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Sonic Directions to the Urban Student: Lyotard, the Megalopolis, and Not Listening as Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to research on Lyotard and sounds by taking up the urban as an ensemble that is immediately a matter of sound and education, approaching pedagogy not as a tactic but as a sonic mode of and relation to thought. It begins by exploring the sounding state of the contemporary urban environment as it's organised around the production and circulation of information and knowledge. Hearing and listening in this urban setting are privatised such that the possibility of sonic interruptions is foreclosed. The article turns next to Jean-François Lyotard's writing on the urban, which positions urbanism as a system that demands exchange and communication and as a social form that doesn't avoid or repress interruptions, but rather consumes and absorbs them as sources of new accumulation. Connecting Lyotard's urbanism with his work on writing and sound, the article then articulates three forms of sonic pedagogy: hearing, listening, and not listening. In this pedagogical schema, the primary problem of the urban today is that hearing and listening dominate at the expense of not listening. This configuration positions students as deficient adults who must grow up as quickly as possible, thereby depriving the student of the ability to be and remain a student. The sonic pedagogies developed in the article, then, have the potential to resist the privatising listening practices of the urban that compel opacity into transparency and to potentially reconfigure the urban around exposure to thought and childhood.

KEYWORDS

Lyotard; urbanism;
pedagogy; interruption;
childhood; stupidity; timbre

The urban is more than a particular built form or spatial arrangement. It's an ensemble of social relations, of everyday lives and encounters, of competing and complementary systems of power. This ensemble is sonic, bristling with sounds and reverberations at and between every level. And it's educational too, not just because we learn particular things in and from the ensemble, but because the ensemble itself is a work in the making, a process that necessarily involves thinking and testing, writing and studying, teaching and learning. Within the transformations of political economy over the past few decades and the rise of the contemporary knowledge economy in particular, the urban ensemble and its sonic and pedagogical components are structured according to the logic of neoliberal capitalism. Through state and private management and planning,

‘urban life is now reducible to endless indexes calculated by professional experts, consultants and tech companies’ (Merrifield 2017, 80). Unlike the industrial urbanism of the mid-twentieth century, however, the urban is no longer imagined as stagnant, but as vibrant and dynamic, and we don’t need top-down state planning but bottom-up entrepreneurial creativity. When knowledge is the motor of capitalist urban development, there can never be too much of it. To be sure, knowledge has always been central to economic relations. What is distinctive about the contemporary knowledge economy is that the role and status of knowledge—including the conditions and results of its production, distribution, and utilisation—have increasingly taken on a *determinant* function in economic, social, and political development (Ford 2022).

Education on this reading is no longer about the transmission, but the *endless generation* of knowledge. The dynamism of the urban needs constant regeneration through creativity and expressivity. This generation, however, is only ‘imagined as a means of competitive self-actualisation and social production of innovative capacities directed toward entrepreneurial calculation’ (Means 2019, 208). Education, in other words, is reduced to the acquisition of transferable skills, knowledge, dispositions, habits, and so forth for the ceaseless development of human knowledge capital. Music education, if it exists at all, is valued not for its inherent pedagogical properties but for its *external* benefits; because it will increase test scores or produce better, more critical, creative, and flexible workers for the knowledge economy (Louth 2020). In this article, I take up the question of the urban as one that is immediately a matter of sound and education, approaching pedagogy as a sonic mode of and relation to thought. Pedagogy, in other words, isn’t a matter of content or the tactics and strategies of delivering or producing content, but a *relation* to reverberating thought, an argument I make primarily through the work of Jean-François Lyotard. While there are rich resources for sonic urbanism and studies of city sounds (e.g. Krims 2007; LaBelle 2010), Lyotard’s urbanism remains, with a few exceptions (e.g. Barth 1996; Ford 2019; Grebowicz 2013), a relatively neglected resource in general and for theorising sonic pedagogies of the urban in particular.

On one hand, as a name, Lyotard is widely and easily recognisable across broad swaths of contemporary research. The style and body of thought to what the name might refer, on the other hand, remains quite limited in terms of depth and breadth. After the swarms of writing on and around the ‘postmodern’ debates in the 1990s, Lyotard’s name sedimented into a few stagnant concepts, which are generally either written off or engaged quickly in reference to other thinkers and concepts. In respect to research on musical aesthetics, Trent Leipert (2012) notes that this is due not only to the relatively few texts of his that directly engage music, but also to their ambiguous style (lack of clarity), level of abstraction (lack of specificity), and references to Lyotard’s other concepts (lack of context). Threading together and contextualising several fragments of Lyotard’s musical thought through a discussion on affect, Leipert (436) helpfully presents Lyotard’s interest in music along the lines of temporality, technology, and phrasing to suggest that ‘Lyotard perhaps tries to establish a zone of listening ... that hovers between articulation and affect, within the ‘tension between the acts or gestures of attempted phrasing and those of listening to nuance and of being affected by sound’.

