

Resisting Hegemony through Noise

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Abstract

This essay examines the cultural phenomena of noise in its perceived social constructions and demonstrates its emergence as a form of resistance against prevailing dominant hegemonic codes of culture. In particular, the paper explores the ability of noise to be enacted as a tool to escape the shackles of heteronormative constructions of sexuality and gender in the cultural landscape of the United States. Examined to support this argument are the contrasting works of two American artists: John Cage and Emilie Autumn. Through Cage and his avant-garde articulations of sound, covert acts of resistance against the dominant heteronormative constructions of masculinity are explored, and through Autumn's classical crossover work, a more overt and explicit form of resistance to subvert gender stereotypes and structures of normality and patriarchy are illuminated. Additionally, the paper explores possibilities for artists to engage with other movements, such as disability activism to create new possibilities for change.

Keywords: John Cage, Emilie Autumn, Queer Theory, Modernism, Musicology, Sound Studies, Noise, United States History, Cultural Studies

Of all of the cultural forms of expression, music is perhaps not only the most subversive in its articulations, but also the most far-reaching and penetrative in its act of execution. Though expressed in a complex matrix of formations, this phenomenon has been entangled both historically and presently in all cultures, making it an attribute of universal nature. While few would be bold enough to deny such claims, what is perhaps more aligned to conjecture is the actual definition of music; a discourse that has been anything but static in nature, and one existing in a consistent state of flux. For the French economist Jacques Attali, music has not only invaded our world and daily life with increasing proximity, but it has also become unavoidable: "Background noise has become a necessity in a current state of existence devoid of meaning".¹ According to Attali, such a conceptual paradigm is not only inescapable, but its disruptive capacity has also become the modern harbinger of new social orders.

When such a form of expression is defined from culture to culture, it is most often juxtaposed with some other opposing binarism, whether defined vis-à-vis with terminology

¹ Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p 3.

such a discord, cacophony, or perhaps most the commonly attributed, noise. While a definition of noise has never been universal across time and geographic space, one can situate connective circuitry most commonly within tenets of disruption and resistance towards the prevailing aesthetics, authority, and enforced social order. For Douglas Kahn, noise cannot exist either without the very thought of noise, which can "make an audible event called noise louder than it might already be".² By following such discourses, one can argue that the utilization of noise as a form of resistance can not only be disruptive, but also both hermetic and annunciatory.

This paper will examine the cultural phenomenon of noise in its perceived social constructions and will demonstrate its emergence as a form of resistance against prevailing dominant hegemonic codes of culture. In particular, this examination will explore the ability of noise to be enacted as a tool to escape the shackles of heteronormative constructions of sexuality and gender in the cultural landscape of the United States. Examined to support this argument will be the contrasting work of two American artists: John Cage and Emilie Autumn. Through Cage and his avant-garde articulations of sound, covert acts of resistance against the dominant heteronormative constructions of masculinity will be explored, and through Autumn's classical crossover work, a more overt and explicit form of resistance to subvert gender stereotypes and structures of normality and patriarchy will be illuminated. Though drastically different in style, approach, and their means of political organization, both Cage and Autumn's work reflect similar abilities to utilize disruptive forms of expression to act against the dominant enforcements of hegemonic gender constructions in their eras.

When examining music and its antithesis counterpart of noise, it is important to note that the later has typically been associated with any form that prevailing opinion has viewed as oppositional to the dominant structured order. While the condemnations of Claudio Monteverdi by Giovanni Maria Artusi or of J. S. Bach by J. A. Scheibe appear minor when compared to severe examples in modern history, such as the music censored as 'degenerate art' during the Third Reich, one can still observe a certain pattern within the context of historical Western musicology that situates expressive means outside of dominant constructed codes of a period's expression as a form of the 'other' in need of suppression. The Canadian musicologist Jean-Jacques Nattiez has noted that certain definitions of music and noise have been notoriously ethnocentric in articulation, citing commentary from scholars such as Walter Wiora. To counter such narrow definitions, Nattiez has attempted to broadly situate the concepts within a generalized framework:

² Douglas Kahn, *Noise Water Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1999), p. 25.

Just as music is whatever people choose to recognize as such, noise is whatever is recognized as disturbing, unpleasant, or both. The border between music and noise is always culturally defined – which implies that, even within a single society, this border does not always pass through the same place; in short, there is rarely a consensus.³

If we are to codify our interpretations of aural experience through the methodology of Nattiez in this discussion, we can essentially place musical acts or expressions within a type of semiology, or more precisely, within a chain of sign referents containing the neutral, the poietic, and the esthetic. In practice; this entails the producer, the message, and the receiver. It is important to stress that the cognitive experience of both ends of this chain (the producer and the receiver) can vary greatly with the receiver or audience not necessarily interpreting the semiotic chain as intended by the producer. Such interpretations can lead to the coinage of ‘noise’ as a descriptive, regardless of whether the producer had intended this disruptive interpretative experience intentionally, such as with the Italian brutistes, or unintentionally, as with Wagner’s Tristan Chord. Thus, an act of noise can emerge into vocabulary either intentionally or through a form of mistranslation due to factors within a localized cultural context.

