

(Dis)orienting Hysteria: Reading Perception, Pain, and Techno Music as Mad Materialist Affect

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Abstract

This article engages a Mad methodology to identify hysteria as a critical site of Mad engagement and to attend to the potentialities and incomprehensibilities at the intersection of chronic vulvar pain and techno music. Beginning with an encounter between pain and sound, I explore the potential of inter-sensory experiences as a form of micropolitical resistance to perception as disciplined. By deploying a diffractive approach to reading affect theorizing, I merge literature related to madness, pain, sound, and the coloniality of knowledge production to develop a nuanced articulation of *Mad materialist affect*. In doing so, I perform a conceptual intervention that confronts the subversive effects of disciplinary boundaries and makes visible the relational histories and present encounters that discursively and materially constitute chronic vulvar pain and techno music. I offer an analytic that attends to hysteria as a colonial apparatus while simultaneously exploring the re-signification of hysteria as a generative state of (dis)orientation.

Keywords: Mad Studies, affect theory, hysteria, vulvodynia, techno music, knowledge production

I approach this essay through a memory of my first conscious encounter with pain and sonics, which occurred in a repurposed factory space in West Toronto/Tkaronto in the summer of 2015. I went with friends to see Detroit techno music¹ legend Jeff Mills. At the time, I was working through what is often referred to by those with chronic pain and illness as a “flare-up,” reflecting the sensory fluidity of chronic pain. The pain monopolized my attention and made me acutely aware of the border between self and other. As we approached the venue by car that evening, I recall feeling the physical impact of the beat before my ears could pick up on the music. While still distant from the source of the sound, I remained keenly aware of the perceptive border between my body and sensation. However, as we edged nearer, the pain that vibrated chronically in my body slowly escaped into the matched register of sonic vibration. My charged nerves untensed in the hysterical suturing of sound: The affective force of vibration and pulsating light engulfed me into a consensual disorientation.

In “The Contingency of Pain,” Ahmed (2004, pp. 20–41) offered a phenomenological account of pain that identified the evaluation of a sensation as

¹ Techno music, also referred to simply as *techno*, is a sub-genre of electronic music. See “Techno as Histrionic Affect,” p. 25, for details.

pain as a perceptual process that is both produced and productive, whereby pain(ful) affects materialize one's awareness of one's bodily "surface" (p. 24). Ahmed (2004) clarified, "It is not that pain *causes* the forming of the surface.... Rather, it is through the flow of sensations and feelings that *become* conscious as pain and pleasure that different surfaces are established" (p. 24). This reading leads me to understand a pain flare-up, here, as making visible the border between self and other. In this essay, I engage with Ahmed's (2004) analysis of pain by discerning the mechanisms through which my own "body-subject" has come to surface, examining how sound might disrupt these mechanisms, and attending to the social, historical, and material-discursive construction of chronic vulvar pain as a product of colonial encounters and epistemologies.²

The experience with which I started this article can be recognized as interrupting the process detailed by Ahmed (2004), whereby sensations coded as pain harden one's corporal awareness: sonic hysterics that defied discursive legibility produced an encounter so potent that I experienced a moment of (dis)orientation or (mis)recognition that obscured my sense of self, time, and space. Reading my experience alongside Connolly's (2010) writing on perception as the product of "corporeo-cultural discipline" (p. 187) opens up further possibilities for understanding the production of pain, as well as the potentialities of "intersensory" (p. 181) experiences. Applied to my experience wherein sound disrupted perceived pain, reading Ahmed (2004) and Connolly (2010) together expands possibilities for understanding chronic pain as a form of disciplined perception. Chronic vulvar pain, also known according to the diagnostic signifier *vulvodynia*,³ is disciplined in that it cannot be separated from the "coloniality" (Quijano, 2007) of medical and psy discourse, categorization, and the logics of white hetero-patriarchy that have framed the limits of my knowing and sensing (Patsavas, 2014). Grappling with perception, then, provides a path to interrogate pain outside of biomedical and psy rationalities and attend to the relational effects that pain imprints on both the corporal and social body, through dynamic relations of power (Ahmed, 2004).

As a form of "micropolitical" (Connolly, 2010, p. 190) resistance to perception as disciplined, Connolly (2010) proposes experimenting with inter-sensory experiences. Affective intensities can produce a state of disorientation with the potential to interrupt the "anticipatory habits" (p. 191) which govern perception and "sharpen our awareness of the multiple inter-involvements between affect, memory, and tactility in the organization of perception" (Connolly, 2010, p. 192).

