

## On Serendipity

Or, Toward a Sensual Ethnography

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It's difficult to imagine a more auspicious place to begin than Pauline Oliveros's backyard. On a warm August afternoon in 2007, I interviewed the American composer for Eric Chasalow's oral history project on electroacoustic music composers, sitting outdoors amid the gentle hum of late summer days. Among other things, I was particularly interested in her use of sampling in her iconic 1965 composition *Bye Bye Butterfly*. Her own program note to the piece explains: "*Bye Bye Butterfly* bids farewell not only to the music of the 19th century but also to the system of polite morality of that age and its attendant institutionalized oppression of the female sex. The title refers to the operatic disc, *Madame Butterfly* by Giacomo Puccini, which was at hand in the studio at the time and which was spontaneously incorporated into the ongoing compositional mix" (in Judith Tick and Paul Beaudoin 2008:697). This note highlights a tension, evident in more extensive analyses of the piece (compare Heidi Von Gunden 1983; Martha Mockus 2008), between express (intentional) commentary about gender and sexuality uniquely bound up in Oliveros's sampling of *Madama Butterfly* and a kind of chance operation in picking up a record "at hand in the studio," giving a sense that any other piece of music could have served her purposes. When I asked her about her process in choosing Puccini, she answered wryly, "It was serendipity," explaining that the record was the only one in the room but that it lent itself particularly well to her compositional aims. This serendipity embraced both what Martha Mockus has described as "lesbian musicality," or

an overt “conceptualizing the relationship between sexuality and composition” (2011:9), as well as the subtler playfulness of aleatoric performativity, an indeterminate compositional approach that, especially in Oliveros’s hands, maintains a poignant if less explicit element of queerness in its subversion of a composerly will-to-control.

While the idea of serendipity has a long and complicated history, Oliveros’s answer resonates with recent theories about decentering willful forms of forging “success” without necessarily giving up hope for a better, more emancipatory future. Jack Halberstam has recently advocated a less willful form of queer thought and activism, instead embracing a “queer art of failure.” Halberstam writes, “Failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well; for queers failure can be a style, to cite Quentin Crisp, or a way of life, to cite Foucault, and it can stand in contrast to the grim scenarios of success that depend upon ‘trying and trying again’” (Halberstam 2011:3). For Halberstam, failure is rewarding in escaping “the punishing norms” of disciplining behavior, preserving “the wondrous anarchy of childhood,” and generally disturbing “clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers.” It stands as a salient remedy for the “toxic positivity of contemporary life” (2011:3).

Similarly, we might also see Oliveros’s compositional process and self-analysis as embodying the kind of future-oriented, performative indeterminacy that José Esteban Muñoz sees in queerness’s utopian streak, often manifested in aesthetic practices: “The aesthetic, especially the queer aesthetic, frequently contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity. . . . Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (2009:1). For Muñoz, indeterminacy plays a critical role as “both affect and methodology” (3) in

experiencing utopia not just as a (perhaps impossibly) distant future, but also as a quotidian sensory experience. In light of these theoretical interventions, how might a queer-inspired notion of serendipity and productive failing allow ethnomusicologists to recuperate pleasure and rethink the encounters of bodies in ethnographic research? How could ethnographers attune themselves in order to attend more fully to the indeterminate sensations of queer quotidian experience?

Prompted by a serendipitous email exchange of my own (described in detail in the paragraphs that follow), I consider here the possibilities of a *sensual ethnography* as a way of reorienting ethnography to consider the importance of sonic pleasure in a more serious and sustained way, especially in response to an emerging consensus in sound studies and sensory ethnography that has (perhaps inadvertently) enshrined sound first and foremost as a site of knowledge (for example, Steven Feld 1996; Lucien Taylor 1996; Tomie Hahn 2007). In short, sound is knowing, and other functional (or non-functional) modalities of sound are either irrelevant or of secondary value. Yet a more pleasurable encounter with the sonic has the potential to re-open these fledgling fields to its sensuality. Doing so is not simply a “failure” to know but rather an embrace of serendipity, quotidian indeterminacy, and queer spaces that cannot simply be reduced to knowledge.

To suggest that music and sound should be considered in terms of pleasure is not altogether new—it hardly even counts as a reminder, given the powerful articulations of music and sexuality by Suzanne Cusick in *Queering the Pitch*, as she provocatively asks, “What if music IS sex?” Arguing that sex is no longer (and for some, never was) bound to reproduction, but rather is “a means of negotiating power and intimacy through the

circulation of pleasure,” Cusick shows how the space between the pleasures of music and sex begins to collapse: “What if hands are sex organs? *Mine are*. What if ears are sex organs? What if music-making is a form of sexuality in which (as in some other forms of sexuality) the sites of giving and receiving pleasure are separated?” (1994:78–79). While such a model of listening does not preclude the kind of listening-as-knowing espoused by soundscapers and acoustemologists, it offers up a different agenda for anyone setting out to listen at all, but especially for those, like ethnographers, who endeavor to listen to Others—to hear cultural difference, including sexuality and more. In the spirit of such a sensual ethnography, I explore here connections between serendipity and sensuality, after which I turn to two case studies of sensual ethnography from my own ethnographic research in transnational Berlin communities, including a monthly queer club night and a weekly Sufi ritual. In both instances, the possibility of listening, sounding, and responding to sound through dance or other bodily movement is bound up not principally with knowing, whether for participants or myself as ethnographer, though forms of knowledge are certainly in play. Rather, these spaces of intimate sonic encounter privilege the exploration of the serendipities of the sensual and call on participants to engage with that sensuality in direct, sustained ways.