As this paper contends that noise is a culturally framed construct, it is reasonable to assume that ‘noise’ is an effect of normativity, and such a discourse would not be complete without examining its relationship with prevailing conceptions of normativity. Accordingly, what is deemed noise is culturally intertwined with localized conceptions of ‘normal’, along with its related counterparts, ‘normalcy’ and even ‘normality.’ Interestingly, such terminology is actually more recent than many would assume, as Ben-Moshe, Nocella, II, and Withers have noted in their paper *Queer-Crippling Anarchism*:

Normalcy is a relatively new concept, which arose as part of the modernity project in 1800-1850 in Western Europe and its North American colonized spaces. The word ‘normal’ did not enter the English language until around 1840. Prior to the concept of normalcy there was the concept of the ideal (and its corollary – the grotesque)... In the nineteenth century the concept of the norm entered European culture, as related to the concept of the average. Normalcy began with the creation of measurements and statistics. Qualities are represented on a bell curve, and the extremes of the curve are abnormal. Statistics were created as state tools (hence their etymology as state-istics)... This new form of governance is what Foucault characterized as biopolitics, the newfound ability to measure performances of individuals and groups that

³ Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music*. Trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 48.

makes them governable.⁴

Additionally, one must mention that the term 'normality' also differs from 'normalcy.' According to Lennard Davis, 'normality' correlates to an actual state of being regarded as normal, while normalcy is the structural realm that controls and normalizes bodies. These norms are not only rooted within the bourgeois, white, heterosexual male norms (with the middle class as the mean), but also exercise an ideology, which for Davis, develops a science of justifying such notions of the norm that is additionally centered around the body and its performance.⁵ The conceptual paradigm of noise is particularly relevant in this discourse as it often resides far outside at the extremities of whatever a society or state defines as such norms. Ben-Moshe, Nocella, II, and Withers further elaborate upon Davis as they state:

The concept of the norm, unlike the ideal, implies that the majority of the population must somehow be around that mean. Everyone has to work hard to conform to norms but people with disabilities, and other marginalized groups, are scapegoated for not being able to fit these standards, while in fact they are needed to create these standards and maintain them. There is a need for people at the margin, but they are punished for being placed there.⁶

It should be noted prior to proceeding that while certain efforts of recent decades have re-examined issues of gender and sexuality in relation to music, there has also been a significant amount of scholarship in musicology which has often been distorted through work of a relatively homophobic, heteronormative lens. Scholars such as Gary Thomas have examined such issues in his article on Handel's sexual identity which noted an unusual insistence on heteronormativity from the composer's biographers, who at times used masking descriptions for Handel such as being that of a man of "normal masculine constitution".⁷ Similar peculiar efforts have also been observed with biographers of John Cage in relation to his associations with Zen as noted by Larson:

⁴ Len Ben-Moshe, Anthony Nocella, II, AJ Withers, 'Queer-Crippling Anarchism: Intersections and Reflections on Anarchism, Queerness, and Dis-ability'. *Queering Anarchism: Addressing and Undressing Power and Desire*. Editors C.B Daring, J. Rogue, Deric Shannon, Abbey Volcano (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2012), p. 211.

⁵ Lennard Davis. 'The Rule of Normalcy: Politics and Disability in the U.S.A. [United States of Disability]'. *Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism and Other Difficult Positions* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), p. 102.

⁶ Ben-Moshe, Nocella, II, and Withers, p. 212.

⁷ Gary Thomas, 'Was Handel Gay'. *The Queer Encyclopedia of Music, Dance, and Musical Theater*. Editor Claude J. Summers (San Francisco, CA: Cleis Press, 2004), p. 114.

Zen is so opaque and strange, if approached by a mind conditioned by the Judeo-Christian worldview, that until recently Cage's passion for Zen was disturbing and/or mystifying to his commentators. The art world has maintained studied ignorance. Even though Cage explicitly said, for instance, that Suzuki's Zen teachings led him to create *Theater Piece No. 1*, the first *Happening*, at Black Mountain College in August 1952... I have seen art historians delete Suzuki's name from the interviews in which Cage talks about it. And what happens when Cage's work is put in an art museum? Or a concert hall? The boundaries between arts are constructed out of assumptions that are almost impossible to destroy.⁸

When discussing Cage it is interesting to note how his work often straddled both spheres of intentional and unintentional noise. While Cage is perhaps most known historically for his controversial work *4'33"*, his efforts to resist dominant discourses of American culture are of particular relevance to this discussion. As a pupil of both Henry Cowell and Arnold Schoenberg, Cage was educated by two leading musical forces of the American avant-garde, but despite the experimental nature that surrounds perceptions of his compositions, the importance of Cage's work is often as much rooted in ideological means as in performative aspects. As a follower of the works of Henry David Thoreau who also ascribed to South Asian and East Asian philosophies, Cage embodied a type of passive anarchist resistance towards Western ideologies and practices. In particular, he cited *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* as "a gift from India, which took the place of Western forms of psychoanalysis," allowing him a pathway to reconcile his sexual identity struggles in ways that Western institutions would have never allowed.⁹ With this stated, prior to proceeding it should be acknowledged that certain scholars such as Richard Toop have noted a complex evolution of Cage over several decades, leading to what has been sometimes referred to as a multiplicity of "John Cages".¹⁰ Despite this issue, however, when carefully examined, there are still certain consistent pathways to examine such an ideological and artistic trajectory.

When beginning to examine the work of Cage, it is important to situate his work within the socio-historical context of which it was inspired. The American historian George Chauncey has situated the period of the 1930s-1960s, culturally speaking, as the most homophobic and heteronormative period in American history.¹¹ Much of Cage's work was situated within this era, which included the trial and conviction of his teacher and mentor

⁸ Kay Larson, 'Five Men and a Bride: The Birth of Art 'Post-Modern''. *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, 35.2 (2013), p. 15.

⁹ Kay Larson, *Where the Heart Beats: John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists* (New York: The Penguin Group, 2012), p. 125.

