

Sonic Vibrations

Itzel Corona Aguilar

*Sonic tumult and upheaval—it was resistance as music. It was a noise strike.*¹

Saidiya Hartman

*When words fail me, I can make up for it through material, visual, or sonic projects. . .*²

Maria Gaspar

Relying on archival records and newspaper accounts, Saidiya Hartman writes about an early twentieth-century sonic riot in a women’s prison, through which she reanimates the utterances, words, and profound breadth of Black women’s lives during this time. When the “investigation of abuse and torture at the reformatory made rioting-colored women a newsworthy topic,” white journalists described the scene of revolt as a “noise strike.”³ One can imagine how the rhythmic shouting and clanking of objects against the cell bars may have produced an impenetrable dissonance weaved together by an undying love to keep each other alive. As Hartman writes, “in the discordant assembly, they found a hearing in one another.”⁴

Sound carries on beyond the hold.



Maria Gaspar, lead artist, *Radioactive: Stories from Beyond the Wall*, 2016-2018. Workshop exercise led by Maria Gaspar and Michael de Anda Muñiz at the Cook County Jail, Chicago. Ensemble members held captive, playfully dancing and laughing during a warm-up exercise. Photo by Sarah J. Rhee.

In the discordant assembly of the prison hold, sound produced through revolt and despair seeps through cement and flesh, creating ties of remembrance. Sound bonds them all. In the contemporary hold, plastic chairs are slanging against white obedient floors. Yellow wooden pencils speak through hisses of lead against black and white paper surfaces. The subtle sonic eeriness

¹ Saidiya Hartman, “Riot and Refrain,” in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (W.W. Norton, 2020), 283.

² Maria Gaspar, unpublished interview with the author, November 26, 2024.

³ Hartman, “Riot and Refrain,” 280.

⁴ Hartman, “Riot and Refrain,” 283.

emitted from fluorescent light fixtures, iron locked into place, and punitive voices vibrating through the intercom into the walls of the Cook County Jail and the bodies of everyone confined—sonic vibrations moving within and beyond. The clashing voices of those inside coming together as one.

No space to even think.

In interdisciplinary artist [Maria Gaspar's](#) *Radioactive: Stories from Beyond the Wall* (2016-18), members of the community and passersby came together to witness audio and animations created by current and formerly detained individuals of the Cook County Jail. The largest building of Chicago's West Side, the jail abuts the working-class residential area of Lawndale. A series of community-engaged radio and visual broadcasts, *Radioactive* was presented on September 15 and 16, 2018, in a large-scale public art event at the north-end wall of the Cook County Jail. The voices, creative stories, and visual narratives of those currently incarcerated were broadcast and projected from inside the jail onto the wall turned screen and airspace outside its border.

As an art installation and political intervention, *Radioactive* performs an “insurgent aesthetics” through sensorial elements within and beyond the confines of the jail, what Ronak Kapadia defines as an otherwise vocalization of less-known knowledge created by persecuted communities and their own displaced flesh and blood.⁵ The vibrations of hands coming together to express celebration for a peer's success in the workshop; the resonating warmth of laughter in chest cavities exuding connection throughout the gut; the sounds of saliva and flesh rubbing up against gums shifting about as smiles grow in the faces of men held captive, capture and simultaneously pull apart the colonial violence that upholds their contemporary reality. As Chicana scholar Stephanie Fetta writes, “The soma works at the organismic level—at the level of musculature, organs (such as the stomach and the bladder), sudden corporeal sounds and actions (e.g., burping, stomach rumbles, crying, gasping)—the soma expressed what one believes and feels in an unmitigated fashion.”⁶ Sonic vibrations exuding from the corporeal reality of each of the participants held captive.



Radioactive: Stories from Beyond the Wall, workshop drawing warm-up by Masean Spencer, 2017.