## Reorienting Serendipity

Imagine a man running naked from a bathhouse through a city while crying out intensely. So begins the history of serendipity—at least in one account. When Archimedes had his famous epiphany on mass and displacement as he stepped into a bath, he could not resist the impulse to streak (or maybe he simply could not be bothered to get dressed), and he ran around calling out, “Eureka!” Royston Roberts’s history of scientific serendipity

(1989) begins with “Archimedes—the First Streaker,” followed by a long succession of serendipitous scientists. For Roberts, serendipity is “the gift of finding valuable or agreeable things not sought for or ‘the faculty of making fortunate and unexpected discoveries by accident’ (dictionary definitions)” (ix). He, like many other commentators on serendipity, traces its origins to eighteenth-century correspondence between Horace Walpole and Horace Mann about a Persian fairy tale, “The Three Princes of Serendip” (an old name for Sri Lanka). One of the oldest tellings of the Walpole-Mann correspondence comes from M. J. Rosenau in a 1934 presidential address to bacteriologists; Rosenau begins, “Nowadays, I suppose no one reads Horace Walpole. Sixteen volumes of his letters rest patiently on the shelves of the library. If you pick up Volume II and turn to page 204, you will find one of his chatty letters to Horace Mann, in which he playfully boasts that he has a talisman by which he can find anything he wants by dipping for it. Then he tells how he discovered in an old book on Venetian arms the origin of the badge at the top of the Medici coat-of-arms” (1935:91). Rosenau then relates the following excerpt from a letter dated January 28, 1754:

This discovery, indeed, is almost of that kind which I call *Serendipity*, a very expressive word, which, as I have nothing better to tell you, I shall endeavor to explain to you: you will understand it better by the derivation than by the definition. I once read a silly fairy tale, called “The Princes of Serendip;” and as their Highnesses travelled, they were always making *discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things which they were not in quest of*: for instance, one of them discovered that a mule blind of the right eye had travelled the same road lately, because the grass was eaten only on

the left side, where it was worse than on the right—now do you understand *Serendipity*? (Rosenau 1935:91)

Rosenau, like Roberts, focuses on serendipity as a lens for telling the history of science—or more precisely, of scientific discovery, which for him begins with Christopher Columbus. I will return shortly to the colonial politics built into the term, but not before recounting a sound-centric moment in Rosenau’s history. “One of the best examples of scientific Serendipity,” he continues, “is the discovery, often told to me, by Emile Berliner of the principle of the microphone and telephone transmitter (1935:94).” Like my serendipitous encounter with Pauline Oliveros, the story emphasizes the unexpected merits of conversations on hot summer days:

He was chatting with a telegraph operator at a fire station in Washington on a hot, trying day. The telegraph key was clicking dots and dashes, when the operator casually remarked, “That’s Jim on the other end. I can tell by the touch. A light pressure causes a different click from a firm pressure.” Berliner, who had been working on electric circuits, went home to his garret laboratory and worked out the principle of loose contact. (1935:94)

Here, Rosenau stresses the ways that audible touch was knowable. That’s Jim on the other end. And yet underlying this epistemological stance is a more basic affective engagement between body, telegraph machinery, and the electric current that transmits its signal. Such are the fruits of hot, trying days. This idea of a multi- or cross-sensory form of engagement with the world will figure in prominently in the discussion that follows.

Returning to the origins of serendipity, Robert King Merton and Elinor Barber point out both the orientalizing and the quirky nature of Walpole’s reading. After laying

out the initial circumstances of his correspondence with Mann, they write: “But all this tells us nothing of how it was that Horace Walpole, living in England, in the year 1754 came to merge these particular ingredients to fill a minute space in the English language by creating this strange new word, serendipity” (2004:4–5). It would appear to be meta-serendipity, pulled between broader cultural currents and Walpole’s own idiosyncrasies: “From all indications, this [his invention of the word and letter] was the result of two unrelated sets of circumstances: One is the great efflorescence of interest in the Orient in the eighteenth century; the other, Walpole’s idiosyncratic propensities, which he brought to the reading of the tale of the three princes of Serendip” (5). In elaborating on those idiosyncrasies, they describe him as a social deviant, explaining: “His sensitivity and timidity, his almost effeminate withdrawal from the social and intellectual rough-and-tumble of the time, might have made of him only an ineffectual and ridiculous eccentric had he not also had the unusual strength to turn his weaknesses into virtues” (7). In short, Walpole’s very word “serendipity” acts much like the word and concept of queerness, tugged between a troubling racial history and a kind of emancipatory affect.<sup>1</sup>

## Sensual Ethnography

In July 2014, a colleague wrote to ask me to review a new album of sound compositions and location recordings from the Middle East. Among other things, he noted that this album would resonate well with my interests in “sensual ethnography” and sound studies, noting my involvement with *Sensate: A Journal of Critical Media Experiments* and work

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the history and queerness of the concept of “queer” itself, see Mel Y. Chen 2012:57ff.