Although Ahmed (2004) did not specifically attend to the subversive possibilities of disorientation in relation to pain, I draw links between the potentialities of painful affects and queer affect, addressed by Ahmed (2006) in

² An early version of this essay was presented at "The Queer Art of Feeling: Sensation, Emotion and the Body in Queer Cultures" (2019) at Cambridge University. I am grateful to Sara Ahmed, who delivered the keynote address and offered encouraging remarks after I presented this paper.

³ See Bornstein et al. (2016) for further reading related to the diagnostic classification *vulvodynia*.

Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others. This allows me to suggest that painful affects themselves can produce a form of (dis)orientation, as though one is *out of place*. Ahmed (2006) demonstrated that moments of (dis)orientation are often accompanied by disciplinary affects that attempt to fix one back in line; however, it is often in moments of disorientation that subjects “learn what it means to be oriented in the first place” (2006, p. 131). Said another way, examination of normative orientation becomes increasingly possible when breaking the norm by occupying a vantage point from someplace else. What is common between Ahmed’s (2006) and Connolly’s (2010) approaches to disorientation is the implication that moments of disruption, or the felt sense of displacement, can move one to examine pain from outside the narrow orientation of biomedicine and white-hetero-patriarchy. In this conceptual essay, I draw on theories of sound, techno, and electronic music broadly to explore electronic music’s potential to facilitate the movement of a subject’s gaze outside, or rather, back onto, the textures of normative orientation. In doing so I examine the encounter between chronic pain and techno music, detailed above, as productive of a moment of (dis)orientation that houses the potentiality to interrupt flows of power implicated in maintaining disciplined perception and complex relations of power.

My examination of pain and sound is grounded in a “mad methodology” framed by Bruce (2017, p. 306) and by LeFrançois and Voronka (in press), whose writing outlined frameworks that centre Mad knowledge and affective states, as well as Mad, postcolonial, Black, and critical race theorizing. For LeFrançois and Voronka (in press), a “mad theory as methodology” is rooted in Mad and Disability Studies and can be powerfully enacted through a “maddening of ethics,” informed by an “ethics of unruliness” that allows for the destabilizing of white anti-Black rationalities by “call[ing] for a decolonial commitment to unveil and disrupt colonial ways of knowing—and colonial ways of making the other knowable—in order to open spaces for that which is unspeakable within Western epistemes” (in press). Their piece opened with a citational nod to Bruce’s (2017) potent argument that “beyond approaching madness as object of analysis, mad studies is most potent when it critically and ethically animates madness itself as methodology” (Bruce, 2017, p. 306). Thus, I deploy a Mad methodology to confront psy-knowledges as technologies of race and coloniality (LeFrançois & Voronka, in press) and to locate “philosophy within ‘pathology’” (Bruce, 2017, p. 306).

In order to more effectively examine the subjects of this article via Mad methodology, I bring diverse theorizing of affect into conversation to argue chronic vulvar pain and techno music can be understood as forms of hysteria, or as constituting *histrionic affect*, locating hysteria as a critical site of Mad engagement. Aligning with Mad Studies’ appeal to transdisciplinary inquiry (Mills & LeFrançois, 2018), I further my argument by applying a broad interpretation to affect—A maddening of ethics supports me to be “resistant to rule-based definitions” (LeFrançois & Voronka, in press) and to refuse the ontological and epistemological distinctions that are often made between different schools of theorizing that boundary affect, feeling, emotion, and sensation. I merge Ahmed’s (2004, 2006, 2007, 2010) phenomenological approach to feeling, emotion, and affect as

historically and socially produced, circulating and disproportionality “sticking” to bodies in patterns that serve social order; Gorman’s (2017) articulation of affect as a signifier of race and madness, and her Mad/queer-of-colour corrective that articulated affect pertaining to “the experience of intensification of ideology” (p. 311), notably related to living under white supremacy; Connolly’s (2010) neuro-phenomenologist engagement with perception and governmentality; Thompson’s (2017) interrogation of sonic ontology and white universality; and Barad’s (2003, 2007, 2010, 2014, 2015) theorizing of agential realism, which lends affect to material-discursive relations.