¹⁰ Richard Toop, 'John Cage Defended against his Appropriators'. *The Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics*, 3 (1993), p. 102.

¹¹ George Chauncey, *Gay New York* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994), p. 27.

Henry Cowell on ‘morals’ charges, and the rampant exploits of McCarthyism, which targeted homosexual artists, whether overtly, or covertly; a notable example being the modernist composer Aaron Copland, who despite having recurring themes of Americana in his work, not only saw the removal of his *Lincoln Portrait* from Eisenhower’s inauguration, but was also the subject of a report on supposed ‘anti-American’ activities.¹² As musicologist Nadine Hubbs has pointed out, various queer composers in the United States also attempted to reconcile their identities through constant means of negotiation with their surrounding heteronormative culture. Notable examples of such efforts include Vigil Thompson’s self-heterosexualizing “campaign” and his cautionary public associations with other gay composers in the 1980s,¹³ and Leonard Bernstein’s double-life, which included reports from contemporaries of him outing conductor Dimitri Mitropoulos.¹⁴ Cage, on the other hand, appears to have attempted to reject such heteronormative structures in many ways altogether, openly living with partner Merce Cunningham in post-Stonewall New York City.¹⁵ Though precursory in nature, we can note certain parallels here with Lee Edelman’s reworkings of queer theory in his work, *No Future*, in which the author articulates a radical rejection of the heteronormative lifestyle. Essentially, Edelman rejects a reproductive futurism that is hegemonically superimposed over the population in the name of the child. This heteronormativity, which is of a particular violent disposition for Edelman, is essentially grounds for a queer resistance against any conceived notions of futuristic optimism. Edelman expresses such queer resistance through a Lacanian lens, associating it with negativity and an opposition towards achieving of a state of meaning through an orderly trajectory towards the future. For Edelman, the notion of queerness is positioned through a rupture in stable articulations of the self; constantly resisting not only the emerging institutions of identity politics, but ultimately the overarching social order itself.

While Cage resisted assimilation into the heteronormative lifestyles in America during the 1940s onward, his particular thoughts on living also reflect a certain ideology fixated on the present, which rejected any notion of needs, wants, or desires for the future: “The highest purpose is to have no purpose at all. This puts one in accord with nature, in her manner of operation”.¹⁶ Such thoughts were also reflected in his book titled *Silence* in which he asked:

¹² Howard Pollack, *Aaron Copland: The Life and Work of an Uncommon Man* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999), p. 458.

¹³ Nadine Hubbs, *The Queer Composition of America’s Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), p. 161.

¹⁴ Nadine Hubbs, ‘Bernstein, Homophobia, Historiography’. *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture*, 13 (2009), p. 37.

¹⁵ Larson, *Where the Heart Beats*, p. 122.

¹⁶ John Cage, *Silence* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press. 1961), p. 55.

And what is the purpose of writing music? One, is of course, not dealing with purposes but dealing with sounds. Or the answer must take the form of a paradox: a purposeful purposelessness or purposeless play. This play, however, is an affirmation of life - not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way of waking up to the very life we're living, which is so excellent once one gets one's mind and one's desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord.¹⁷

While Edelman's arguments in *No Future* are far more explicit politically, there is a certain overarching theme that situates the ideologies of both individuals outside the hegemonic discourses of heteronormativity that are frequently at odds with queer identities and any attempt to evoke a logically juxtaposed alternative. Edelman elaborates upon such a notion when he argues:

... the impossible project of a queer oppositionality that would oppose itself to the structural determinants of politics as such, which is also to say, that would oppose itself to the logic of opposition. This paradoxical formulation suggests a refusal - the appropriately perverse refusal that characterizes queer theory - of every substantialization of identity, which is always oppositionally defined, and, by extension, of history as linear narrative (the poor man's teleology) in which meaning succeeds in revealing itself - as itself - through time. Far from partaking of this narrative movement towards a viable political future, far from perpetuating the fantasy of meaning's eventual realization, the queer comes to figure the bar to every realization of futurity, the resistance, internal to the social, to every social structure or form.¹⁸

Edelman goes further to state:

Rather than rejecting, with liberal discourse, this ascription of negativity to the queer, we might, as I argue, do better to consider accepting and even embracing it. Not in the hope of forging thereby some more perfect social order-such a hope, after all, would only reproduce the constraining mandate of futurism, just as any such order would equally occasion the negativity of the queer-but rather to refuse the insistence of hope itself as affirmation, which is always affirmation of an order whose refusal will register as unthinkable, irresponsible, inhumane.¹⁹

¹⁷ Cage, *Silence*, p. 12.

¹⁸ Lee Edelman, *No Future* (Durham: NC. Duke University Press, 2004), p. 4.

¹⁹ Edelman, p. 4.

When examining Cage's compositions, works such as *4'33"* are notable not simply due to their unorthodox performative traditions, but additionally due to the fact that they exemplify efforts to remove the ego from the process of artistic creation. Similarly, later works such as his *Europeras* are also relevant in their efforts to challenge conventions of social control and demonstrate an ability to illuminate issues relating to gender, ethnicity, and sexuality often ignored by historical narratives. The five-part *Europaera* series was intended to be an irreversible negation of the opera genre, symbolizing Cage's rejection of the institution. Cage proclaimed "For two hundred years the Europeans have been sending us their operas. Now I'm sending them back".²⁰ Verging on a broad range of conceptions of cacophony, Cage hoped that each audience member would experience a different opera from seat-to-seat. Utilizing the most complex applications of chance aided by computer systems, the scores for *Europaera* 1 and 2 were described as essentially "a pair of circuses of independent elements - music, program notes, lights, costumes, decors, action. Nothing relates to anything else except by coincidence".²¹ The aesthetic experience was perhaps best articulated by Stefen Beyst, who depicted a radical departure from earlier works such as *Music of Changes*:

It suffices to compare John Cage's *Music of Changes* with *Europaera* 1 & 2. The harmonious overall sound structure of the former has been replaced with a rather cacophonous mix of singers singing out of pitch who, amputated from their own bodies, try to sing mutilated arias. Whereas sounds or isolated tones only gain when subordinated under the primacy of chance, an integrated whole only loses when it is subdivided in 'independent but coexistent' parts. Here, there is no longer question of freeing audible material from its subjugation under an encompassing whole, but rather of ripping an integrated whole apart in loose fragments. With visible pleasure... Ever since *4'33"*, not only are sounds introduced in the composition, music itself is transformed into noise... We are no longer dealing with musical space.²²

While not overt social commentary in the traditional sense, the mere act of disrupting a centuries-old canon in this fashion generates consequences which bring upon a sobering

²⁰ David Revoll, *The Roaring Silence: John Cage - a Life* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1993), p. 273.

²¹ Robert Sherman, 'Music; A Premiere of John Cage's Opera'. *New York Times*, Archives, (1988) <<https://www.nytimes.com/1988/07/10/nyregion/music-a-premiere-of-john-cage-s-opera.html>> [accessed 3 June, 2018]

²² Stefen Beyst, *John Cage's Europeras: A Light – And Soundscape as a Musical Manifesto*, 2005 <<http://www.d-sites.net/english/cage.html>> [accessed 25 May, 2018]

re-examination of the genre. Such action was articulated rather succulently by Alistair Williams in his synopsis of the *Europeras*, which proclaimed:

Put another way, they throw in the air precisely the semiotic conventions that cultural theorists are now so busily trying to understand. Because the *Europeras* are caught in a semantic tension between established associations and the new configurations produced by chance procedures, they raise all sorts of questions about the western canon, though they utilize only one of its genres.²³

As Williams has illuminated, the actions of these works had underlying consequences, revealing entrenched stereotypes and assumptions that were often overlooked with little question for numerous dominant eras of prestige. As John Cage Trust director Laura Kuhn has noted, the most striking aspect of Cage's first two *Europeras* is that each element has complete isolation from any other, revealing a work articulated by a total absence of intended musical or dramatic relationships.²⁴ Kuhn states:

These independent elements comingle in performance without suggesting or revealing any sort of hierarchical order. There is no intended musical discourse or syntax, and thus no need for the managerial hand of a conductor; each uncondacted soloist governs his or her prescribed actions by digital-clock time displayed on carefully played video monitors. The overall effect is one of a perfectly orchestrated collage of only the most coincidentally related means, whose collective end result – “meaning” if you will – can only be reckoned in the most subjective of terms.²⁵

For Kuhn, the *Europeras* embody an exemplification of the phenomenon of synergy in their hybrid art forms where content and form become inseparable. Such compositional structure allows for fresh associations, and more importantly the deriving of artistic significance not from the content itself, but rather through the content co-mingling with content in a type of “brushing” of Europe's opera against Europe's opera in a type of McLuhanian sense.²⁶

Kuhn also goes further to draw parallels between Marshall McLuhan's writings and Cage's art, stating that it “worked to address itself to the business of awakening the perceptions to what were, for him, the most socially significant (and usually most problematic) “realities” of the contemporary physical world”.²⁷ Perhaps most notable, however, is Kuhn's claim that

²³ Alastair Williams, ‘Cage and Postmodernism’, *The Cambridge Companion to John Cage*. Ed. David Nicholls (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 237.

²⁴ Laura Kuhn. ‘Synergetic Dynamics in John Cage's ‘Europeras 1 & 2’’, *The Musical Quarterly*. 78.1 (1994), p. 134.

²⁵ Kuhn, p. 135.

²⁶ Kuhn, p. 135.

²⁷ Kuhn, p. 146.

Cage has managed to mirror reality, represent nature, and initiate a profound and still unresolved shakedown in the critical community.²⁸

To further elaborate upon the notion of disruptive action, Nattiez contends that though not always explicitly expressed, the actions of composers such as Cage largely revolve around a methodology to “speak” in music about music in the second degree, with an overarching goal of exposing or denouncing the institutional aspects of music’s functioning.²⁹ Similarly, Attali argues that “noise” or more precisely, music that resides within the culturally defined adjectives of disturbing or disruptive is essentially a harbinger or premonitory voice of a new social order. For Attali, the contemporary noise of a culture is often a more effective lens to foreshadow social and political disruptions and upheavals than by relying on traditional fields of research and their specialists.³⁰ If we are to situate the *Europeras* through the lenses of Nattiez and Attali, one begins to witness how Cage’s performative critique plays a subversive role, essentially using the attributes of a medium to deconstruct it from within.

Though the disruption of works such as the *Europeras* are without a doubt fascinating in their efforts, Cage’s subversive use of the concept of silence is perhaps the most interesting and far-reaching. While the association of silence with noise may appear to be contradictory at first encounter, actual silence is essentially a conceptual impossibility of human experience, whether we ascribe to Attali’s association of true silence with death, or Cage’s well-known experience in Harvard University’s anechoic chamber in 1951. Through such a use of silence, Cage would remove the ego from the act of composition, situating a type of anti-identity that artistically situated him as an antithesis to the creative genius archetype often depicted through the construction of the male abstract expressionist; an identity depicting severely exaggerated masculine stereotypes. Such attempts were met by a backlash not only from critics, but also from notable figures such as Jackson Pollack, whose angered responses towards Cage’s work and sexuality earned him the nickname, “the raving heterosexual”, a situation which Kay Larson has best described:

Cage hated Pollock’s drunken rages... Feldman began talking with the hard-bitten but haunted Pollock and getting weepy midnight phone calls from him. Feldman recalled the “raving heterosexual” Pollock’s verbal assaults on Cage for being gay. At the time, Feldman thought, “Cage had a very peculiar reputation. He was very well liked, and was to some degree disturbing to a lot of people....Christian Wolff’s mother called John a charlatan. Guston loved him, but referred to his routines as a nightclub act. Although everybody cared greatly for him, and they weren’t overly

²⁸ Kuhn, p. 142.