I had done at the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard University. Both of these activities grew out of the broader project within a domain of anthropology that has branded itself as “sensory ethnography,” itself a kind of refashioning of visual anthropology. Like visual anthropology, sensory ethnography emphasizes aesthetic craft within the ethnographic process, with interest in experimental narrative forms and non-visual media compositions, as well. The timing was auspicious: I had just completed a 48-minute, 16-channel sound piece, *God Hears Those Who Praise Him*, based on location recordings from several Islamic congregations in Turkish Berlin. The piece was a companion to my recently completed dissertation on those same communities, and it challenged me to confront the possibilities and constraints of sound composition as an act of ethnography.

But of course, this colleague had not actually asked about sensory ethnography—he had asked about sensual ethnography. In subsequent conversations (in person and by email) it became clear that he indeed meant sensory ethnography. And yet, I found his email—or more precisely, the typo in it—weighing on my thinking in ways I consider serendipitous. In particular, it raised a question: What do we mean by “sensory” in sensory ethnography? The obvious answer, and one that circulates informally among colleagues I work with who self-identify with sensory ethnography, is that ethnography in film or sound offers a way to circumvent the constraints of writing that made ethnography such a fraught social and political endeavor in the first place. In short, it was a solution to the “crisis of representation” in anthropology in the 1980s and ’90s, as articulated by James Clifford and George Marcus (1986) and others. Roughly stated, that crisis was a critique of the ideology underpinning “thick description,” so prevalent a few

years earlier, that suggested that careful, exhaustive, interpretive writing could give anthropologists the analytical tools necessary for ethnography. If thick description embraced the *graphē* in ethnography, the crisis of representation stood back with skepticism—but still focused on writing. Because of this tenuous relationship with writing, the story goes, sensory ethnography then emerged as a way to create more equitable forms of representation in which the ethnographer played a less oppressively interpretive role.

And yet does sensory ethnography really solve these problems of representation, or simply defer them? Certainly, observational documentary films or phonographic compositions have sometimes produced compelling pieces of ethnography that realign the relationships between anthropologist, “informant,” and reader/viewer/listener. But they have brought along with them an intellectual baggage that seems rooted in a much older form of anthropology, one which assures us that things and people and places are knowable, and that such knowledge is then the aim of ethnography. Some now-classic pieces that make such claims of sensation-as-knowledge include Steven Feld’s work on acoustemology (1996, 2012), Tomie Hahn’s *Sensational Knowledge* (2007), and Lucien Taylor’s “Iconophobia” (1996), as well as work by Paul Stoller (2004) and Sarah Pink (2009) focusing on a more analytical kind of ethnography of (or rather, about) the sensuous and sensory. This broad claim was a useful bulwark against possible accusations of aestheticizing experience or effacing the political dimensions of cultural activity. For instance, in his extensive writings on the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea, Feld makes very clear that their sonic experience of place—their acoustemology—is not just a phenomenological encounter but also a form of knowledge. “I coined this new term,” he

writes of acoustemology, “to join acoustics and epistemology, to argue for sound as a capacity to know and as a habit of knowing” (xxvii). Sound was a site of knowledge and knowing.

This gesture by Feld and others has been tremendously important in asserting the legitimacy of other non-Western forms of cultural production, but by demanding that human experience with sound yield knowing/knowledge, other kinds of encounters with sound have been largely pushed aside, especially sonic encounters of pleasure. Scholars of sound studies (which might be thought of as overlapping to some degree with sensory ethnography) have often similarly emphasized forms of sonic knowing (for example, Karin Bijsterveld 2014; Veit Erlmann 2014; Ana María Ochoa Gautier 2014), striking an almost defensive posture relative to visual studies, as if to argue that the sonic can also produce knowledge, just like the visual. In both cases, a focus on knowing-through-sound reinscribes—perhaps unintentionally—the telos-driven, goal-oriented forms of academic knowledge production that have long buttressed a Cartesian, colonial-friendly, heteronormative form of knowing the world at a particular distance—not too close to be contaminated by the thing-being-known, but close enough to fit it into a scopic or otherwise sensory regime of modernity (compare Martin Jay 1988). In other words, so long as sound is harnessed as a form of knowing (and only of knowing), it perpetuates those same problematic conditions of knowledge. A sensual ethnography, on the other hand, indulges sensation for its own sake. The body becomes a queer archive of pleasures—past and present—readily explored through failure, through rupture, through misalignment. For all the innovative contributions sound studies has made to music studies, it might be time to re-evaluate the kinds of approaches that scholars of music

studies have cultivated in recent years, especially with regards to the embrace of musical pleasure. Again, what if not just music, but all sound, is sex? Not only sex, or pleasure—but also, not solely knowledge. If musicology can be “carnal,” as Elisabeth Le Guin (2006) has suggested, what might a carnal sound studies look, sound and feel like? What about sensual ethnography?