In order to map entanglements of power, pain, and sound, I employ the logics of diffraction and intra-action as derived from Barad’s theory of agential realism (2007). I also employ diffraction as a methodology in reading the texts that inform this article (Barad, 2007). Diffractive reading entails “reading texts intra-actively through one another, enacting new patterns of engagement, attending to how exclusions *matter*” (Barad, 2010, p. 243; emphasis added), which, by encouraging dialogue and challenging disciplinary boundaries (Barad, 2007) aligns powerfully with a Mad methodology to expose and contend with the colonial apparatus of concept and discipline formation (LeFrançois & Voronka, in press; Mills & LeFrançois, 2018). An ethical practice of unruliness allows me to therefore engage with the onto-epistemologies of Barad, Ahmed, Connolly, Gorman, Bruce, and Thompson, among others, with uneven movement. Given that the writing process is embedded in the process of world-making (Barad, 2007), my commitment to madness and unruliness, in reason, design, and application, supports my ability to hold theoretical and methodological tensions normally thought incongruent. In doing so, I explore histrionic affect by developing a nuanced conceptualization of what I here refer to as *Mad materialist affect*.

Mapping Hysteria, Chronic Vulvar Pain, and Techno: Beyond Diagnostics

Dis(orienting) Madness and Maddening Affect

Merging Mad theorizing with Ahmed and Connolly’s scholarship allows for an understanding of affective intensities, including madness and histrionic affect, as permitting a state of (dis)orientation that makes possible the recognition and interrogation of dominant power relations. These affective intensities do not simply reflect disciplined perception, but simultaneously open up avenues for greater analysis via distorted perceptions. I suggest that one example of this is implied by Gorman’s (2017) writing.

Similar to Ahmed’s (2004) approach to pain, Gorman (2017) is less interested in *what madness is* so much as *what madness does*, specifically to signify the white from racialized subject—and in fact warns that:

To take the appearance of affect as essential is to theorize madness as a quintessential mode of being, rather than as a name for an assemblage of an

individual's engagements with sedimented formations of social/cultural relations. (p. 310)

For Gorman, this also risks reifying diagnostic and racial classifications that the psy-disciplines have been founded on. However, in identifying affect as that which is coded as an excess to white subjectivity, Gorman's (2017) writing supports me to locate potential in madness as a threat to civilized subjectivity, and as therefore disrupting the stability of the colonial project.

The simultaneous presence of disciplined perception and refusal is explicitly illustrated in Bruce's (2017) potent analysis of anti-Black modernity, wherein she identified madness as a technology of white supremacy, while, also, a state of (dis)orientation that can house (ir)rationalities necessary to defy the logics of modernist "Reason" (p. 304), which forms the bedrock of the colonial episteme. Bruce (2017) appropriates the pathologization of Black fugitivity in the antebellum south, elaborating Toni Morrison's writing of Black madness in terms of self-preservation, where to lose one's mind is to escape from Reason:

Morrison suggests that 'going mad' was *also* a strategy to clutch hold of one's mind when Reason would steal or smash it. Indeed, if Reason is benefactor of white supremacy, proponent of antiblack slavocracy, and patron of patriarchal dominion, a black enslaved woman might fare better going insane instead. (p. 305)

The line between madness and (dis)orientation can be further threaded by looking to "Disorienting Disability" (2019), a special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* that engaged Ahmed's (2006) approach to (dis)orientation in a meditation on disability. In the introduction of the special issue, editors Friedner and Weingarten (2019, pp. 483–490) outlined their intention to present disability not as an identity, site of diversity, or biomedical condition, but rather as an analytic dedicated to troubling understandings of disability as they have been popularized across biomedical and social sites. Ahmed's (2006) phenomenological approach to orientation is specifically taken up in relation to the body by Lajoie (2019), who examined illness as a site of disorientation that produces a sense "of being out of place" (Harbin, 2012, p. 263), while also encouraging analysis and promoting more unstable orientations to self.

Hysteria, I suggest, is a form of madness that, although constructed through the epistemic violence of psy-disciplinary knowledge identified by Mills & LeFrançois (2018), allows for disorientation, housing both disciplined perception and refusal, that can make possible rebel perspective. A maddening of ethics allows me to trespass on psy-borders that have confined the intelligibility of hysteria to pathology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and whiteness, and to critically engage the histrionic affect, or disorienting "affective intensity" (Ringrose & Renold, 2014, p. 774) of chronic vulvar pain and electronic music. Grounding my exploration of techno music and chronic vulvar pain in their shared or common affective intensities, I argue that vulvar pain and techno can be identified as forms of histrionic affect, and that reckoning with these particular forms of madness creates the potential for generative (dis)orientation.