²⁹ Nattiez, p. 85.

³⁰ Attali, p. 214.

critical, I would say there was an anti-homosexual bias against not only Cage, but also Rauschenberg, Johns, poets John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara, and the painter Cy Twombly, among others. As for Pollock, Cage would cross the street to avoid him.³¹

The complexity of Cage's association with silence is explored in particular depth by Jonathan Katz in his essay *John Cage's Queer Silence; or, How to Avoid Making Matters Worse*. For Katz, Cage enacts a reactionary stance here towards the ego-centered abstract expressionism sphere which he contends was actually much more rooted in a resistance-based ideology than many initially contended. Katz argues:

Closeted people seek to ape dominant discursive forms, to participate as seamlessly as possible in hegemonic constructions. They do not, in my experience, draw attention to themselves with a performative silence, as John Cage did when he stood before the fervent Abstract Expressionist multitude and blasphemed, "I have nothing to say and I'm saying it".³²

Examining such action from a different angle, historian Caroline A. Jones draws correlations between Cage and Michel Foucault, believing that Cage's practices to remove the ego attempted to withdraw "the body" from what Foucault would later refer to the "body politic," entailing the "discursive construction of the body, its affects and desires".³³ Similar observations have also been made by Richard Dellamora, who situates Cage as a type of forerunner to queer literary figures such as William S. Burroughs. Dellamora situates both Cage and Burroughs as fitting within the queer theory context, though in a precursory nature without the benefit of being self-aware of such.³⁴ In his essay *Queer Apocalypse: Framing William Burroughs*, Dellamora attempts to sketch out a genealogy of the queer, looking at how deconstruction is connected with queering. He contends that the work of James Creech has shown that deconstruction has undertaken a significant role in contemporary queer theory by exposing that supposedly natural forms of gender and sexuality are essentially power-effects produced within the hegemonic institution of compulsory heterosexuality. With this stated, for Dellamora deconstruction is therefore connected with "queering" even more profoundly than some might assume.

³¹ Larson, *Where the Heart Beats*, p. 209.

³² Jonathan Katz, 'John Cage's Queer Silence; or, How to Avoid Making Matters Worse', *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies*, 5.2 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 50.

³³ Caroline Jones, 'Finishing School: John Cage and the Abstract Expressionist Ego', *Critical Inquiry*, 19.4 (1993), p. 655.

³⁴ Richard Dellamora, 'Queer Apocalypse: Framing William Burroughs', *Postmodern Apocalypse: Theory and Cultural Practice at the End*. Editor Richard Dellamora. (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), p. 136.

Dellamora makes efforts to expose the deconstruction of a binary-structured model of sexual difference in Derridean apocalyptic theory and analyses the apocalyptic narrative and tone of Burrough's work, noting the author's aesthetic of silence. He describes this use as a homage to Cage that offers an example of deconstruction *avant la lettre* in the context of hip queer culture of the 1950s.³⁵ Dellamora, like Jones, describes here an influence from Cage, particularly his 1949 *Lecture on Nothing*, essentially contending that this new aesthetic ultimately initiated several reactions, perhaps most notably Burroughs's resistance to the military-industrial nation-state; a reactionary stance that could be depicted as a central aspect in the critique of the heroic (re)presentation of the male heterosexual ego rooted in the postwar aesthetic of abstract expressionism.³⁶ This point also connects back to earlier figures discussed such as Pollock who depicted a movement also very much in conflict with Cage's artistic ideology. Nonetheless, those such as Nattiez have noted that "In the West, the general context of the musical fact assures that such special cases (Cage, Schnebel, and the like) are quickly marginalized".³⁷ Whether or not explicit in nature, such acts appear to have a type of jarring effect upon institutional concepts; an interesting phenomenon that perhaps reveals even more from those of the institution than those of the expressive act itself.

Though he discussed the disruptive nature of sound, silence, for Attali, is perhaps the most radical of musical concepts. As mentioned previously, Attali contends that our only means of achieving true silence is in death itself; illuminating an interesting parallel with the notion of the Freud's death drive. While such Cagean articulations of silence have been associated with the death drive by past theorists such as Jean-François Lyotard, interesting debates have emerged relating to how to properly interpret this association. The musicologist Nikolaus Bacht once accused Lyotard of engaging in a deliberate misreading,³⁸ but other recent scholars such as Matthew Mendez have extensively noted the numerous ways in which Cage appears to have heavily influenced Lyotard's articulations about aesthetic concepts, demonstrating a strong likelihood of more than merely a surface-level reading from the philosopher.³⁹ According to the findings of Mendez, when one analyzes Lyotard's oeuvre synoptically, it reveals certain continuities and contradictions significantly revealing themselves in Cage's constant negotiation between "Nietzschean" and "Kantian" tendencies.⁴⁰ Thus, whether one examines the ideological correspondences or divergences of Lyotard and Cage, their philosophies are situated upon the transversal

³⁵ Dellamora, p. 137.