⁵ See Ronak K Kapadia, *Insurgent Aesthetics: Security and the Queer Life of the Forever War* (Duke University Press, 2019).

⁶ Stephanie Fetta, *Shaming into Brown: Somatic Transactions of Race in Latina/o Literature* (The Ohio State University Press, 2018), 7.



The *ensemble*, a term Gaspar employs to refer to the group of men who volunteered to participate in the workshops that took place within Cook County Jail, came together to project and broadcast their intimate and creative stories through diverse media such as drawing, performance, poetry, and audio. With Gaspar's guidance, the primary contributors of the project, men held captive, creatively developed strategies for challenging the governing symbols of punishment and captivity, including the prison itself, consistently serving as an aesthetic reminder of isolation, torture, and the impossibility of experiencing freedom. Through dance and touch, they embraced one another, a physical act typically surveilled, scrutinized, and not permitted in the prison context. Flesh coming together, as members of the ensemble delicately pressed their fingertips against another peer's hand, following along to music. Bodies moving in circles. Eyes closed. A warm-up exercise to get the heart feeling. A slight collapse of penal time, "the measure of time as punishment for captive people."⁷ As members of the ensemble came together, glimpses of connection and solace were resurrected, aspects of daily life that the prison and detention center aim to control and annihilate. The participants remained captive, nothing physically changed about where their bodies were located, but there was a transcendence of time and space when they came together, and their voices radiated through the jail and beyond.

Finding solace in sonic vibrations. Transcendence.

Black and religious studies scholar Ashon Crawley poses the question: "Can a sound destabilize what we think is and can be 'normal'? How can sound present us otherwise worlds of possibility. . . ."⁸ As members of the ensemble embrace one another, through touch and sound, the potential for their connection is brought to the forefront of their collective creative process. What is at stake? Their lives, their freedom, their in/ability to think. In *Radioactive*, sonic utterances play a pivotal role in displaying the intimacy of their encounter, encounters between men that are forbidden to take place, and punishable if they do, but not in these circumstances. In that room, within the prison, and beyond, where the ensemble gathered, they disrupted the normative violence of the jail through "queering sound" that "presumes relations of plentitude and multiplicity," gathering and organizing sonic intimacies, visualizing the impossible, influencing audiences to move and connect in harmony.⁹

Gaspar records the voices of members of the ensemble to be broadcast and projected outside the jail wall. Sonic resistance and protection are at work here, a potential for subverting paradigms of violence that aim to disappear and annihilate the stories and lives of those incarcerated. In joining the performance and creation of *Radioactive*, readers are tethered to a geopolitical timeline that creates meaning of every minuscule interaction that happened during the production and presentation of the final installation. In his discussion of Gaspar's newest video work, *Clamour* (2021), a sixty-hour time-lapse video documentation of the demolition of the oldest section of Cook County Jail, workshop co-lead for *Radioactive*, Michael De Anda Muñiz writes about the role objects play, in this case remnants of the jail, which provide a visual of the "tools of unfreedom," to find their weaknesses and obliterate the punitive continuum that defines the criminal legal system.¹⁰ By

⁷ Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* (Massachusetts Harvard University Press, 2020), 8.

⁸ Ashon Crawley, "That There Might Be Queer Sound by Ashon Crawley," *The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage*, October 29, 2014, <https://www.pewcenterarts.org/post/there-might-be-queer-sound-ashon-crawley>.

⁹ Crawley, "That There Might Be."

¹⁰ Michael De Anda Muñiz, "Maria Gaspar's Abolitionist Dreams Permeate 'Compositions,'" *The Latinx Project*, March 1, 2024, <https://www.latinxproject.nyu.edu/interventions/maria-gaspar-compositions>.