In hopes of beginning to answer such a question, let me put forward a few tentative focal points of a sensual ethnography. First, sensual ethnography attends carefully to pleasure, and also pain. These categories’ relationship to knowledge is fraught, but neither is reducible to knowledge, no matter how sensational it may be. (Perhaps it should be expected that Suzanne Cusick has also played a critical role in thinking about sound and pain in her work on American torture, euphemistically described as “enhanced interrogation.”<sup>2</sup>) Second, the sensual often takes place at unusual proximities. Mel Y. Chen has written about animacies, or our notions of what possesses “lifeliness,” suggesting that such a notion can itself be queer, “work[ing] to blur the tenuous hierarchy of human-animal-vegetable-mineral with which it is associated” (2012:98). Queerness is a kind of “‘improper affiliation’ . . . located outside of the heteronormative” (104). This blurring, as Chen notes, takes *place*, it takes space, it is located somewhere-relative-to-something. From the vacuous notion of “soundscape” to much more nuanced recent interest in presence, music and sound studies have struggled to articulate just how proximity—whether between two people, a human and an animal, a microphone and a loudspeaker—affects sonic experience and vice-versa. Third (though

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<sup>2</sup> See also Sarah Coakley and Kay Kaufman Shelemay, *Pain and Its Transformations* (2007), as well as William Cheng on “Pleasure’s Discontents” (2013).

perhaps an outgrowth of the second), sensual ethnography would seek out intersections of sonic experience (both producing sound and hearing/listening) with other senses, especially touching, smelling, and tasting. While sound studies has vociferously fought to attain equal footing with visual studies, it runs the risk of producing a default audiovisual stance—an audioscopic regime?—in which the ethnographer stays arms-length away from a person or phenomenon, but never so far that it moves out of visible and audible range. Fourth, if perhaps somewhat paradoxically, it would entail an embrace of surface and description. But by description, I do not mean here a return to Geertzian thick description, but something more akin to Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s ravishing descriptions of athletic beauty (2006), more Pindar than standard academic prose. In a sense, Gumbrecht is simultaneously both caving to the pleasure of spectatorship—a kind of haptic observation—while also actively resisting the allure of interpretation, or at least to interpret prior to savoring the pleasures and power of description.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Gumbrecht’s language continuously veers toward a kind of affective excess emerging from surfaces. His writing evokes a notion of excess suggested by Mark Graham, who argues that “excessive or extravagant phenomena” are key tropes of the anthropology of queerness, including: “the indeterminate nature of matter, the litigious character of things, the unrepresentable fetish, the secretive commodity, the ambiguous and superfluous gift, nomadic smells, implicate value, repeat failures, the unheimlich in the everyday, and now the anthropologist’s body. Excessive phenomena are not recognizable by their scale—size *doesn’t* matter—but by their capacity to depart, to go beyond, to roam and wander off the beaten track” (2014:143).

Such an ethnographic practice would not preclude nor demand the use of writing. It might be “iconophobic” or iconophilic, soundscapey, or as silent as a PDF. It might draw on interviews, or on close listening, or on observations about communities and individuals which they may or may not agree with. Like any ethnographic method, it may be patently inappropriate in certain settings. Finally, it may be willful and well planned, but as Pauline Oliveros, Jack Halberstam, and my review-seeking colleague have all demonstrated in different ways, a sensual ethnography most likely floats and twists serendipitously—sometimes with, sometimes against the best-laid ethnographic plans—inhabiting the interstices of intuition, forethought, spontaneous performance (as ethnographer and as human being) in interaction with the world beyond the body—but also always already slipping into and pervading the body.

Again, a sensual ethnography is not devoid of knowing, it simply revels in the pleasures and pains of the world prior to indulging the pleasures of telling what it all means. As Rebecca Solnit has suggested, speaking in praise of Virginia Woolf, “the language of bold assertion is simpler, less taxing, than the language of nuance and ambiguity and speculation” (2014:88). And so, with these assertions now out of the way, let me turn to a space of more nuance and ambiguity and speculation—namely, actual experiences I have had in the course of fieldwork-based research with Berlin’s diasporic communities, especially from Turkey, at the intersection of the queer, the serendipitous, and the sensual.

## Example 1. Holding Hands in Gayhane

I was surprised when he reached for my hand. It wasn’t the first time something of that sort had happened, but it had been a while. Years, I guess, as I think through it now. I

simply wasn't ready for it. As soon as our fingers clasped, I felt dryness, almost paper-like, especially compared to the clammy sweatiness that had slowly distilled on my own fingers, mostly the result of holding an empty bottle of soda for too long. But before I had time to think more about his papery hands (or my not-very-papery ones) we had to negotiate what would happen next. I have to admit, in that moment, I was a little annoyed. It was going on 4:00 a.m., and I was more or less ready to leave the club, my friends having already gone home and my legs growing wearier with each beat. Beyond that, I felt like I had adopted a sufficiently antisocial posture to allow myself to dance, more or less alone, and simply soak in the scene. It was a moment of what some friends and I used to call "misanthropology." And frankly, I had been enjoying it.