³⁶ Dellamora, p. 137.

³⁷ Nattiez, p. 39.

³⁸ Nikolaus Bacht, 'Jean-François Lyotard's Adaptation of John Cage's Aesthetics', *Perspectives of New Music*, 41.2 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), p. 241.

³⁹ Matthew Mendez, 'A Power of Sonorous Paradoxes: Passivity, Singularity, and Indifference in Jean-François Lyotard's Readings of John Cage', *Cultural Politics*, 9.2 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 171.

⁴⁰ Mendez, p. 171.

between passivity and indifference which brings out a traversal for the series of logical paradoxes embedded in both individuals' musical theorizing.⁴¹ If Cage has generated a metaphorical association with the death drive, this is still significant as it projects a destruction of not only the masculine ego, but also the very constructions of the modern artist itself.

It should also be mentioned that while Cage's efforts towards an anarchistic resistance are a worthy realm of exploration, they were also situated within a landscape that was notoriously dominated by white European male artists. With this stated, it could be argued that Cage's experimental artistic circles tended to be somewhat more diverse in relation to gender and sexuality than those of other groupings such the serialists, which were almost entirely white heterosexual Anglo-Saxon Protestant males.⁴² Still, one might note that Cage's contemporaries, particularly those of the *New York School*, for example, still came from relatively affluent backgrounds or had opportunities to train with leading figures of the period. Such a point is not necessarily intended to be detractive, but when examining such resistive efforts historically, one must recognize the certain socio-economic boundaries at play, a particular limitation of the avant-garde that is still in need of further exploration.

While Cage utilized covert and abstract means of resistance in an era of explicit heteronormativity in the United States, the next artist to be discussed, Emilie Autumn, takes a drastically different approach, but one that in certain ways mirrors similar efforts. While vastly different in musical expression and aesthetics, Autumn has also utilized unorthodox sonic means to resist against the hegemony of the United States in the twenty first-century during an era of perceived, but not actualized gender and sexual equality. As a classical crossover artist, Autumn was originally a music student at Indiana University Bloomington, but left due to disagreements over the rigid codes of dress and appearance expected of performers of classical music. After initially releasing an album of new age classical crossover music titled *Enchant* in 2002, Autumn experienced a series of personal crises which ultimately led to a suicide attempt and her institutionalization. Upon reemerging, she reoriented her efforts at artistic expression to explore darker themes of experience through a feminist lens, such as patriarchy, sexual violence, and the rigid boundaries of gender constructions. She also incorporated themes related to her personal struggles with bipolar disorder, and her critique of medical practices in the United States, which she believes fail to properly understand and address mental illness.

Autumn's first exploration of these themes began with her 2006 album *Opheliac*. Autumn named the record after the Shakespearian character of Ophelia from Hamlet. She

⁴¹ Mendez, p. 174.

⁴² Georgina Born, *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez, and the Institutionalization of the Musical Avant-Garde* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), p. 62.

described the *Opheliac* archetype as someone driven to madness by “all the men in her life manipulating and pushing her to the point of no alternative”.⁴³ The album was notable in its efforts to explore themes of mental illness, patriarchy, and enforced normality, both within historical Victorian themes and modern contexts. While the album utilized a number of traditional aesthetics ranging from violins, synthesizers, harpsichords, and spoken word, Autumn also incorporated industrial sounds into her recordings to give them a more abrasive atmosphere. The vocal performances are also notable as they range from operatic melody lines to screeching emotive bouts. The album was also accompanied with a book Autumn wrote, titled *The Asylum for Wayward Victorian Girls* that centered around Autumn having a cross-generational correspondence with an institutionalized woman during the Victorian period. The book is notable in its ability to expand further upon the themes of Autumn’s record and explore problematic methods and means of power relations in relation to the control of those who fail to conform to society’s expectations of normality. In both her album and book, Autumn takes a stance reflective of Foucault, noting an obsession with non-heteronormative sexual practices, and a desire to control them, especially with women. In particular, Autumn’s work is interesting as it manages to synthesize the experiences of those in the Victorian era and her own experiences in the modern era; illuminating many questions that still persist about how we view sexuality and mental illness in contemporary society.

Autumn’s live performances entail both aspects from her albums and writings in an unusual combination of burlesque, gore, and performative acts. While her performances have managed to engage audiences in North America and Europe, she has faced considerable censorship in Russia, notably due to the gay propaganda law signed into law in 2013. She was threatened with censorship due to the fact that her acts entailed the kissing female performers and audience members. In addition, she was informed that she was to ‘high-five’ other performers, and not to hold their hands, as this could also be a legal violation. While she stated that such an occurrence was one of her saddest moments, it is also one of her proudest; having managed to disrupt such repressive states of existence in some way.⁴⁴

Autumn’s third album *Fight Like a Girl* released in 2012, would become her most well-known effort. Drawing further on the themes of *Opheliac*, *Fight Like a Girl* would be Autumn’s resistive effort towards the medical establishment and the sexual violence of patriarchy. She chose the title *Fight Like a Girl* as she believed that such a statement’s misogynist context actually fails to account for the real daily-life struggle of feminists. For

⁴³ Linda Leseman, ‘Emilie Autumn will not be Pacified; Fight Like a Girl Comes out Today’, *LA Weekly* (July 24, 2012)

⁴⁴ ‘Emilie Autumn Interview’, *Electric Music Magazine*.
<<http://www.electricmusicmagazine.com/emilie-autumn-interview>> [accessed December 2, 2017]