Leipert ends the article with a paragraph on Lyotard’s essay, ‘The Zone’, which introduces the relationship between sound and spatial organisation. I pick up where Leipert

leaves off, attending to three sonic dynamics of our current urban form, which Lyotard terms the megalopolis. These dynamics, I contend, are pedagogical in that they each enact distinct relationships to childhood and thought and different conceptions of being a student. I draw these by expanding from a text in which Lyotard, tongue-in-cheek, provides ‘directions to servants’, demarcating three forms of sonic writing: *hearing*, *listening*, and *not listening*. These forms respectively correspond with information, knowledge, and thought, and while all of this is explained more later, for now, I’ll briefly say that information is facts, knowledge is the meaning of facts, and thought is an opaque realm beyond cognition.

By placing these sonic pedagogies in conversation with Lyotard’s concept of the megalopolis, his take on sound, and other scholars who theorise urban sounding environments, I argue that the primary problem with the megalopolis is that it privileges hearing and listening at the expense of not listening, positioning noisy timbres as that which must be analysed and understood, as interruptions that must be incorporated. The child is thus positioned as a being that must grow up, and the student as one who must graduate. The sonic pedagogies offered in the article, then, have the potential to resist the domination of the megalopolis and potentially reorganise the urban not around the production and exchange of information and knowledge, but around an exposure to the noisy matter of thought.

Overhearing—or Not—in the Urban

The urban is, generally speaking, loud and busy. The dense and expansive chatter and clamour of gathering and circulating pedestrians, cars, buses, trucks, and bikes, of construction, repairs, and demolitions, of music from street performers and cell phones, are non-stop. Our exposure to the multitudes of sounds is part of what energising the urban, forcing encounters with differences, others, strangers that can compel attention and distraction. Brandon LaBelle (2018) characterises the sonic agency operative in urban environments within the contemporary knowledge economy that’s structured through digital capitalism and its networks as ‘the overheard’. Of course, there is always more to hear than what is heard, always something else between the audible I can process and the inaudible that constitutes the atmosphere of hearing. In the age of networks, the contours of sound shift in a number of constitutive ways. The growing import of intellectual, cognitive, and affective labour redefines ‘what constitutes matter by relating it increasingly to modes of “intelligence” and “agency” that no longer necessarily require organic bodies’ (63). The subject is enmeshed within expansive networks that extend and reframe our mode of attending to sounds. We have a heightened exposure to the sounds of unseen and unknowable others while we ourselves are compelled to participate in networked communications that also amplify the quantity of sounds in circulation. There is so much more chatter, so many more opportunities to overhear and be overheard.

To overhear is to be interrupted by ‘a type of noise: with what may form into something, but not yet’ (67). The overheard, as an interruption, is the emergence of a potential. There is something above or below the audible, and I might strain to tune it out or tune it in. I might raise my voice or move away from it, or I might respond by joining a new conversation, recall it later, try to piece it together, or wonder after it. Urban noise fosters the potential to ‘challenge the tonalities of social community, but in doing so

may equally enrich the vitality of its shape and form', supporting 'a dynamics of alterity and social tolerance' (72). We might desire or recoil from overhearing and from being overheard as well. In the age of digital networks, we extend ourselves by commenting, liking, reposting, but we also experience enhanced vulnerabilities by the opportunities for our own soundings to be snatched and appropriated. Thus, while sound is inherently fleeting and mobile as it comes and goes, is necessarily intimate as it enters into me, while it's unstable, always more and less than what I think I hear, it doesn't 'necessarily escape from ordering principles, algorithmic does, and socio-technical structures inherent to global culture' (64). In networked capitalism, this becomes ever more likely, as so many modes of communication are structured through corporate and state platforms that capture, commodify, and surveil our sound.

Between these alternatives, as one moves throughout the urban one might be more likely to be overheard by capital and the state than to be interrupted by overhearing a stranger. Sound is a necessarily relational movement of vibrations of air that can connect and change us; the vibrations literally enter into us. But what sounds enter, how they enter, how they're received, and for what purposes is another question, one that Mack Hagood (2019) helps explain in his study of orphic media devices, which give individuals the means to regulate and personalise the sounding environment and the resonances we receive, our exposure to interruptions. They function to 'silence a blaring contradiction in our liberal, capitalist, and increasingly "infocentric" society, which generates the imperative for a focused, free, and disembodied subject while also complicating the environmental conditions that have always negated the possibility of such a subject' (10). They're a 'sonic fix' to liberal capitalism in that they take a systemic social problem (sound) and turn it into an individual one that's resolved through market exchange. Instead of attributing the sounds of traffic to the capitalist configuration of time and space, I blame the individual drivers. Instead of asking whether or not society should be organised in such a way that requires me I (or my upstairs neighbours) to be plugged into production and consumption all day and night, I purchase a white noise machine so I can have a more productive sleep, and therefore have a more productive and consumptive day tomorrow.