But there we were, with a spate of decisions to make, all in a moment, all without any more discussion than a flick of the wrist and a hopeful aiming-with-the-eyes. Not expecting this encounter, I had no idea of where his body was, how he moved at the hips, who he had been dancing with before. I had noticed him with a group of four friends, one of whom had taken his shirt off a while—maybe an hour?—earlier. Now they were all looking on with big, laughy grins. Which only exacerbated my own anxieties about what was supposed to happen next. Would we continue facing each other and simply dance holding hands? Would one of us turn? Which of us was leading? For a moment, my arm felt like a cog slipping against another, caught up in an uncertain holding pattern. Then—and this entire encounter thus far probably lasted less than four beats of a standard-tempo house tune, so probably no more than a couple seconds—he asserted himself quite definitively and, although he was several inches shorter than me, he raised his arm above

my head and haltingly I spun under his arm and into his embrace. He laughed, and I could smell his sticky-sweet breath.

Within a moment, he then undid everything, spinning me back out to our original starting position, and I sensed we were done—a four-bar fling on the dance floor. But no, he pivoted hard toward me, pushed my hand up with his own, and assertively spun himself into my arms. Somehow, in that moment my mind raced to an episode of *Dancing with the Stars* I had watched only a few days earlier, featuring Nyle DiMarco, a model and Deaf activist, who had danced blindfolded with his partner Peta Murgatroyd (Season 22, Week 9). With my eyes and ears, I still failed to manage this spin, and after a brief awkward laugh together, we simultaneously—at last, coordinated!—spun apart from one another. I leaned in toward him and asked (or yelled, really) what his name was. In German. He told me it was Ahmad. Our conversation got stuck there as I asked a couple other questions, first in German, then English, to no avail. He only responded, “Refugee!” I asked him in my own broken Arabic where he was from and he said, “Syria.” At that point, he nudged away from me and slinked back into the safety of his group of friends.

Over the years, my usual routine at Gayhane—a name riffing on the Turkish *meyhane* nightclub—where this encounter with Ahmad happened, entailed convincing friends who were interested but not otherwise planning on coming along to join me, at least for a couple hours. Oftentimes those friends had friends there, other times we made friends there—and sometimes we just kept to ourselves. I had first gone there exactly five years earlier, in May 2011, during a preliminary research trip, shortly before my daughter was born. When I first began my research, and before it drifted toward and narrowed in

on the Islamic acoustics of Turkish Berlin, I had cast my ethnographic net wide. As such, I thought club events might figure prominently in my project, including Gayhane, held monthly at the famed SO36 nightclub in the Kreuzberg district, as well as events around the corner at Südblock, described by the German queer news site *Queerio* as follows: “The audience is colorful—from longtime residents of Kreuzberg to international partygoers—with a high queer-ratio [*Queer-Anteil*] but without really being an exclusively queer venue [*Queer-Location*]” (2016).<sup>4</sup> Gayhane, for its part, has become a venerable institution within Berlin’s nightlife as well as, according to one friend and former-regular, “a gay tourist trap.” The SO36 website frames the event in terms of its connection to Turkish folk dance “House of Halay for lesbians and gays. Belly Gogos, a midnight show and a Homo-Oriental dancefloor from DJane Ipek and guest DJs. People stream in colorful masses to the monthly belly-dance event with beats. . . . For 16 years now, lesbians, gays, trans people and their friends gather on the Homo-Oriental dancefloor, which DJs Ipek, mikki\_p, Khandan and Ceto get moving with Turkish, Arab, as well as Greek and Hebrew pop music.”<sup>5</sup>

In the ensuing years, I continued to go whenever I was living in or visiting Berlin, sometimes planning trips around the monthly event even after it became clear I would not be discussing it in my dissertation or (most likely) the resulting book. The event warrants its own much closer study, ranging from the music played to the ways social identities are crafted (or re-crafted) on the dance floor, from the costumes of the performers (with

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<sup>4</sup> <http://queerio.de/lieblingsorte-suedblock/>, accessed May 28, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> <http://so36.de/regulars/gayhane/>, accessed May 28, 2016.

mikki\_p typically donning a fez and male belly dancer Zadiel Sasmaz wearing just a pair of low-cut, sequined pants) to the outside activist organizations supported by/in solidarity with the event.<sup>6</sup> The event poses a veritable goldmine of questions about intersectionality and identity; various kinds of gazes (is there an aural equivalent of a gaze?), including my own; Berlin's relationship with immigrants; and so on. In short, the event is ripe for a queer acoustemological project—about knowing and performing queerness through sound and vice-versa.