Autumn, to fight like a girl is to fight for one's life, and to fight to the death for survival against endless forms of institutionalized and targeted violence.⁴⁵ The album's title track is set to loud, industrial, instrumental music, with heavily distorted and screeching vocals. Lyrically, Autumn articulates the struggle for equality and demands revenge upon those who have inflicted violence towards women, calling for the 51% to rise up. While the explicit and violent nature of this track marked a noted shift away from mainstream radio and MTV formats,⁴⁶ it has had notable success online, with recent resurgences in popularity via digital downloads to become her most well-known recording.⁴⁷

When Donald Trump was elected president of the United States in 2016, Autumn re-released a single of *Fight Like a Girl*, donating profits of the track to the Feminist Majority Foundation. More recently, she also used the track as a form of resistance to call attention to sexual violence when the Harvey Weinstein scandal brought new public attention to sexual harassment and assault. She re-mixed a free downloadable version of *Fight Like a Girl*, which included audio samples of Uma Thurman, Ronan Farrow, and Emma Thompson's testimonies embedded into the musical track.

Such unsettling themes expressed in Autumn's work reflect a particular engagement with affect theory when examined closely in this context. While early theorists such as Silvan Tomkins articulated notions of affect as a powerful source of motivation, a number of interesting parallels begin to emerge when compared with themes from Sara Ahmed's 2010 work, *The Promise of Happiness*, particularly through what Ahmed describes as 'feelings of structures.' Autumn has described herself as someone who has been outraged with society all of the time and has used her music and writings as a way to express not only her disdain for society's structures, but also her feelings of hopelessness towards the future. One can draw parallels between Autumn's use of music to express rage at the hegemonic structures enforced upon women and Ahmed's depiction of the Feminist Killjoy. While Autumn had already achieved success with her record *Enchant*, she instead decided to engage in a more bold, alienating, and disruptive pathway which has received mixed reactions and limited her marketability to the mainstream audiences; some of which still prefer the more accessible aesthetics of her earlier work. By incorporating noise into her music through disturbing and unpleasant attributes, she not only disrupts hegemonic constructions of a moral economy of happiness, but also positions herself in a way that openly explores the disturbing structures

⁴⁵ Linda Leseman, 'Emilie Autumn will not be Pacified; Fight Like a Girl Comes out Today', *LA Weekly* (July 24, 2012) [accessed December 1, 2017]

⁴⁶ 'Fight like a Girl by Emilie Autumn', cdbaby.

<<https://store.cdbaby.com/cd/emilieautumn3>> [accessed January 24, 2018]

⁴⁷ Alan D.D., 'Emilie Autumn releases 'Fight Like A Girl: The Tribute Remix'', *Intravenous Magazine*. <<http://www.intravenousmag.co.uk/2017/11/emilie-autumn-releases-fight-like-girl.html>> [accessed January 24, 2018]

of sexism and violence through explicit imagery of repression, grief, and outrage; all similar to those of the society that Ahmed examines:

Feminist readers might want to challenge this association between unhappiness and female imagination, which in the moral economy of happiness, makes female imagination a bad thing. But if we do not operate in this economy—that is, if we do not assume that happiness is what is good—then we can read the link between female imagination and unhappiness differently. We might explore how imagination is what allows women to be liberated from happiness and the narrowness of its horizons. We might want the girls to read the books that enable them to be overwhelmed with grief.⁴⁸

By invoking imagination and musical expression, Autumn states that her primary underlying goal is empowerment, by whatever means necessary, however dark and disturbing her invoked imagery may be. Such action has interestingly received negative press and reviews in the online community by pushing the boundaries of content in popular music forms, with some criticizing her shift away from virtuosic violin work to digital programming, creating less accessible forms,⁴⁹ and others critiquing her overall aesthetic as being limited to the “depressive, death-obsessed fan of *Les Mis* and *Sondheim*”.⁵⁰ Still, Autumn has embraced such critical reactions, stating that “I have made it my life’s mission to prove by example that even the ugliest of experiences can be transformed into things of extraordinary beauty, and even magic”.⁵¹ For Autumn, by utilizing themes which push the listener to be engaged, even through graphic lyrical content and uncomfortable aesthetics, she ultimately hopes for progress towards a future she once deemed impossible. Ahmed articulates a similar goal when she concludes her chapter on the Feminist Killjoy by stating:

Feminist consciousness can thus be thought of as consciousness of the violence and power that are concealed under the language of civility and love, rather than simply consciousness of gender as a site of restriction of possibility... There is solidarity in recognizing our alienation from happiness, even if we do not inhabit the same place (as we do not). There can be joy in killing joy. And kill joy, we must and we do.⁵²

⁴⁸ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 62.

⁴⁹ ‘CD Review: Fight Like A Girl – Emilie Autumn’, *Open ‘Til Midnight* <<https://otmblog.com/2012/08/08/cd-review-fight-like-a-girl-emilie-autumn/>> [accessed January 25, 2019]

⁵⁰ Sue Corsten, ‘Review: Emilie Autumn – Fight Like a Girl’, *Everything Express* <<https://everythingexpress.wordpress.com/2012/09/01/review-emilie-autumn-fight-like-a-girl/>> [accessed January 25, 2019]

⁵¹ *About the Author* <<https://www.amazon.com/Asylum-Wayward-Victorian-Girls/dp/0998990922>> [accessed 1 March, 2018]