Previous orphic media were passive in that they blocked out sound. This changed with the emergence of the knowledge economy and the generalised urbanisation that followed the end of World War II. With the increased circulation of communication 'attention came even more under siege', and to deal with this in accordance with liberal capitalism, orphic media 'emerged that *actively* mobilised the affective potentials of vibration—not merely buffering subjects, but instead fighting sound with sound' (16). Thus, while orphic media include a range of devices from hearing aids and ear plugs to white noise apps and earbuds, perhaps the most exemplary form is noise-canceling headphones. First developed and marketed by Bose, these devices take headphones and 'add tiny microphones and signal processing to produce an out-of-phase copy of the resonating environment in an attempt to negate its phenomenological existence' (178). The idea first came to Bose's founder, Dr. Amar Gopal Bose, as he was trying to listen to music on a flight, and their first marketing target was for air travel. They came from the context of 'the babel of airport throngs and the roar of the jet engine', which 'exemplify the noise generated in the United States where space is reconfigured to maximize speed and circulation' (178–179). They create a kind of individual oasis, reinforcing

the subject as autonomous, rational, and in control, and position the free market as the best way for the individual to achieve the means to be such a subject. Resonances are remediated into neutrality to produce an abstract sonic space.

Hagood's point isn't to unilaterally disparage orphic media or their users and inventors, for this would also be the individualisation of a systemic issue. The problem is that orphic media 'separates us from things—and people—before we have a chance to know whether or not we want them', and so 'the cultural value of circulation suppresses the cultural value of embodied copresence' (196). This doesn't mean that one must *always* be open, as if that were even possible or desirable, and as if there weren't political dynamics involved. As a pointed example, he highlights the urban context in which Dr. Bose first started tinkering with sound. As a child, Bose retreated to the basement to work with sound to escape from the racism he suffered on the streets of Philadelphia. Similarly, the Beats by Dr. Dre headphone advertisement campaign, 'Hear What You Want', features Black athletes using noise-cancelling headphones to block out the jeers and taunts of mostly white fans. Tuning out racist interruptions is qualitatively different from tuning out the possibility of a stranger's interruptions. Yet even in these two instances, the social and systemic sonic racism is 'addressed' or, more accurately, reinforced by capital through *individual* and commodified solutions, leaving the systems of white supremacy and capitalism intact.

In our current setting, orphic media fundamentally change our relationship to and understanding of the world, training our ears to listen for what we want and, therefore, what we already know. This is true even in cases when music and listening are shared in urban spaces. When cell phones become a primary means of listening in urban environments, allowing them to link up with networks, one can, for example, access other musical playlists through a variety of platforms that tag musical and locational data, so one can 'explore the most commonly listened-to-music within different cities and districts of cities' (Watson and Drakeford-Allen 2017, 1041). Even though one can then connect with others and share reverberations, this is still a matter of the individual's choice, reinforcing one's ability to control their sonic surround. And, of course, these opportunities are still facilitated by capital and the state.

Instead of 'hearing what we want', Hagood (2019, 233) says, we should be '*wanting what we hear*'. In the digitally-networked world, orphic media function to preclude our ability to listen for the interruptions of urban noise, those sonic forces that can, as LaBelle (2018, 87) suggests, arouse a new kind of listening 'that enables gestures of caring beyond the familiar', one that can form 'the basis for uncertain practices' by giving 'resonance to voices unsited and unhomed by the political economies of attention and mediation'. These calls and suggestions pose unexamined educational questions in need of exploration. This is not a matter of *what* we need to learn or know in order to enact new forms of sonic engagement and produce different conditions of the urban; it is a matter of *how* we can do so. To put it differently, pedagogy here is not a matter of curricular content but of educational relationships to sound and the interruptions of the urban. If there is something sonically limiting and oppressive about the contemporary urban soundscape, then we need to think through the political stakes of pedagogical forms. It's here that Lyotard can offer important provocations, questions, and even *directions*. This might seem unorthodox, given that many radical forms of education shy away from issuing directions and from the authority of the teacher, but without such an

intervention the dominant political structures are merely reinforced (Ford 2017). Before developing proposals for these sonic pedagogies, however, I want to turn to Lyotard in order to consider the role of information and knowledge in the production of the urban and its (in)audible surround.

Information, Knowledge, and the Noise of the Megalopolis

The abstract sonic space of the city is produced by and productive of a political economy of information and knowledge, which epistemologically and ontologically re-organises subjectivity and the social such that, as I argue below, thought and thinking are reduced to information and knowledge. One way to approach the knowledge-based capitalist urban is by its constant problematic of noise. At the most general level, ‘a noise is a resonance that interferes with the audition of a message in the process of emission’ (Attali 1985, 26). Noise is an interruption in a sounding order, an excess that disturbs and a violence that threatens to overturn. As both its legitimation and potential source of destruction, noise is a foundational element and a constant object of attention for any order. In a system that’s based on the production and circulation of information and knowledge, noise is any threat to the successful transmission of either.