But what about a sensual ethnography? First, as I sit here writing this in the early morning hours, I hear a ringing in my ears—and the first birds of morning outside my window. I don't know if it's still lingering from Gayhane a few nights ago, or if it's simply the slow, steady march of hearing loss and tinnitus. But it feels very similar to what I feel every time I leave Gayhane (or other dance clubs, but they figure less and less in my research routines). My ears serve as a kind of recursive archive that strangely and unexpectedly draws me back to the light, almost feather-weight sensation of walking out of a club after sunrise and hearing those same birds in counterpoint with the same high-pitched drone. The ringing also makes me sad—it makes me wonder what my conversations in clubs might have been like with Ahmad and others were I able to hear better. I free associate, thinking of a gay and lesbian House of Halay as a kind of distant

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<sup>6</sup> As of this writing, no extended treatment of Gayhane exists in academic literature or the popular press, though it makes frequent, if limited appearances in discussions on queerness, race, and music in Berlin. See Jennifer Petzen 2004:25–27; Elizabeth Bridges 2005:231–33; Kira Kosnick 2005, 2007:65–69; Nicholas Kulish 2008; and Martin Hildebrandt 2014.

cousin of Marina Abramović's media installation *Balkan Erotic Epic* (2005), with its erotic, homosocial imagery built on a foundation of traditional dance and ritual. More to the point, I think of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's interest in texture in her landmark *Touching Feeling* (2003). In her discussion of Henry James and his "intense fecal interest," she points out that "to perceive texture is never to ask or know What is it like? Nor even just How does *it* impinge on *me*? Textural perception always explores two other questions as well: How did it get that way? and What could I do with it?" (13). Texture quickly becomes a multisensory site that engages with questions of epistemology, but more typically tends toward phenomenology and affect, and especially the "particular intimacy that seems to subsist between textures and emotions" (17). That intimacy, I would suggest, is not just between people and things—how does *it* impinge on *me*—but also between people and people, between dry hands and sweaty palms, between ringing ears and the parched post-sugar-beverage film on my tongue and lips as I smile at Ahmad and his friends. As he twists under my arm or vice-versa, we impinge on each other: texturally, bodily, touching-feelingly, sonically.

## Example 2. Tasting God's Names

In all truthfulness, Gayhane only vaguely reminds me of Marina Abramović's performance art. But it absolutely reminds me of the multisensory intimacies of shared corporeal space in Sufi *zikrs*. That association is part interpretive, part ethnographic, and part serendipitous. Mostly it's my interpretation—I have rarely heard anyone in the Sufi communities I work in suggest such a connection without my prompting. But some have, including a music teacher who used to talk about certain Alevi ceremonies (which are not universally regarded as having any connection to Sufism) as culminating in "entering a

trance” (*transa girmek*). In addition, the ethnographic reading of this situation stems from the banalities of scheduling. When in Berlin, my regular Friday night activity has been and remains attending the weekly *zikir* of a small congregation, or *zaviye*, of Halveti-Cerrahi (pronounced “Jerrahi”) dervishes in the district of Wedding.<sup>7</sup> Schedules vary, but a typical night with them begins around 7:00 or 8:00 p.m. and often does not end until 4:00 a.m., with extended *sohbet* conversations with the *baba* who leads the order and a *zikir* that typically runs about an hour, rarely starting before 11:30 p.m.

This leads me to the serendipity of this pairing. After moving to Berlin for an extended period in late 2011, I attended my first *zikir* with Sheikh Abdullah Halis, who was also formerly associated with the Halveti-Cerrahi order, at a Tai Chi Studio in the district of Schöneberg, only to then race over to SO36 in order to meet up with friends for Gayhane. But I aspired to continue yet further, staying there all night until the early morning prayers (at that time of year, around 6:00 a.m.), which included a special *zikir*-like recitation just around the block from the club at the Mevlana mosque. Ultimately, I was too tired to make it through the entire combination, and I also had been discouraged from going directly from a club to prayers, even if I had not been drinking or doing anything else that would technically prohibit my participation. (To make matters worse, I also received a phone call while at Gayhane informing me that my daughter was seriously ill. Or at least that’s what I rightly surmised at the time, but I once again had a hard time finding a place with decent reception and enough quiet that I could hear.) The date was January 28, 2012—bleeding into January 29.

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<sup>7</sup> For more on the Halveti-Cerrahi order, see Şenay Yola 1982 and Mustafa Özdamar 1997.

In calling this night serendipitous, I mean not that it was a surprisingly auspicious moment that led to a Eureka! moment. There was certainly some of that, as I was confronted by what I perceived then and now in both groups as strikingly similar forms of bodily movement, driving sonic pulses, powerful and extended repetitions, communal intimacy and a homosocial erotics that cut across the senses. But it was also a terrible stomach-punch in which my own worst fears as an ethnographer were initially allayed by a “successful” first visit to Abdullah Halis’s *zikr* and subsequent arrival with friends for Gayhane, only to realize that my plans for the year were about to be profoundly overturned because of family health issues. Here was ethnographic pleasure and pain, back-to-back in a way that set into motion a string of poor choices and a spate of failures—in research, interpersonal relations, and health—in (what felt like) excruciating circumstances. These were not failures that then or now feel like queer successes, or anything that could be construed as such. But since the first time I read Halberstam’s book, published shortly before I moved to Berlin (Fall 2011), I have held out hope that there may be some more queerly positive outcomes from what still today feel like abject failures—that it might be (or become) “a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique. As a practice, failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed, failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities” (2011:88). Or perhaps this was precisely the kind of creation of queer affect “which disrupts, momentarily, the fortification of the white hetero male body and opens it up to other forms of desire” (66).

