

# UNSILENCED BODIES

TRAUMA IN QUEER NOISE MUSIC

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The 20<sup>th</sup> century introduced cosmopolitan populations to the sounds of electronic music, often first credited to Luigi Russolo's writing in his 1913 Futurist manifesto *The Art of Noise*. In the context of art and music, electronic sounds in this era encompassed a narrow aesthetic scope: recreations, reimaginings, and recordings of machinic sounds, modernist industry, and war. The postmodern televising of global projects such as the space race and atomic research around the Cold War marked the beginning of when "electronic sounds became firmly lodged in the public imagination" (Rodgers, 2010). Despite electronic sounds' specific contextual beginnings, they were subject to the same utilitarian multiplicities of an "empty container" as Mozart's *Ode to Joy* and other styles of music that came before it did (Žižek, 2008). Simultaneously, electronic popular music emboldened misogynist objectifications of the female body, the other, the alien, and the foreign through space age pop album covers "featuring racially exoticized portrayals of women" (Taylor, 2001) and its weaponization by state agencies against protestors and captives in top-security facilities (Cusick, 2020). By the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it seemed that electronic music was for "everyone": war criminals, racists, and record company CEOs.

However, electronic music was not just subject to the aesthetics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A consumerist awe brought by modern industry was a central theme in how electronic styles of music were seen as groundbreaking, progressive, and boundary-pushing. Even in genres previously well-established such as rock, new technology and inventions surrounding guitars, pedal effects, and amplification revolutionized the way music was performed, recorded, and listened to. Some of the most visionary advances seen in electronic music were the result of unintentional outcomes of new electronic devices, yet nonetheless only made possible by a mass production of countless musical instruments and devices, such as the tempo manipulation of drum machines by NYC synth-punk band Suicide in the late 70s and 80s.

After decades of access to these products, experimental electronic groups that delved into unintentional or extended techniques grew more commonplace. In the United Kingdom, power electronics and industrial noise emerged as a prominent underground genre, perhaps most notably with Whitehouse and Con-Dom (Control-Domination), two acts who see continued praise in extreme electronic music circles today. Although their music sonically stood out locally (yet not internationally, with Japanese noise emerging a decade earlier), these two artists fell victim to the same aesthetic subjectification of earlier electronic music. Whitehouse was mocking the rape and murder of Reiko Takemura on their 2003 album *Bird Seed* and Con-Dom's live sets saw Mike Dando, the sole performer, groping audience members to highlight the complacency of the crowd. For them, extra-musical themes were only linked to sound via the notion that noise is transgressive, not through specific physical gestures or objects that induce affect through a coupled (or decoupled) sonic result.

This specific European electronic experimental style can be aesthetically differentiated by looking at David Novak's 2013 book *Japanoise*, with examples of homemade electronic instruments and DIY community performance spaces that allowed Japanese noise performers to "establish [the genre's] reputation through its most radically physical performers". Physicality emerged in the sonic (the shaking of noise tables to activate instruments and create a static sonic effect), non-sonic (the anonymous account on page 146 of a "noisician's" meticulous, unruly, and complicated performance setup that may seem overly-intricate for only a 20-minute performance to some), and even interpersonal (arguing with and pushing past the sound engineer to make the PA system louder). Here, we can see how the sonic and non-sonic coalesce, or how the performative gestures by the musician and their gear are intertwined with the sonic result.

The *legibility of coalescence*, or how strong a physical gesture and sonic result are linked together in a live setting, is something that can be qualitatively analyzed and compared between noise artists. To jump back to the West, the theremin is a prime example of an electronic instrument with relatively high coalescence legibility. A performer uses their hand to control pitch on one axis and volume on the other. The audience can see the hand move, and thus the sound changes accordingly. Despite this clarity of a one-to-one relationship between motion and sound, there is no cultural or affective context displayed. Even abstractly, assuming pitch is assigned to the Y-axis, not all cultures' languages agree to describe higher frequencies as "higher" pitches. Other than "high" and "low" being used to describe the spectrum of pitch, "small" and "large" are used in Bali and Java, and "young" and "old" among the Amazonian Suyá people (Zbikowski, 1998). Novak's account of a performer shaking a table to activate all their equipment and instruments simultaneously also has a one-to-one relationship; shaking the table leads to all instruments being sonically activated. Language is not involved in understanding that the collision of two objects often leads to a noise. Despite the sonic result of the table shaking being presumably more complicated than a simple modulated sine wave produced from a theremin due to a wide array of digital and analog effects, the relationship between action and sound remains strong. Additionally, the relationship in the case of the table is further strengthened by its affective communicability. The performer communicates their disregard for the safety and upkeep of their equipment through an act of self-targeted aggression with affective qualities that the audience can relate to through their own emotional and bodily language and experiences.