One mechanism and political-economic context through which this conception of noise is materialised and propagated is in the realm of telecommunications. Hagood (2019) cites AT&T’s development of long-distance telecommunications technologies as an example. The longer the distance a message travels the greater its vulnerability is to noise. To reduce the possibility of interrupting resonances, AT&T digitally condensed ‘messages into a binary code that eliminated all surplus, leaving only the elements necessary to decompress the full message at the output end’ (156–157). The use of information technologies like this train us to listen for signals and codes and to turn away from noisy interruptions in an effort to eliminate them. Even for Jacques Attali, ‘the key to social liberation ... resides in the liberation of information’, and the problem with capitalism is that it *inhibits* the production of knowledge (Drott 2015, 734). Noise is not inherently resistant or even inherently political. Rather than a binary juxtaposition, there’s a dialectic between noise and sound, a relation that itself is unstable and uncertain, as the absence of such a dialectic would paradoxically produce noise as order. As Stephen Kennedy (2018, 77) points out in *Future Sounds*, Attali’s conception of music as ‘noise-free information’ assumes that music is ‘an *ordering of* ‘a uniform or general category’ rather than something ‘far more nuanced’. Unlike music, Kennedy claims, noise is independent of perception and doesn’t *mean* or *signify* anything. The pedagogical problematic, as we’ll see soon, concerns our relation to noise.

Lyotard is particularly helpful for more deeply considering the political struggle over sound and noise in the contemporary urban setting as the struggle relates to thought because it takes on an urban and pedagogical form. This spatial struggle over the organisation of life and the process of urbanism is waged precisely around the figures of childhood, thought, and sound. In his later works, Lyotard identified a new prevailing urban system that he termed the megalopolis, which has its origins in the city and the town-country relationship and resulted in part from the expansion of the city. This augmentation didn’t so much dominate other spatial forms but incorporated them into its expansive logic, whereby the megalopolis becomes a kind of indeterminate zone that

‘does not have an exterior and an interior, being both one and the other together’ (Lyotard 1997, 24).

In one paper, he probes the contours of the megalopolis in relation to what it suppressed, the *domus*. The *domus*, for Lyotard (1991, 191–192), is a form of domestic community or common, the household, or a form of ‘space, time and body under the regime (of) nature’. Such a regime for Lyotard, to be clear, isn’t an idyllic social form in harmony with the natural world. Instead, it’s a form of social organisation in which there’s a sense of belonging and in which exclusions aren’t necessary. Here, language, life, and belonging are rhythmical and progressive, meaning they are both developmental and repetitive. It’s a rhythm of constant and spontaneous work at the service of nature. The child is one such form of rhythm, work, and the natural:

Within the domestic rhythm, it is the moment, the suspension of beginning again, the seed. It is what will have been. It is the surprise, the story starting over again. Speechless, *infans*, it will babble, speak, tell stories, will have told stories, will have stories told about it, will have had stories told about it. (193)

Under the *domus*, the child is a fresh beginning that ensures continuity and repetition, that which maintains coherence through the possibility of beginning again. At the same time, and because of this, the child enacts the interruptions and excesses of the *domus*. There can be no domestic community without something to domesticate. The domestic rhythm, in other words, doesn’t suture or heal interruptions, but ‘*scars over*’ them (192). Neither suppressed nor absorbed, noise is part of the natural realm in which humans produce their domiciles.

Lyotard says he can only write about the *domus* from within the megalopolis, an urban form of community that’s not based on a relation to nature but to exchange. There’s no more memory, narrative, or rhythm, just databanks and algorithms. The megalopolis, in other words, is the geographic manifestation of what he terms ‘the system’, which operates according to the logic of performativity where, driven by the demand to maximise the efficiency of inputs and outputs, ‘everyone seeks and will find as best s/he can the information needed to make a living, which makes no sense’ (194). This is the setting in which we turn away from the overheard to optimise our sonic environment. Even more importantly, however, it’s a setting that transforms the opacity of the overheard into transparent bits of data.

The megalopolis has replaced the order of the *domus*, broken apart its rhythmic and spatial belonging to introduce an order of citizenship, communication, and commerce. In the place of an order subjected to the mystery of nature, it installs a democratic and capitalist order based on reason, rationality, communication, and exchange. It prohibits mystery and interruption through incorporation and development. Everything can and must be brought within its structure. Noise isn’t suppressed or eliminated but harnessed and absorbed into circuits of exchange. Thus, we can understand noise-cancelling headphones as the transformation of noise into forms of quiet or recognisable forms of sound that allow for productivity and exchange. Moreover, noise isn’t cancelled or eliminated but constantly transformed into information. Accordingly, it’s not so much that noise is a threat to the transmission of information or the order of the megalopolis, but that noise is a never-ending *source* of information. This is similar to the ‘platform urbanism’ that Alexander Means (2019, 210) theorises, in which ‘every interaction

becomes a potential data point to be predicted, tracked, processed, and optimized through algorithms, data analytics, mobile apps, and embedded sensors'. Everything *must be* measured, quantified, and calculated, for only then can it be exchanged. Noise, as uncalculated disorder, is positioned as the potential for new calculations, new exchanges. Noise isn't a threat to be eliminated but a resource to be put to work. Consider how, for example, over the last several decades of financialisation, stock traders have approached financial assets as noise that they can bet on or against because through trading the noise can relay information about prices and values (Knouf 2016). Those who valorise noise as the source of new musical forms or soundscapes miss one of Lyotard's central insights: the megalopolis thrives precisely on the mining of noise for innovative and creative productions.