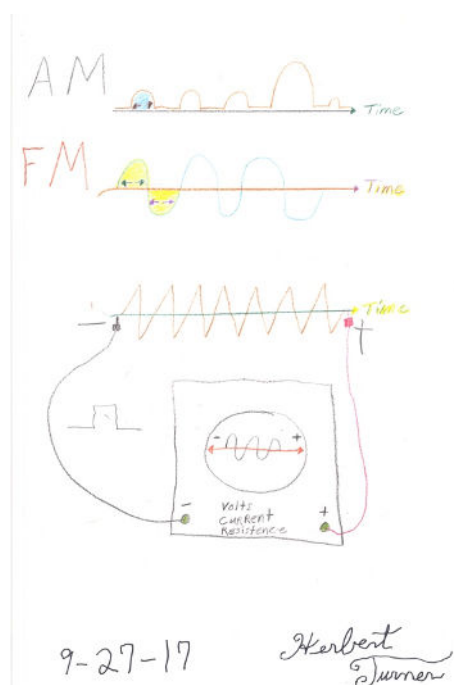


tracing the role of sound in the performance and creation of *Radioactive*, a landscape of unharmonious stories emerges.

Captivity crushes the soul, sound repairs it.

What does sound do to the soul? The standard-issue prison sandals that members of the ensemble are forced to wear slam against cold white floors as they dance, jump, and perform erratic movements. Plastic chairs manifest screeches of resistance as they are dragged across the jail for the ensemble. Connection and solidarity are forbidden in this place and even the chairs voice their disavowal of the collaboration happening in the room. Members of the ensemble play with metal brackets from a foldable plastic table to create new sonic vibrations and slamming their hands against its porous surfaces, an extension of the jail itself, the table is no longer impenetrable. Ziploc transparent bags held against a microphone playfully unveil the repurposing of objects to create meaning through sound. Auditory projections move through one million cycles per second through radio waves, suturing the gaping phantom wound that separates detained people from those on the outside.

Sound frequencies heal.



Radioactive: Stories from Beyond the Wall, Project Erasure Poetry Workshop, drawing by Herbert Turner, 2017.

According to transdisciplinary visual artist, choreographer, and healer, Guadalupe Maravilla, sound therapy, a practice that uses vibrations produced by gongs, purifies the water in our bodies that carries stress, impurities, and even disease. As a trained sound healer, Maravilla facilitates therapeutic workshops for undocumented (im)migrants, cancer patients, and those in need of healing, relying on specific frequencies that interconnectedly correspond to various parts of the body and the solar system. In Gaspar's *Radioactive* workshops, members of the ensemble breathe and exhale deeply, releasing wind vibrations from the esophagus, towards one another, into the realm of and beyond Cook County Jail. Through beatboxing, singing, and moaning "mhmmmm," internal



organs experience moments of solace; the tongue revolts, tapping the roof of the mouth, a glottal stop formed by obstructing airflow in the vocal tract. New sounds emerge: bus doors opening and closing; cars honking in delirium speaking through speed; the steps of people walking by; the wind crowding and embracing all the participants of this moment; members of the audience breathing alongside the voices of those reaching through the recordings, all collapsing time and the material conditions that lead to this moment. Laughter enters the stage again, sound frequencies functioning as subtle reminders that sound prevails.

Hartman writes about how “chants and cries escaped the confines of the prison even if their bodies did not ... a philosophy of freedom that reached back to slave songs and circle dances—the sonic gifts of struggle and flight, death and refusal, became music or moaning or joyful noise or discordant sound.”¹¹ Impenetrable reverberations of revolt originating from the soul, weaved together by a commitment to honor each other, even if on the outside, society does not. Frederick Douglass also writes, “they would sing, as a chorus, to words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves.”¹² A devotional soundtrack expressing the possibilities of sacred world-making in the most grotesque spaces of humanity, sites of confinement where deprivation of freedom becomes the primary vessel for connection and inharmonious sound. A melody of possibilities outside of confinement.

Sound heals.

¹¹ Hartman, “Riot and Refrain,” 283.

¹² Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (Clydesdale Press, 1845), 31.

