flags the way that the panic-inducing police siren claims the right to noise as an asymmetric index of top-down control, against which the vocal imitation of the siren as a human cry attempts to speak back to power and re-play one of its signature sounds as a tactic of critique, mimicry, and opposition. If this open colonization of public space by audible signals of authority is still in evidence across the urban soundscape of the

present in poor neighborhoods, the nearly silent rubber wheels of the Segway show up as the polite “sound of the police” within spaces of white privilege within Baltimore such as the Hopkins campus. Buoyed up by government funding and research grants, academic workers presumably have the right to proceed undisturbed by the intrusive sound of sirens, and so the constant sense of police surveillance which goes along with the security state protocols of the present are rendered helpfully mute so that academics can go about their business (including the business of junior faculty talking about queer phenomenology to their digital recorders in the padded safety of their own private offices). Accordingly, one does not hear “the sound of the police” within the field recording.

¹¹ It seems to me that this moment is important precisely for its banality. It is a moment of simultaneous recognition and loss. In a moment of recognition, two gay men hail each other as sexualized subjects within the public sphere, silently, through discreet glances. In a moment of loss, this recognition produces no sonic trace, and thus the sound of the event as sound refuses to grant any priority or interest to that everyday moment of recognition. As such, this moment opens usefully onto the vexed distinction between “the gay” and “the queer.” If the register of publicly legible identities and the sexual practices (from cruising and flirting all the way to public sex) that batten upon them takes place within the domain of gay and lesbian and bisexual signifying regimes, the sonic is, as they say, “a horse of a different color.” The sonic is a register of physical vibrations, of the ontology of vibrational force within the world, and the two domains need not correlate or correspond. The failure of this gay moment to become sound- which could easily be recuperated into a melancholic discourse as the sound of self-oppression, of self-silencing, of “the closet”- could also be used in a different way to foregrounds what is “queer” about sound as such. What is queer about sound is its very refusal or recalcitrance, its resistance to or deviation from our expectations about what is or is not significant. Of course, there are plenty of ways that gay and lesbian and trans identity can show up as sound; one’s tone of voice can sound “faggy”, “butch”, or in some sense-non-normative—a husky-yet-female voice, a falsetto-yet-male voice, for example. But the queerness of the sonic obtains at the points at which sound as physical vibration unsettles or fails to accord with the normative force with which we inhabit, present, and perform our own identities, whether gay or straight or otherwise.

As it happens, this field recording abounds with moments of divergence between the gay and the queer. The young man asking people if they are registered voters in Maryland was working for the Human Rights Campaign, the most mainstream lobbying group for GLBT rights, and a highly vocal advocate for the marriage equality movement; he was engaged in signing up Hopkins students to donate money to the HRC to further their (since successful) efforts to legalize gay marriage in Maryland. The sound of his conversation with potentially supportive strangers was a moment of gay risk, or speaking out and claiming space for gay rights and the dignity and validity of gay and lesbian subjects. In comparison with that usefully and normatively apparent “gay moment”, queerness emerges, by

contrast, in the curious sound of the car-becoming-a-wooden-rocking-chair. There's nothing "gay" about the sound of that car, but there's certainly something "queer" about it, if we take the queer to be that which disrupts normative signifying regimes: within the context of the sound recording, the sonic presentation of the car as a small, domestic, wooden object (a rocking chair) rather than as a large, potentially lethal vehicle exemplifies what I am calling the queerness of the sonic as such.

¹² For an example of a composition that mobilizes the inherent musicality of the gesture of wielding a microphone itself, see Karlheinz Stockhausen's "'Mikrophonie I (1965), für Tamtam, 2 Mikrophone, 2 Filter und Regler."

¹³ The autonomy of the sonic from the register of visual and linguistic meaning can arrive in unexpected ways. Though in the context of this essay this autonomy was disclosed through the experience of the disjunction between sound-as-recording and an experience of being in the world, that disjunction can itself be discovered within the realm of music, and is in no way specific to field recordings. A specifically musical case in point of the "queerness" of the sonic can be found in the practice of Judy Dunaway, a virtuoso performer of music written for and performed upon balloons. In a performance at the Red Room in Baltimore, the entire packed room was absolutely silent as we sat hunched together watching Dunaway strap a three foot wide white weather balloon to her waist with guide ropes. Two separate contact mics, spaced a foot apart, were taped to separate sides of the balloon, which bulged off of her belly like a grotesque parody of a pregnant stomach. Once strapped securely in place, she spread her legs and sat down, clamping this white inflatable surface in place with her stockinged knees. She then grasped two vibrators, checked their battery and speed settings, turned them on and, with eyes clenched shut and a fierce look of concentration upon her face, slowly edged the tips of the vibrators against the trembling membrane of the balloon's thin skin. The signal from the contact mics was carried out into the PA system in combination with the substantial bass resonance of the balloon itself, and the room was filled with a wall of dense, low frequencies subtly beating against each other, a sound at once instantaneously powerful and yet also sufficiently complex to reward extended, meditative consideration.

The sound felt immense, out of proportion to both the size of the object that caused it, and out of proportion with the size of the room; closing one's eyes produced the distinct sensation of having been transported to a much larger acoustic space. The strongest point of comparison, when keeping one's eyes shut and considering the performance purely in terms of incoming audio, was to the sound of distant planes taking off which can be heard when one is in proximity to a large commercial airport hub. Subtle variations in the angle of Dunaway's hand and in the pressure of the vibrator tips against the balloon would result in modulations of the beating frequencies, with minute adjustments producing constant shifts and slides up and down in intensity and pitch which might be analogically compared with the effect of moiré patterns as optical phenomena.

Dunaway's performance quilts together a broad range of elements culled from diverse ontological levels, which collectively define the expanded range of objects proper to a queer phenomenology of sound: "performance" could name the complicated intersection of an action (stroking), an image (a woman with her legs spread, a giant white orb), a frequency as a physical vibration in a room, a thin membrane of plastic encountering air at two different temperatures on either side of its surface, a waveform as it was digitally recorded and displayed on a laptop's screen by the engineer at the sound board, and a state of embodied, socially extended being together in the world (the audience as a temporary perceptual community). Thus, in this case "sound" does not designate a unity, for we were not hearing the sound of a balloon, but the sound of an extended technological assemblage: a balloon and a vibrator and a human hand and a contact mic and a speaker and a certain sized room are all brought together by Dunaway into an expressive chain of connection and interaction. Theorized in terms of Gilles Deleuze's poetic extension of becoming, we could say that the queerness of this performance obtains not in the material assemblage of this particular signal chain, but in the expressive leap from source to sound in which a hybrid object in process—a balloon-becoming-plane—was made manifest. Judy Dunaway's balloon takes on a certain queerness in the un-decidability of its becoming, one that might be fruitfully compared with the queerness of the car-becoming-rocking chair which I experienced on the street, and re-experienced in the playback of my field recording. These fugitive materials illustrate how queerness dislodges and expands being, transforming objects and forcing us to redraw the relational boundaries of their-- and our-- identities in the process.