The spokespeople of the megalopolis tell us that this is progress and justice. By making everything transparent and communicable, after all, we can resolve all problems, address all wrongs, repair all divisions by bringing them into the open. Such inclusion, however, ultimately works to transform the untameable interruptions that pervaded the *domus*: 'What domesticity regulated—savagery—it demanded. It had to have its off-stage within itself' (Lyotard 1991, 201). In other words, the *domus* accepts the secret and opaque and is *subjected to* the savage, or uncontrollable and violent ruptures. Interruptions haunt the *domus* as unavoidable disruptions, while the megalopolis consumes interruptions through absorption. The consumption of interruptions is fundamental to the megalopolis' development: 'Secrets must be put into circuits, writings programmed, tragedies transcribed into bits of information ... The secret is capitalised swiftly and efficiently'. There is no service to mystery, no submission to the untameable.

When Lyotard says he can only write about the *domus* from within the megalopolis, it's not because it was a previous, empirically definable stage of history that demands a distance for comprehension. He doubts it ever actually existed as a form of community. The *domus* is not like the 'natural' soundscapes that Murray Schafer (1977, 185) romanticises against the noises that 'whirl in the hearts of our cities day and night', turning the urban into a 'neighborhood Blitzkrieg'. Urban noise is a problem resulting from the lack of agreement about what noise is, or 'as to which sounds constitute *unwanted interruptions*' (183, emphasis added). For Lyotard (1991, 197), the *domus* concerns the nature of thought and infancy and it persists within the megalopolis as the force of impossibility, which 'is not only the opposite of *possible*, it is a case of it, the *zero* case' of possibility'. The *zero* case of possibility is precisely the realm of thought, which Lyotard likens to several pedagogical figures: childhood, thinking, writing, and reading. The *domus* exists as 'the child whose awakening displaces it to the future horizon of his thoughts and writing, to a coming which will always have to be deferred' (201). For Lyotard, childhood is more than a beginning and passing stage of development, but a recurrent state that survives, as Geoffrey Bennington (2005, 7) writes, 'in the sense both that it survives biological childhood, and that it is nothing other than biological childhood surviving or outliving *itself*'. Childhood is when the human is in-human, when it is radically dependent on others yet without the capacity or means to recognise or respond to this dependency.

The child can't participate in the debate, dialogue, reason, or exchange. The child is stupefied, unable to account for or process and response to what's happening, to assign it a form or accord it a representation. The child is, in short, stupid and, as

such, is a student. Indeed, both words share the same root: *student* and *stupid*. Giorgio Agamben (1996, 64) marks the similarity: ‘those who study are in the situation of people who have received a shock and are stupefied by what has struck them, unable to grasp it and at the same time powerless to leave hold’. The megalopolis and the knowledge economy can’t tolerate such infancy precisely because it can’t produce knowledge or value; it remains inarticulable and, in Kennedy’s (2018, 148) words, a challenge to ‘our ability to make sense of the world’. The student of noise doesn’t graduate, doesn’t mine noise for information; they instead ‘study without an end, plan without a pause, rebel without a policy’ (Harney and Moten 2013, 67).

Sonic Pedagogies in the Megalopolis

Childhood is an ever-present potentiality of zero in which external matter acts and attracts in unintelligible ways. In his writing on the megalopolis, Lyotard connects childhood to literacy. It is only because of the surplus and excess that one reads and writes. After all, if everything was intelligible there would be no need to write or to read, just as if there were nothing wild and savage there would be no need for domestication. Childhood is, in this way, a recurrent state of beginning again from zero that ‘offers itself only at the end of its inscription, by the writing of the remembrance, in its working-out. Always to be reread, redone’ (Lyotard 1991, 198). This is an educational state in which thinking is unexchangeable because it remains unintelligible, unfinished, subject to interruptions. Elsewhere, Lyotard proposes what I take as a schema of sonic pedagogical forms that revolve precisely around their relation to thought, the *domus*, and the megalopolis.