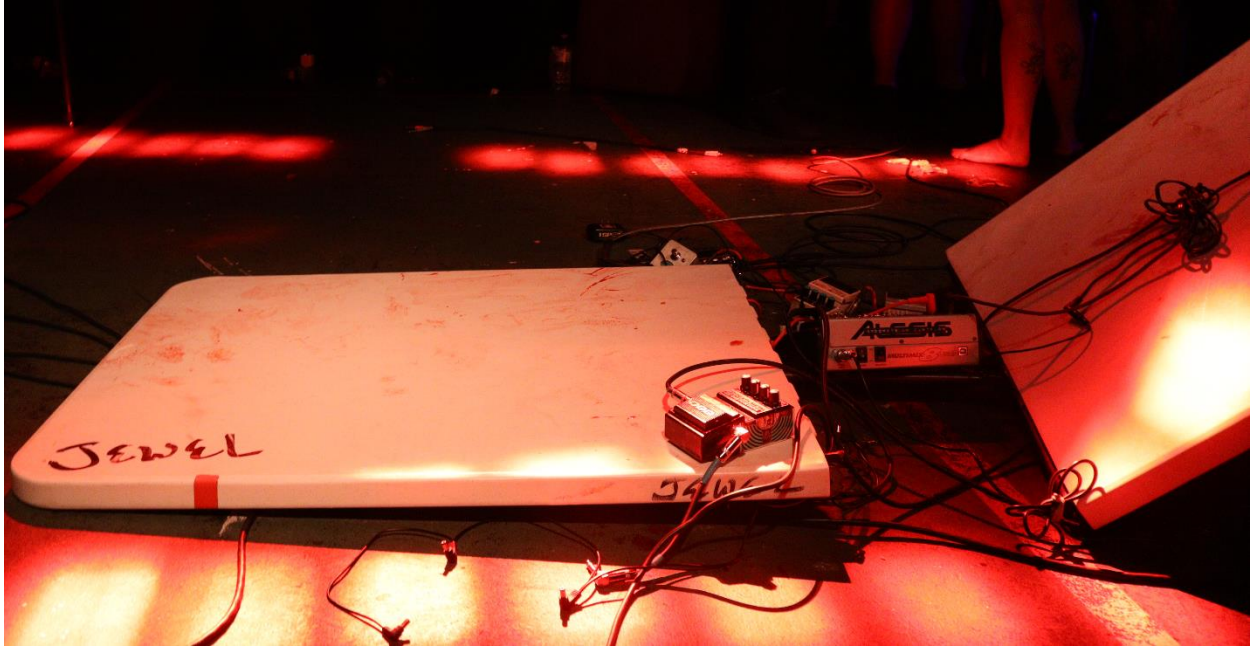
Framing the performance of noise music under the context and history of visual art and performance art, as opposed to electronic music, allows us to begin positioning Queer noise music, just as the position of Western and Japanese noise music practices have been made distinct. Gustav

Metzger outlined the potential power of linking sound with action in his 1959 Manifesto regarding auto-destructive art, stating that the amplification of the auto-destructive processes' sound "can be an element of the total conception". Destruction art is about opened (and opening) wounds and the survival (or death) that occurs (Stiles, 2016). Survival leaves a "death imprint", manifesting guilt, responsibility, and acceptance of its possible opposite (Lifton, 1991). In the example of the table being shaken, survival manifests minutely. Shaking the table invites the possibility of disconnection: a cable getting unplugged, an instrument getting scratched, or an effect pedal falling on the floor. It is living with the possibility of a wound instead of surviving with a wound with the possibility of death. Additionally, the act is isolated between the performer, their space, and their equipment, allowing for the performer to have full control of the act without audience members able to disrupt their system. Metzger intended auto-destructive art to be a publicly displayed practice with structures representing natural decay and social crisis (Stiles, 2016). The traditional musical setting of stage and audience space represses both of these elements, allowing the performer to have complete control over natural decay (disruption of electronic system connections) and social crisis (physical rebellion by the audience against the performer's sonic, performative, or affective practices). For Lifton, a survivor is defined as one who has witnessed or encountered death in some manifestation, whether literal, psychological, or ecological. For survival to be fully communicated through the live performance of noise music, wounds, literal or metaphorical, must be present, with the possibility of becoming infected or healed, in the coalescence of action and sound.