Chronic Vulvar Pain as Histrionic Affect

While “‘hysteria’ and its variants neurasthenia and nervousness” emerged during the industrialization of the 19th century (Briggs, 2000, p. 247), these diagnostic constructions are characterized by unstable genealogies that reflect the fluctuating nature of the socio-political projects in which they have been embedded (Tam, 2014) and the instability of psychiatric categorization more generally (LeFrançois & Diamond, 2014). Aligning with an understanding that “any critical investigation of madness and modernity must confront the matters of blackness and antiblackness in the foundation of modern Reason” (Bruce, 2017, p. 304), 19th-century hysteria must be understood as a product of colonial knowledge and scientific epistemologies. Informed by the racial logics of psychiatry, gynecology, and evolutionary science, hysteria was conceptualized as a diagnosis of “nervous weakness” that was applied to, and simultaneously worked to construct, bourgeoisie white women through explanations of their fragility, or unsupported accounts of pain (Briggs, 2000; see also Showalter, 1987). In historical accounts of hysteria, medical authorities supported and advanced conceptualizations of pain perception as correlated with civilized sensation and sensibility and thus operated to define wealthy white women from racialized and, to a lesser extent, from poor and working-class women (Briggs, 2000; Cooper Owens 2017). Claims that Black women could not feel pain were mobilized in the name of gynecological and national progress to justify heinous forms of experimentation on Black enslaved women (Cooper Owens, 2017; Dudley, 2012; Snorton, 2017); and today, these racial logics provide critical context to the contemporary erasure of Black bodies from vulvar pain discourse and diagnostics (Labuski, 2015, 2017; Tosh & Carson, 2016). Tam’s (2014) discussion of the role played by neurasthenia, as weaponized against Asian migrant workers in the contemporary transnational context, further supports the idea that hysteria’s diagnosis functions as a blunt instrument, such that “shifting constructions of [hysteria] helped placate historically specific anxieties about gender, race, and class” (p. 341).

Feminist philosophers have begun to articulate the subversive character of hysteria as a manifestation of patriarchy, but as Parker (2001) has highlighted, a reliance on Freud and Irigaray has resulted in an interpretation of hysteria that has primarily remained contained to whiteness, the individual, or family. Furthermore, Gorman (2017), in relation to the study of madness, has implicated Freud in the theorizing of “white bourgeois subjectivity” (p. 312). By rendering unintelligible the relationship between hysteria and race, theorizing of hysteria has not only failed to account for racialized refusal but, moreover, has contributed to the reproduction of colonial logics that define gender and race through psy-discourses. These connections have been elucidated outside academia; Parker (2001) highlighted how the resistance potential for engaging hysteria is reflected in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* through the focus on social oppression and collective refusal. Just as the terminologies that capture hysteria shift according to time and context, Parker’s (2001) analysis offered an expanded frame through which to recognize hysteria, whereby “hysteria is a malaise of a particular culture at a particular moment” (p. 9). By centring Mad theory and an ethics of unruliness, I extend Parker’s (2001)

reasoning to propose a reading of hysteria to mean any affective intensity (Ringrose & Renold, 2014) sutured to social circumstance. Attunement to the varied manifestations of hysteria reveals how states of hysteria have been both produced and coded through one's contact with certain "objects" within the orientation of whiteness (Ahmed, 2007, p. 152).

Today, processes of anti-Black sanism (Meerei, Abdillahi, & Poole, 2016) and hetero-patriarchal psychiatrization operate through chronic vulvar pain as they historically did through hysteria, and serve as technologies in organizing the social, subjectivity, and sensation. Chronic vulvar pain, also known as vulvodynia, is captured by *DSM-5* diagnosis *genito-pelvic pain/penetration disorder* (Dias-Amaral & Marques-Pinto, 2018) and, like hysteria, is rationalized through neurological logics, whereby pain is often associated with "central sensitization" of the nervous system (Sadownik, 2014). Labuski (2015) detailed the striking similarity between 19th-century hysteria and contemporary diagnoses attached to chronic vulvar pain to note that it is not necessary for hysteria to be applied as a formal diagnosis for its very same logics to be reproduced through different technologies.