In a short foreword to a collection of his works, which later appeared in *Postmodern Fables*, Lyotard (1997) riffs on an unfinished Jonathan Swift work, ‘Directions to Servants’, and reflects on the tasks of composition: writing, reading, and translating. He introduces the topic by way of, first, a sonic differentiation between hearing and listening. ‘You hear yourself write, obviously. Even if you try not to listen to yourself’ (149). When you hear yourself write, he says, ‘you hear only something that has to be written’ and so you are confident in the writing, and ‘ahead of the writing’ (150). Hearing writing, then, is a transparent communication between sound and text and between meaning and representation. There are other times that you listen while writing when you aren’t confident in writing. You’re uncertain, and the hesitation can lead in two directions. On one hand, you might ‘strap it down, make it severe, classical, academic’, you argue your points against another. On the other hand, you might neglect the writing. Lyotard defends this neglect, which he might feel compelled to because of the attacks on the style of French writing at the time. Hesitated writing that leads to neglect ‘signals that you are not quite sure of the heading, that you are a little or very lost, that you are afraid, that you don’t feel you have enough force to think’.

He introduces yet another sonic mode of writing, of *not* listening while writing. This isn’t a total absence of the sonic, as if one could even imagine existence without vibration. It might be that you aren’t listening *to* the writing, but open to something else entirely, beyond reading and thinking through words. ‘You lend an ear only to what comes along’ (150). In typical fashion, now that Lyotard has arrived at what he’s most interested in, he moves on from the audible to focus on reading and writing. Before he does so, however,

he acknowledges that one could confuse this mode of sonic writing with another kind of confidence that's not attached to thought but to destiny: 'You act as if you were destined only for the most noble works of thought. You leave to servants the task of making order out of what just thought itself up, ahead of the line of writing' (150–151). This confidence in destiny is a harm insofar as it divorces the writer from the obligation of reading and re-reading the work. By leaving these tasks to servants who are *others*, the writer isn't compelled to wrestle with thought. The temptation here results from the knowledge that reading the words written while not listening is impossible, 'a waste of time', that one 'will never succeed in making it better. Only in making it other, again' (155–156).

We can take these distinctions as different relations to thought with different temporalities. Hearing writing is a correspondence to formulations, or a progressive harmonisation between thought and its representation. Listening to writing is an interruption in the harmony, one that desynchronises thought from its articulation. The relationship between thought and articulation is suspended, ambiguous, and unsettled. Not listening to writing is a sonic openness to variegated temporalities, or an obedience to thought beyond representation or form, to thought as *matter* or timbre. Meaning is absent and without any relation to the writing or intentionality of the subject. This is the kind of sonic writing that Lyotard was after, I think when he earlier stated that childhood is like a writing that is 'always to be reread, redone' (Lyotard 1991, 198). It's never finished because it's untameable; the infancy of the *domus* persists even in the knowledge economy and its urban form of the megalopolis. If listening is, as François Bonnot (2016, 255) would have it, an 'instrument for the capture of the sonorous sensible', not listening would be the capture of the subject by sonorous matter.

The problem with the megalopolis, then, is that it is organised solely around the sonic logics of hearing and listening. There is only information to be extracted and exchanged, knowledge to be produced for circulation. You can hesitate, yes, as long as you produce something intelligible. There isn't an ontic hierarchy of values within the three modes of sonic writing, however; it's not as if hearing and listening must be resisted or annihilated. In fact, the three modes might be heterogeneously blocked together. Like childhood, thought is something that's recurrent, that's within and beyond formulation: here, there, and in between. But it is through not listening that childhood is birthed. The child, after all, doesn't hear words but noise. The words are still there of course, but they are unrecognisable, indeterminable, without any links or chains between them. They are words as not-words, uncapturable timbres.

It might be helpful at this point to give a more concrete example of not listening, one that might resonate with the reader of these words. I think that this form of sonic writing is what John Biguenet (2015) is after when he discusses silent reading. The silence here refers not to the audible surround at first, but to the self. To read, he says, requires 'a fitful silencing of the self, at least when the self is able to accept silence' (59). It's hard to do, and so it happens like a spasm. Living in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, Biguenet couldn't read any more. He speculates that this due to the weight of his worries, how his self was so decomposed that he didn't have one to surrender. The question of the state of surrender is ambiguous here. At one point, he defines it as 'is an act of hospitality toward another's mind, in which we silence our voice in courtesy to the voice of another's consciousness' (56), and so it seems as if there are two definable subjects at play. Yet he makes a distinction between skimming and reading, drawing on neuroscience research

findings to claim that silent reading is, for many people, *auditory*, as we hear our own voice resonating in our bodies. If this is the case, then the silent reading he proposes is indeed a childish activity in which matter passes through the body, where the subject is desubjectified even and as its 'inner voice' extends. On my reading, silent reading is a form of not listening to the writing, but instead lending an ear—and a voice—to sonorous matter. It can only come *through* writing and reading, not as a guarantee but as possibility for the zero case of childhood.