As mentioned previously, some have criticized Autumn's overt, radical and graphic depictions of psychiatric treatment, but Nicola Spelman has noted that even addressing such issues within a modern musical context is rare. She states that "While artists such as Eels, Emilie Autumn, Amanda Palmer and Green Day have produced examples of post-1970s songs that retain a certain engagement with Anti-psychiatry thinking, it is fair to say that such cases are now comparatively rare".⁵³ Spelman also cites Roy Porter, who has argued that "Since the mid-nineteenth century, women have come to dominate the cultural stereotyping of mental disorder - and they have been disproportionately the recipients of mental treatments, both within and beyond custodial institutions".⁵⁴ Ben-Moshe, Nocella, II, and Withers also draw similar conclusions in contemporary society, noting "Many psychiatrized people are forced to take medication, undergo electroshock "therapy," or reside in institutions. For many, forced psychiatric treatment is not a service that people consume; it is a violation of their autonomy and it is abuse".⁵⁵ With this stated, Ben-Moshe, Nocella, II, and Withers advocate challenging these current systems of power and normality through their conception of a 'queer-cripping anarchism' that they hope will effectively combine the resistive forces of both the queer and disabled communities.

Autumn engages an interesting dynamic by essentially combining dark themes of experience with elements of noise. While scholars such as Gaboury have articulated potential avenues for the concept of the glitch (noise) and queer agency,⁵⁶ the perceived outcome of such an attribute has been carefully examined by those such as Marie Thompson who have situated its critical reception among gendered lines:

Cascone's 'aesthetics of failure' reflects the prominent role of failure in discourses of noise music. However, failure as an artistic strategy and rhetorical device has not been available to all, insofar as the relationship between noise, error and innovation is frequently gendered as well as racialized. Kathleen Hanna and Johanna Fateman of the queer-feminist electroclash group LE Tigre have remarked on how the erroneous sounds of male artists are often 'fetishized as glitch' and 'as something beautiful', whereas the errors of women are often heard as simply markers of failure, rather than expressions of innovation, creativity or artistic merit. In short, whether or

⁵² Ahmed, p. 87.

⁵³ Nicola Spelman, *Popular Music and the Myths of Madness* (Philadelphia, PA: Routledge, 2016), p. 58.

⁵⁴ Roy Porter, *Madness: A Brief History* (London: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 87.

⁵⁵ Ben-Moshe, Nocella, II, and Withers, p. 215.

⁵⁶ Jacob Gabouray. 'Critical Unmaking: Toward a Queer Computation', *The Routledge Companion to Media Studies and Digital Humanities*. Editor Jentery Sayers (New York, Routledge, 2018), p. 483.

not 'failure' becomes 'successful' often corresponds to the perceived gender of the artist failing. With this in mind, it is perhaps not surprising that while there are many female, nonbinary and genderqueer practitioners utilizing noise and error in their work, noise music histories have often centered on a patrilineal 'dotted line' of composers, artists and sound-makers.⁵⁷

Through a re-examination of art such as Autumn's that is a resistant form of expression against both patriarchy and the reckless treatment of mental illness, a possibility to explore these dimensions and possibilities further emerges, especially when they are interpreted through frameworks which Ben-Moshe, Nocella, II, and Withers have described.

Such initiatives also hold a certain potential which may avoid the pitfalls associated with the notion of 'white noise'.⁵⁸ In a recent article, Jasmine Rault of the University of Toronto at Mississauga defined the concept of white noise as:

...the ways that a performance of feeling (of sympathy, empathy, identification, and solidarity) for queer and trans people of colour, creates a distorting field of white noise - comprised of bits and pieces of people of colour's experiences, analyses, and labours - that is central to the constitution of contemporary US liberal whiteness. This feeling has the effect, not unlike speaking for others, of distracting from and distorting the ostensible subject of feeling and of reproducing hegemonic whiteness as a series of generalized "nice feelings"... My interest here is in tracking the ways that feelings of sameness are asserted in the face of obvious difference. I suggest that white noise is a technology of sameness-feeling - a seemingly unobtrusive filter by which differences are both incorporated and obscured... white noise is the homogenizing filter through which any information, cultural context, or interview subject is passed in an effort to (re)produce feel-good affects of nice white Western sexual exceptionalism.⁵⁹

Through such a definition, it appears apparent that to be an effective measure of resistance of any relevant effect, noise as a concept must avoid becoming associated with the notion of white noise. The erasure of difference is especially troublesome, especially if any movement is to seriously challenge any notion of hegemony in a substantive way. With this said, the recognition and articulation of difference must be explicit to the point of challenging such

⁵⁷ Marie Thompson, *Beyond Unwanted Sound: Noise, Affect and Aesthetic Moralism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 131.

⁵⁸ I would like to credit Frances Latchford of York University's School of Gender, Sexuality & Women's Studies for providing helpful insights on this topic, notably by expanding my conceptions of noise to explore areas such as this one.

⁵⁹ Jasmine Rault, 'White noise, white affects: filtering the sameness of queer suffering'. *Feminist Media Studies* (17.4, 2017), p. 586.

entrenched hegemonic discourses, otherwise such a concept will remain solely in theory and not in actual practice.

In context, the concept of noise is undoubtedly difficult to articulate, whether within the context of the past or in the events of the present. Still, through its various means and articulations, it can be can utilized as an effective means of resistance, either through the subversive uses of sound as demonstrated by artists such John Cage, or by the more affective means by modern artists such as Emilie Autumn. By re-examining noise as a form of resistance, the repressive norms of society can also be challenged, and such action may even illuminate new forms of organization for progress. While this particular paper explored the work of two artists, there are undoubtedly many more to examine; a task that could easily lead into a multiplicity of new pathways. Perhaps Attali summarized its potential most eloquently when he proclaimed that noise is the source of the “purpose and power, of the dream”.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Attali, p. 6.

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