Whatever the case, this extended crisis (from my own otherwise “fortified” vantage) pushed me closer to the Cerrahi Sufi order as a point of consistency in an otherwise turbulent time. That search for intimacy, understood broadly, found quick reciprocation in their bodily and sonic practices. During their *sohbet* conversations—derived from the Arabic root *ṣ-h-b*, or friendship, and often called instead *muhabbet*, from the root *ḥ-b-b*, or love—dervishes sat mostly silently while the *baba* who led the group held forth in response to questions. According to the rules of *adab* (or formalized etiquette), they were directed not to speak to one another in his presence. This verbal proscription, however, opened up other avenues for expressing love and affection for one another, through knowing smiles, winks, and looks, perhaps accompanied by quick bodily gestures (for example, placing the right hand over the heart and slightly bowing the head). Everyone sat on the floor around the perimeter of the room, making these kinds of expressions quite effective across the room. But whenever I would sit down, I found myself immediately being touched as a silent way of expressing welcome—often with no visual acknowledgment—from the dervishes on either side of me. They would squeeze my thigh or rub my back, or sometimes simply lean on my shoulder. In each case, these actions often extended from a single gesture (for example, a thigh-squeeze) to a longer-term posture, as a dervish might sit with his hand on my thigh for several minutes. These gestures were both a huge relief and somewhat unsettling: on the one hand, they gave me reassurance every time I entered the group’s *zaviye* that I was a welcomed guest and, if not part of their community, at least I was not an intrusive nuisance—I think. At the same time, they were unsettling not because they violated my personal space (though they did so, at least according to the norms of social spaces I

typically inhabited), but because they made so clear that the physical terms of engagement were not and could never be commensurate across the cultural divide that separated their working-class Turkish, Kurdish, and Laz bodies from my own academicized, white-American body. I might be able to learn and even roughly replicate the social scripts that guided behavior there, but our bodies inhabited different spaces nonetheless.

Still, these hours-long conversations with a friend draped on my shoulder or rubbing my back for long stretches heightened my sensitivities to the kinds of shared bodily practices that inhabited that mostly homosocial space, many of which emerged most powerfully in the *zikir* ceremonies. *Zikir* is usually translated as “remembrance” or “recitation of the names of God,” but it also entails distinct body positions during those recitations, including some which are designed to refine the body. In other words, they’re really painful. For example, part of the code of *adab* is to kneel/sit on one’s feet when in the presence of the sheikh. This unsurprisingly limits circulation in the legs and feet, causing dervishes to lean forward at specified times in the ceremony and kick their feet together to get blood flowing, if only for a moment. On more than one occasion, the entire hour-long *zikir* was spent in this posture (rather than standing up partway through), including one Thursday evening in April 2012 at the order’s main *tekke* in Istanbul, in which Sheikh Tuğrul İnançer decided to commemorate the passing of an earlier sheikh by having his dervishes remain seated throughout. From my small plot of carpet far at the back of the room, I found myself in tremendous pain because I was so tightly packed into the room with other participants that I could not even lean forward to relieve the weight on my feet and hit them together. Instead, all of us in my part of the room had to pull on

the shoulders of the people immediately in front of us in order to kneel upright and lean forward enough to re-establish blood flow. All the while, we were reciting names and attributes of God with very particular vocal timbres and rhythms, as directed by the sheikh. Mastering this pain, I would later be told repeatedly, was no accidental byproduct of the ritual procedure but rather a central aspect of it, in which bodily sensation was brought into dialogue with this “recitation of names” or “remembrance.” To remember or recite was to also feel (or cease to feel) the usual physical markers of bodily function.

But most days, after the opening portions of the *zikr* came the *devran*, or circular turning. Here the kind of touching-feeling-soundings were even more overt, as dervishes (and myself as a participant) would hold hands to begin, then move hands to one another’s shoulders, ultimately culminating in a group formation called the *Bedevi topu*, a kind of snaking circle of dervishes with arms around one another that collapses on itself. Once everyone had packed closely together, with the sheikh at the center, dervishes put their hands on one another’s backs and began bouncing actively up and down. I was told repeatedly that one of the key purposes of this moment was to feel the heartbeat of the person in front of you. But from my experience, the most palpable sensation in those moments was that of touching sweat, or rather, sweaty shirts. Not only could I feel the momentary state of the heart (at least in theory—I found it difficult to feel that with much clarity given how much everyone was moving), but I could feel the recent history of my neighboring dervishes’ bodies, soaked up in the fibers of their shirts.