Students as the Children of Sonic Thought and Timbre

Thought, then, is outside of form and content, and yet it can't appear to us except through both. Along these lines, thought operates like timbre, which we could figure as a sonic appearance of thought. Sound is sonorous matter, ephemeral vibrations that can be composed and identified in various forms. As form, sound is placed under cognition, which accords matter with concepts so that, for example, different rates of vibration are recognised as and identified with different pitches. Sonorous form is in the realm of ideas and knowledge, but sonorous matter is in the realm of thought. Yet form and matter aren't antipodes if we consider timbre, or what Lyotard (1991, 155) prefers to call 'the nuance of a sound or a set of sounds'. Nuance is sonorous matter breaking through and withdrawing from form, a singularity that's unexpected and uncalculated. It's the eruption of the immeasurable from within measure, one that overwhelms and undoes the human subject, returning it to a state of childhood. As matter erupting from within form, nuance deprives the subject of the ability to synthesise matter and concept because the 'sonorous matter which *is* this nuance is there only to the extent that, then and there, the subject is not there' (157). Timbre is an unrepresentable vector of desubjectification through which the subject is disordered or disseised. We might say that the nuance of music is the sonorous childhood of the subject, as the subject experiencing nuance yields to the matter passing through it, matter that decomposes the subject into a non-subject. While subject with the capacity to synthesise can't access it, nuance still leaves its traces. This is what Lyotard says that writing seeks: what isn't present, what isn't nameable; in short, *thought*.

Lyotard draws out the relationship in a discussion of rehearsal and repetition. Every rehearsal is a repetition, but a repetition with a difference, with a singularity. Those rehearsing 'cannot manage to control the timbre or the nuance which will take place, singularly, on the night of the concert' (155). The singularity can't be repeated because of its relationship with the subject. There is no subject with taste or interest to classify or evaluate the passing charge. Repetition is always singular. As matter without form, nuance can't be subjected to cognition or recall, and therefore, to duplication. At the same time, there is no access to pure matter without form. By definition, nuance requires concrete context, it simply can't appear without form. Moreover, the interactions of forms can birth nuance, as nuance is 'what makes the difference between the note on the piano and the same note on the flute, and thus what also defer the identification of that note' (140). Yet timbre itself, as Anthony Gritten (2017, 553) adds, 'is unarticulated ... it opens up itself to a sound object, but disappears from the scene as soon as the ears begin to construct the sound object *qua* object'. Timbre, we might say, comes while listening to writing, inhabits listening to writing, and leaves while hearing writing.

Listening for timbre is a duty, ‘the sense of obligation, a passivity I should like to translate as *possibility*’ (Lyotard 1991, 178). Passivity requires and maintains adulthood. The passive subject can understand and articulate the force, and can decide to respond or not. Passibility is the experience of childhood. The passing force disables the faculties such that there isn’t determination or judgment involved, and so childhood isn’t a choice but an obligation. The writer, reader, and translator, Lyotard (1997, 160–161) says, is a servant of childhood; not a servant of the self, an other, or a particular order, tradition, or discipline, but a servant to ‘the solidarity of words among themselves, in their civil and disorganised disobedience’. To write and to think is to serve the *matter of words* through the different sonic modes of hearing, listening, and not listening. Words are more than signs that refer to something outside of language. Words are matter themselves, object compositions of lines that extend outward beyond form and content.

Each form of sonic writing entails a certain pedagogical relation between the student—as a student of sounds—and thought with distinct relationships to the megalopolis. It is important that the student, again, is necessarily infantile, which not a biological state but a perpetual inhumanity within the human, one that Lyotard’s urbanism seeks to defend against the circuits of the megalopolis. When we hear writing, we’re not students who are stupefied by opacity but adults who are in synch with the meaning of words, tuned into the megalopolis. When we listen to writing, we hesitate between words and meaning, cleaving an opening between the system and thought, in between childhood and adulthood. When we don’t listen to writing, we encounter words as lines out of order. The charge of the matter leads us beyond the megalopolis and into thought, as words are decomposed, ripped to shreds’ that ‘are like the childhood given back to them after they have pretended to obey, to be grown up’ (161). As he writes at the end of his foreword, ‘You cannot hear a thought that comes along if you don’t listen to this noise, the noise from which thought comes and to which it goes, out of which it emerges and where it tries to enter’ (162). Hearing writing, as the instantaneous transmission of meaning in which there’s a direct correspondence between the sound of words and their meaning, is akin to information. Knowledge, however, comes from the rift between sound and meaning instituted by listening. Not listening allows the noise to pass through, and thus gives one access to the realm of thought, the experience of charged matter *as* matter. Not listening is, as such, is a kind of stupid listening that doesn’t subject sonorous matter to cognition.

At this point, we can more succinctly approach the relationship between composition and thought in the megalopolis. Through its flexibility and openness, the megalopolis demands the new, the different, the opaque, the secret, and requires their transformation into recognisable forms for understanding through hearing and listening. There is an excess of communication, dialogue, deliberation; there can never be too much. Nuance and timbre are destroyed not by repression but by this demand for articulation, which is far more efficient. ‘Timbre’, Lyotard (1991, 203) says, ‘will get analysed, its elements will be put into a memory, it will be reproduced at will, it may come in useful’. Whereas the *domus* accommodates timbre, the megalopolis incorporates it, and through this relationship to timbre, it positions hearing as the dominant sonic pedagogy. Thus, in the megalopolis, the threat is not so much from the state or corporation’s surveillance and capture of sound, but from the impulse to transcribe and articulate them in the first place. As Dylan Robinson (2020, 38) notes in his critique of ‘hungry listening’,

‘the listening continuum has historically been consigned to a framework wherein one is listening well if one is able to capture the content of what is spoken, or the “fact” of musical form and structure’. In the megalopolis, each interruption is an invitation to new regulations, each criticism a call for new reconciliations.