Rain Matheke (they/she) is a noise artist based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, currently performing as Farrah Faucet. They self-describe their music as "radiantly vulnerable", and this vulnerability manifests itself through both performance and personhood. In some of her live

performances, medical mouth gags, plastic wrap, and tape are used to open or restrict their mouth, altering the voice towards a strangled and asphyxiated tone. Differing from the lineage of found objects and trash objects in avant-garde performance, the amplified mouth gag stages medical practice for a public audience, a performance usually only seen by patient and doctor. Calling the gag a “horrible device” and one “only for special occasions”, Rain transforms the object into a communal and generative experience, both lightening the weight of her pain and trauma and transgressing into the territory of security of an audience not having to interact with similar medical experiences or acknowledge the chronic pain or illness associated with the object. The gag acts as the physical manifestation of the haunting of disease, denoting the lines and areas of pain and illness (Foucault, 1973). The dynamic between performer and audience is crucial in the transformation of the object; the audience witnesses a pain hidden by clinical practice and ailment symptoms.

The manipulation and aggression toward her noise table undergoes a more thorough coalescence legibility than that seen in Novak’s recounting. Rain addresses natural decay and social crisis by accepting terminal failure and emboldening audience participation. The toppling of her noise table occurs at the end of nearly every performance. By pushing the table into the territory of death, equipment struggles to remain powered and connected, resulting in a glitchy and strained sound. Here, there is strong coalescence legibility; the dismantling of equipment results in the death of electronic sound, but not before a momentary hiccup and final squelch emitting from the speakers. She often continues her vocal performance past this moment, surviving past the point of electronic death and through the continued asphyxiation by plastic wrap.



The aftermath of Farrah Faucet's set, a broken table and strewn equipment, at Slabfest III in Manchester, New Hampshire on May 19, 2024. Photo by Tyler Jordan.

Audience members often aid in the act of thrashing and knocking over the table in transgressive and communal ways. Before performing, Rain often invites to directly interact with her and her equipment, telling the audience to “not be afraid to touch me”. Through her history of performance involving the toppling of the noise table, audience members familiar with her are often excited for the opportunity to physically engage with her work. People may decide collectively to move the table around the space in cooperation so that it stays intact and connected for a longer period, or may approach the invitation more individually and aggressively, quickly causing havoc and endangering the lifespan of the performance. Notably, interactivity is driven through invitation and social connection instead of forced interaction, allowing the audience to sculpt the performance and connect with it in a meaningful way for themselves without coercion. This direct and natural engagement the audience has with the coalescence of sound and physicality empowers audience members, giving them creative control of performance, death, and survival.

Their three full-length albums, *depression body* (2023), *pain body* (2023), and *astral body* (2024), touch on three fields of survival: emotional, physical, and spiritual. These recordings embody on the same themes of Rain's live performances. In the opening track off *pain body*, "lungless", a pitch shifted sample of what sounds like a doctor talking to a patient is heard. As the 3'44" track progresses, a low, distorted drone crescendos, making the vocals more muted and difficult to understand. The track ends with another layer of shimmering high white noise, engulfing the voice completely. Just like the gag transforms from a hidden to witnessed object in their live performances, this track sets the clinical sonic object as the voice recording, heard in both its hidden and unhidden states. The change from performance to recording allows for a perfectly seamless transition from audible to inaudible, while the gag, once seen, immediately shifts from hidden to visible, highlighting an attention to the relationship between clinical object and audience/listener across different types of media.

Queer visibility in medical practices is often heavily neglected institutionally, creating a need to explore the relationship queer individuals have to objects of medicine and the clinic in other outlets. Due to suboptimal or nonexistent education on queer health for medical providers, laws restricting access to care, and fear of discrimination, homophobia, and transphobia, queer people seeking medical care "recognize how disclosing queerness can affect both patients' and providers' comfort in medical settings and influence patient-provider interactions" (Robertson, 2017). This puts them in the position to enact the same process of hiding the object of queerness internally that is institutionally and clinically upheld. Rain's use of an object's level of visibility as a performance aspect shows her attention to this relationship and desire to unsilenced both object and person.