Furthermore, sweat was not merely a byproduct of this ritual process, but also a sign of its efficacy. One evening after *zikr*, I was asking İsmail *baba* (literally meaning “father,” but here a Sufi leader like a sheikh) about the confluence of senses in the *zikr*—

the powerful smell of burning incense, the recitations and religious songs, the taste of tea and fruit/sweets that followed, and above all, the touching of/by neighboring dervishes. He responded, telling a dervish named Mehmet, “Go and get someone’s shirt.” (Most of the dervishes changed shirts after the *zikr* ceremony.) Mehmet did so and brought it into the room and was then told to give it to me to smell. I took a quick whiff and smiled and nodded, unsure what was supposed to be happening. I was then asked repeatedly, “Does the shirt stink?” I said no, which I meant. It did smell like fresh sweat that, once dried, probably would stink. But İsmail *baba* was not satisfied, and asked Mehmet to push the shirt into my face so I could get a deep, intimate whiff of its smell. After I once again affirmed its non-stink status, he explained that there was a tradition that the sweat of a pious dervish would not smell bad after *zikr*. He then continued to explain how different recited names have different flavors on the tongue—that *zikr* is something that is tasteable and smellable. Over the years that followed, I had many more experiences with these multisensory interfaces, as well as other more informal intimacies on group trips to Turkey: sleeping next to other dervishes, listening to them snore; watching dervishes give each other extended back massages while in a warm spring; and yet being repulsed by French tourists at the same resort who failed to use changing cabins while putting on swim clothes.

Based on vague, veiled conversations with dervishes (and statistical probability), I presume that several dervishes in this group are gay but not out.<sup>8</sup> But the kinds of

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<sup>8</sup> One Muslim friend who is out and who has spent time in Sufi rituals read an earlier draft of this article. Interestingly, he responded that while he agreed *zikr* was an intimate practice, he felt there was greater intimacy still in the particular arrangement of bodies in

erotically charged, homosocial intimacies that predominate the group's activities already have a queer flavor (and smell, and touch) to them, independent of overt sexual orientation. While divine entities—God, angels, the spirits of the deceased—may not be the usual focus of theories of animacy (again, following Chen 2012), these dervishes' encounter with such entities through sonically rich acts like *zikr* creates a space of sensuality and blurred, liminal bodily states. But my serendipitous transit from a *zikr* to Gayhane suggested a powerfully connective, racially inflected queer moment (even if would probably not be regarded as such by the dervishes involved) in which their religious, multisensory articulations of animacy resist the presumed forms of success. They may be failing in the eyes of the German government at “successfully integrating”—though this attitude by German politicians has shifted dramatically since the mass arrival of Syrian refugees, suggesting a complex set of racial attitudes. Ultimately this dislocated, counterpublic modernity is perhaps suggestive not just of a general “queer art of failure” but of a more specific queer of color form of that same art.

## Conclusion: Beethoven Goes to Gayhane?

To conclude, I return to Pauline Oliveros. As part of a 1970s “postcard theatre” collaboration with artist Alison Knowles, Oliveros dressed up (roughly) as Beethoven and posed in a garden for a photograph, which she then captioned, “Beethoven was a lesbian.” On some level, these postcards are most impressive in their dramatic interpretation of history—with one short phrase, Oliveros queers the canon. But once

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more traditional prayers (standing in rows with arms lightly touching with prostrations fostering proximity with the person one row forward and one row back).

again, they can be understood as something entirely more sensual than just a hermeneutic leap (which is not to say that such a leap in this case is not pleasurable!). More dramatically, Oliveros's queering of Beethoven embraces the pleasures his music afforded—pleasures that were too decadent for both the European avant-garde (that is, Stockhausen and Boulez) and American experimentalists like John Cage (Mockus 2008:78).<sup>9</sup> She thought of the idea as primarily humorous: “Beethoven was a lesbian . . . let's twist this thing around! If we're out of the camp, then let's turn it around. I mean, who's going to prove that he wasn't? . . . You know, if we don't have any 'great women composers' let's make sure they weren't passing as men” (in Mockus 2008:77). What if Beethoven was not just a lesbian, but a lesbian dervish? (Perhaps he would have been Bektashi too, given his Turkish March, ostensibly based on Ottoman janissary music.) Similarly, just a week before my encounter with Ahmad at Gayhane, Patricia Kopatchinskaja and the Mahler Chamber Orchestra presented a concert program, “Bye Bye Beethoven,” ostensibly because “Classical music is like a ship, where everyone stands at the stern and looks at how beautiful things are where we came from. But no one dares go to the bow and see what will come next.”<sup>10</sup> But doesn't this just prove that Beethoven and Oliveros, with her now-canonic *Bye Bye Butterfly*, are indeed on the same wavelength? (And if Kopatchinskaja freed him from classical music, he most likely would have been at Gayhane a few days later.) Serendipitous timing, indeed. And

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<sup>9</sup> By posing as Beethoven, Oliveros is not merely re-interpreting Beethoven; she is also emphatically (if subtly) inscribing herself within Western art music, as well.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.mahlerchamber.com/concerts/tours/17>, accessed June 1, 2016.

perhaps interpretation still holds sensual possibilities. Fittingly, Oliveros writes, “As a musician, I am interested in the sensual nature of sound, its power of release and change. In my performances throughout the world, I try to transmit to the audience the way I experience sound both when I hear it and when I play it. I call this way of experiencing sound ‘deep listening’” (in Mockus 2008:11). Maybe then sensual ethnography is just another name for the lesbian, and more broadly queer, musicalities of deep listening?