Thought and writing, then, can no longer appeal to the exposition and critique of oppositional concepts and political programmes that would erect a new form of community. This would remain at the level of information and knowledge, hearing and listening for the megalopolis to absorb. Lyotard thus helps us appreciate how Schafer’s (1977, 207) sonic pedagogy is precisely the educational logic of the megalopolis insofar as it seeks to produce a soundscape free of ‘unwanted interruptions’ and, insofar as interruptions are *by definition* unpredictable, free of any interruptions at all, free of noise. ‘For noise represents’, he writes, ‘escaped energy. The perfect machine would be a silent machine: all energy used efficiently’. The most efficient machine is ‘the human anatomy’, which serves as his ‘model in terms of engineering perfection’ (207). Elsewhere, he presents a scaffolded curriculum that builds towards increasingly efficient listening (Schafer 1992). Instead of listening better through ‘*ear cleaning*’, Lyotard (1997, 31) directs us towards ‘a squint-eyed look at the visible, divergent enough to glimpse what is not visible there’, towards ‘an ear deaf enough not to be seduced by the melody and harmony of forms, but fine enough to take in pitch and nuance’. This is a paradoxical order from the untameable insofar as the subject must *train* for passibility, but this is why sonic pedagogy for the *domus* within the megalopolis must entail hearing, listening, and, most importantly, not listening to the what’s written, read, or played. One can only receive thought from the form and content that thought exceeds and from which it escapes: ‘We will never *know* what is called knowledge’ (32). We remain stupid, and it is precisely through a state of stupidity that we encounter the secret and receive the force of the untameable. Stupidity allows the interruption to *remain* an interruption, for childhood to endure and resist the demands of the megalopolis.

For Noisy Reading

The student in the megalopolis is viewed as a deficient adult, one who, through education, must grow up as quickly as possible. Through this lens, we can better understand the rise of high-stakes standardised testing regimes and their extension into even elementary and pre-schools. Tests progressively incorporate the child as an adult, a potentiality as an actuality, a zero point of impossibility as a point of possibility, a noise as a bit of information. We might even reformulate the megalopolis’ approach to the untameable more precisely. By neglecting the pedagogy of not listening, the megalopolis incorporates the untameable through development, transforming the student into a productive citizen in the megalopolis, one who analyses noisy timbres, transposing them into information and knowledge, as new values for accumulation.

Instead, sonic pedagogies for thought call on timbre to produce students as stupid, as infants devoid of developmental trajectories. By divorcing the subject from the sonic environment and reaffirming the illusion of control, forms of sound education that reduce noise to knowledge inhibit our exposure to such stupidity by reducing our susceptibility to the overheard timbre, preventing it from forcing an interruption on the path to graduation. Yet the pressure of stupefaction can’t come from mere passivity. Stupidity,

as Lyotard (1991, 202) puts it, is ‘a no-saying amid the always already said’. It requires an openness that one prepares for and encounters through composition. Instead of Biguenet’s silent reading, then, we might practice noisy reading, and we might even practice it with our noise-cancelling headphones on. Here, we try *not* to interpret the words, *not* to relate it to ourselves or extend it into new areas, *not* to accord noise a form for representation or understanding. Instead, we encounter the words as nonsense, as disordered and charged lines in order to receive the jolt of stupefaction from the noise that is without representation, meaning, subject, or object. Through this, we can better attend to—and even desire—the interruptions of urban noise and produce a new urban arrangement that’s not at the service of dialogue and exchange, but under the obligation of childhood and study’s noise nuances.

Notes on Contributor

Derek R. Ford is a teacher, organiser, and educational theorist whose research and teaching focus on how pedagogy can contribute to revolutionary struggles. They’re currently an associate professor of education studies at DePauw University and an instructor with The People’s Forum. They’ve published eight monographs, the latest of which is *Teaching the Actuality of Revolution: Aesthetics, Unlearning, and the Sensations of Struggle* (2023). Ford’s work has appeared widely in academic journals such as *Cultural Politics* and *Critical Education* and in a number of popular outlets such as *Black Agenda Report*, *Monthly Review*, and *Peace, Land, and Bread*. They’re associate editor of *Postdigital Science and Education* and deputy editor of the *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*. Outside of academia, they’re the editor of LiberationSchool.org, education department chair at the *Hampton Institute*, and an organiser with the Indianapolis Liberation Center and the ANSWER Coalition.

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