Combining themes of Queer medical trauma with global, political struggles, Gyna Bootleg (they/them) is a performer and artists from Providence, Rhode Island. They actively collaborate with other musicians, including saxophonist Tamio Shiraishi and noise artist Thomas Boettner of Straight Panic, and have several other cross-genre projects, including Harpy, Vomitatrix, and Sire. Their work focuses on the synthesis of auto-destructive performance with social issues, working with knives, barbed wire, and raw meat to create a visceral and fully sensorial performance. Their set at Slabfest III infected the room with an awful stench as they slowly exposed more raw meat under their outfit and splattered more animal blood onto the floor. Gyna then uses a speculum while sitting atop their noise table to allow a butcher knife with a contact mic to pass through, amplifying the careful yet painful gesture, similar to Rain's reframing of the mouth gag,



Gyna Bootleg performing at Slabfest III on May 19, 2024, after they removed chains, condoms, meat, blood, and a pig mask from their body. Photo by Tyler Jordan.

This comfort with flesh, blood, and pain may stem from living with endometriosis. Here, we may begin to question the label and application of auto-destructive art in Queer noise performers dealing with medical trauma, chronic pain, and illness. If we are only to see a performer as a body, then it is indeed auto-destructive: the body destroying the body. However, through affective physical and sonic coalescence, and careful staging of objects, Gyna and Rain ask the audience to view them and the performance through a different lens. Simultaneously self-objectifying (wearing a pig mask, covering themselves in meat, etc.) and fully in control of the visual, sonic, and sensory experience and flow, Gyna acknowledges the multiple narratives present in the attempt to free themselves from corporeal, social, and medical shackles in a similar fashion to Annie Sparkles' *Post-Porn Modernist* (1989), embodying the two extremes of the debate surrounding censorship of the body in performance (MacGregor, 2003). The display of these two opposing states of being and objectification give space for the audience to question their own connection to the performer and performance.

Gyna's use of animal parts and masks are rife with metaphorical meaning and symbolism. In *Caged Heat* (2012), Gyna collaborated with filmmaker and sound artist Frank Difficult to create a video performance contained within an animal crate, amplified via contact microphone and equipped inside with knives, handcuffs, and chains. Gyna's body is adorned with spots of golden reflective material, perhaps implying reptilian scales or diseased sores. Throughout the 14-minute performance, bangs against the cage act as the primary sonic element, often accompanied with either an eerie distorted drone produced from the resonant frequencies of the cage or vocal samples. The claustrophobia-inducing camera angle, positioned inside the cage, peers slightly downward toward Gyna, making the viewer question if they are inside the cage as well or if they are looking through the holes from the outside. Our comfortability with metaphor and metonym confronts our

ideas of property and superiority with Gyna positioning themselves as an animal-yet-human inferior subject (Kirkkopelto, 2017). In their live performance of *Upon the Cross, the Weight of Confession* (2013), Gyna breaks eggs against their groin amid a storm of noise as “a protest against the church's invasion of the female body”, accompanied by blistering noise from amplified objects and samples. Another work, *The Fat of the Land that Greases the Wheels*, sees the pig mask being specifically contextualized as a symbol of the authoritarian capitalist police state through the amplification and destruction of coins, bloodied bills, and defaced flags. Though fluid, the metaphors Gyna captures with animal objects and imagery always has potent connections to themes of power, sexuality, and trauma.

In addition to the political and corporeal, trauma can be explored in Queer noise music through interpersonal dynamics, highlighted in the performances of Niku Daruma, a harsh noise duo (Claire and Alice) from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. They explore the duality of love in all its forms, with the liner notes for their album *Love is an excessive thing* (2023) stating “[Niku Daruma] is a project that celebrates and wishes to spread light on the full extremity of love. This means understanding that sometimes what feels like love can hurt, can harm.” Love is positioned not against its “opposite”, but in unison with it as a single act of love-harm. This position, a state that simultaneously invites and enacts physical, verbal, and emotional dialogue, involves an acceptance that love manifests in overwhelming ways. Reminiscent of works by Marina Abramović and Ulay, including *AAA-AAA* (1978), *Rest Energy* (1980), and *The Lovers: The Great Wall Walk* (1988), Claire and Alice explore their relationship as motivic material across performances and recordings.

Their act unfolds across two distinct sections, often beginning with Claire producing fierce electronic noise with effects and instruments at the noise table alongside Alice's amplified high-

pitched shrieks and screams. In addition to noise generated from feedbacking effects and synths, crudely constructed batter objects with contact microphones, such as paddles, are used against the table, venue space, and themselves. Although the multitude of effect pedals used leads to low coalescence legibility for Claire's gestures, this gives Alice's screams room to pierce the foreground rhythmically in periodic repetition, usually cycling every few seconds through delays and loops alongside her repeated vocalizations. Alice traverses the room, ignoring the audience's self-assigned boundary line, growing more aggressive in both vocal performance and how she carries her body. This crescendo of aggression finalizes itself with an overpowering haunting, pushing her to charge towards Claire and decimate the table and equipment.

This terminal act generates a new scene, setting up the second section of their performance. With the electronics now unplugged, the screams are now left unamplified and barren against the lifeless speakers and rustling audience members, some scrambling to get away from the confrontation, some searching for a better view. The deadened thuds of fist against skin. The wet chafing of skin against floor. The aroused screams triggered by hair being pulled. Sounds of human conflict replace the wall of harsh electronic noise. This absence, measured only by volume, is surpassed by the reality of what the noise represented.

Love manifests here as a willingness to be open and a willingness to be touched, both physically and emotionally (Edelman, 2004). This act of touching also extends to the audience, a witnessing crowd, a similar approach to Rain and Gyna's display of medical equipment, viewed as a testimony for their banishment from the state of "hidden object". Here, the hidden object is the act of physical abuse and the bruises and lacerations that remain after the performance is over. Discourse around lesbian abuse can spawn a specter of inescapable queer trauma that reinforces the unspeakability and shame of queerness (Ovenden, 2011). By staging interpersonal conflict,

Claire and Alice free queer relationships from the shame of conflict and struggle, made possible through the support of the audience's attentive presence.

Their album *Love is an excessive thing* (2023) intersperses samples from interviews of Jacqueline Ades, a woman arrested in May 2018 on charges of threatening, stalking, and harassment towards her ex-boyfriend, with over 159,000 text messages sent, including pleas of reunion alongside threats of violence, torture, and murder. Screeching pitched electronics, shifting at times to metered loops though momentary interruptions of signal, create the formal structure of the five tracks. These electronics have an eerily similar timbre to Alice's screams, indistinguishable at times. The dichotomy between sections of their live performances is also represented on this album, shifting between having either the samples or electronics acting as the primary sonic element. Just like the volume-oriented first section is contrasted with a sonically calmer yet emotionally more intense second section, this album uses Jacqueline's retelling of events as a replacement for the live performance's second section, maintaining the division between volume and emotional intensity.

These three acts ask us to participate in the act of unsilencing trauma. Our power to witness what is normally institutionally private, whether through clinical practice, political power, or relational and familial structures, brings hidden objects into the public and visible sphere. Performers play with the legibility of coalescence between the physical gesture and sonic output to persuade the audience to draw their attention to specific objects and their associated meanings or symbolic themes. Traditional barriers between the audience and performer are naturally dissolved through social crisis, collaboration, and community, allowing the audience to be directly involved with aspects of object transfiguration and natural decay present in Queer noise music's connection to auto-destructive art. The close-knit nature of local communities surrounding these

artists reinforces the practice of performer-audience interaction and instills a language of bodily communication that rejects coercive elements that impede on personal boundaries.

These dynamics of DIY Queer noise communities are exacerbated by the performer's connection to the equipment and instruments at their disposal. Unlike the gear craze surrounding electronic music around the Cold War, and still present today in "synthfluencers" (coined by Max Alper of Peresky), Queer noise musicians are drawn to constructing crude instruments themselves, including noise boxes (a tin, or other similar metal, box fit with steel coils and other objects) and personal objects, such as Rain's mouth gag or Gyna's knife, attached with a pickup or contact microphone. These simple, semi-disposable objects invite a natural decay in performance heated by collision between performer and audience, a dynamic less likely to arise with multi-thousand-dollar instruments and synthesizers on stage assuming good intentions from attendees. Complacency of the crowd, highlighted in acts such as Con-Dom, now appears to be a result of the performer and not the crowd itself. This is not to speak ill of artists that use expensive equipment, but only to acknowledge the agency of the audience, who have a compassion for the financial stability of artists in underground music. Thus, the staging of economics in performance matters if these performer-audience dynamics wish to be explored in Queer noise music.

Comparing Queer noise artists in the United States to English power electronics, Japanese noise music, and auto-destructive visual and performance art allows us to begin to define its characteristics in live performance. The history of electronic music practice has created absences in queer voices that is now being addressed, unsilencing personal and historical trauma. The act of freeing noise from its origins of modernism, consumerist industry, and war is accelerated through the staging of queer screams and howls against a world built on silencing such voices.

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