That the colonial ordering of bodies can produce both violence and unaccounted for or subversive effects is made visible by reading together Gorman's (2017) Mad understanding of affect as that which is represented as outside of legibility, with Labuski (2015), who engaged chronic vulvar pain through Showalter's understanding of hysteria as a "mimic disorder," which for Labuski may explain how both racialized and hetero-patriarchal notions of pain become "acted out" and embodied, but to the point of potential refusal (p. 64). As Parker (2001) wrote, "hysterical mimicry" involves "mimicking hegemonic modes of behaviour to excess—by taking on, in the most exaggerated form, what is expected but to such an extreme degree that the end result is the opposite of compliance" (p. 3). Extending on Labuski's (2015) suggestion that discourses of patriarchy become embodied to excess, such that the result positions them outside of the "heterogendering act of penetrative intercourse" (Kaler, 2006, p. 50), I argue that the phenomena of vulvodynia itself can be recognized as a manifestation of histrionic affect, whereby the experience of pain escapes codification through language: an affective intensity with disorienting potential. Chronic vulvar pain is a form of hysteria constituting an affective intensity in response to untenable social conditions and coded through hetero-patriarchy and "racialized medical imaginaries" (Labuski, 2017, p. 166).

Techno as Histrionic Affect

Techno music is a sub-genre of electronic music that emerged from post-industrial Detroit in the late 1980s. Fusing Afrosonic influences of African drumming, soul, Motown and Chicago house, Detroit techno is characterized by funky, repetitive beat patterns, and 4/4 time at 105 or 150 beats per minute (Sicko, 1999; Vecchiola, 2011). At its inception, the sounds were largely created on hardware drum machines such as Roland's TR-808 and TR-909, which transmitted an especially grainy or raw texture compared to contemporary compact audio software (Haq & Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen, 2016; Sicko, 1999). As a consequence of globalization, capitalism, and white consumption, techno is

often mistaken as a genre insourced from Europe, where it first garnered mass popularity in the early 1990s (Dalphond, 2018). European techno shares a notable resonance with Electronic Body Music, punk and hardcore, and is typically characterized by harsh, dense, sounds with a generally industrial aesthetic (McLeod, 2001). The use of arpeggiation and repetition is similar across contemporary manifestations of Detroit and European genres (Lozej, 2016). Although *techno* now operates as an umbrella term for a wide range of sub-genres, its roots lie in a distinctly Black tradition (Dalphond, 2018).

I approach techno as an affective intensity, from an ethical stance proposed by Ahmed (2004) for considering how to respond to the pain of others, which “involves being open to being affected by that which one cannot know or feel” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 30). Thompson (2017) challenged sound studies as shrouded in white universalism that refutes social and cultural specificities, asserting that an “ontology [of sound] requires resituating amongst its co-productive relations with the social world—with culture, materialism, history, politics, science, technology, epistemology, aesthetics, experience and perception” (p. 278). Her comparative reading of *Airport Symphony* (2007), a compilation of electronic music by mostly white artists, versus *Airport Music for Black Folk* (2016), an experimental production by Black artist and composer Chino Amobi, is, for me, crucial in its attention to the spatial-temporal character of sonic orientation. Thompson’s (2017) work confirms that situatedness is paramount to perceiving the “meaning” of sound, as well as the presence of affective intensities:

Airport Music for Black Folk can be heard to make audible the strain of blackness against itself: it sounds the violent securitization and surveillance of black bodies-as-objects, but refuses this by giving voice to—and thus rupturing—blackness-as-objecthood and the object/subject distinction. Where *Airport Symphony* morphs the banality of the generic into the beauty of the general, *Airport Music for Black Folk* claims the troubled air of blackness straining against itself and, with this, makes audible, through sound’s affective resonances and sonic ‘ugliness’, the general, racialized violence that is excluded by and ordinarily imperceptible to white aurality. (p. 278)

The potentiality Thompson (2017) assigned to the “affective resonances of sonic ‘ugliness’” can be located, too, within Detroit techno, especially in light of its origins as “mechanized music rooted in recognition of the downside of mechanization” (Tsitsos, 2018, p. 275). Techno’s founders, Juan Atkins, Derrick May, and Kevin Saunderson, commonly known as the Belleville Three, produced sounds that echoed the dystopian beat of the auto-industry crash (Vecchiola, 2011). The connection between techno aesthetics and the social landscape of economic devastation has been argued as a form of subversive mechanistic appropriation (Williams, 2001). As Lozej (2016) stated:

[Techno] expresses machine aesthetics more acutely than any other EDM genre via excessively repetitive elements, electronic percussion, minimal melody, stark ambience, relatively static harmony and a conscious eschewing of acoustic (or simulated) instruments. Techno is not just

transparently made by machines; it musicalizes (and practically fetishizes) our present-day immersion in repetitive, mechanized [sic], computerized [sic] systems (Kanzru 2004). (p. 12)

An additional layer to appreciating the affective intensities of techno music has been added by Maynard's (2018) analysis of Afrofuturist creatives and Black speculative fiction. Maynard (2018) detailed the work of Drexciya, a Black electro-techno group active in Detroit in the early 1990s, whose music constituted a sonic re-imagining of the Middle Passage. Drexciya is the name of the underwater world now inhabited by the unborn babies of countless enslaved African pregnant women whose lives were robbed en route from the African continent to settler colonies of regions now known as North and South America. The sonic madness produced by Drexciya houses an affective intensity, which for Maynard (2018) constituted an inverted response to the white modernist human and allows for an understanding of techno music as (dis)oriented from modernity. When read through Bruce (2017), along with an understanding of sonic ontology as socially, culturally, historically, and technologically mediated (Barad, 2007; Thompson, 2017), techno becomes intelligible as a form of Mad appropriation, whereby sonic madness, or a histrionic affect, exceeds white subjectivity as a fugitivity from Reason (Bruce, 2017) and thereby escapes white codification. As Halberstam (2013) captured in the introduction to Harney and Moten's *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, "listening to cacophony and noise tells us that there is a wild beyond the structures we inhabit and that inhabit us" (p. 7).

Potentials of the Illegible

Electronic music, like chronic vulvar pain, exhibits a discursive illegibility that situates it within the "semiotic," a site Parker (2001), by extending on Kristeva (1984) and Showalter (1987), identified as defying language, order, and logic, thereby subverting the structures of codification from which it emerged. I identify the semiotic nature of techno and pain as able to harbour subversive knowledge, which, as Ahmed (2004) said regarding the pain of others, cannot be universally known. While I argue that the recognition of pain as a sensation happens through disciplinary processes, the inevitable failure to place words to pain can operate as a refusal to render pain knowable (Scarry, 1985), or catalogued; and, thus, a refusal to render "mad bodies ... knowable from the perspective of (white) psychiatric authority" (LeFrançois & Voronka, in press). I proffer the same can be said for techno music, and in this regard, I diverge from Parker (2001) where she distinguishes pathology from protest, denying the potential of a narrative that forever escapes language. For a story to be rendered productive, Parker (2001) argued, it must eventually make its way back to the discursive. I, instead, am attentive to Gorman (2017), who, in establishing how the Mad subject is constructed as the racialized subject, discerned emotions, constructed as name-able, from madness, constructed as illegible, and implicated the mainstreaming of madness as a project of rescuing white Mad subjects back into white subjectivity. Considering this, I follow Bruce (2017) and propose it is precisely within states deemed Mad and Sick that protest and refusal can be located. Like Parker (2001), Bruce's (2017) analysis is

framed by Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, but is discerning in that one's retreat into madness is situated within the broader project of de-stabilizing a colonial future that depends on the success of Western modernity and "Reason." Therefore, I appreciate both chronic vulvar pain and techno, in their position as incommunicable affective states, or forms of hysteria, as disorienting frames containing disruptive potentialities.

Positioning Intra-action/Diffraction: Onto-Epistemology and Methodology

Intra-action and Diffraction as Onto-Epistemology

Intra-action and diffraction, the logics provided by Barad's (2007) onto-epistemology of agential realism, operate as analytics as I examine entanglements of power, pain, and sound. Intra-action, distinct from interaction, understands the intelligibility of phenomena as partial and impermanent rather than separate and fixed. Meanwhile, diffraction, which was first taken up by feminist science scholar Haraway (1992), and later elaborated by Barad (2003), engages the physical properties of light waves to attend to the mechanics through which patterns of difference "come to matter" or materialize through the relationship between matter and meaning, or the intra-action of "material-discursive practices" (p. 810). This means that knowledge observations are always situated and directly entangled in outcome. An implication of diffraction and intra-action is that my theoretical apparatus and analysis cannot be bracketed from the subject under study or the phenomena that emerge through my analysis. Apparatus, including frameworks, disciplines, and concepts, are not merely tools of measurement but boundary-making instruments (Barad, 2007)—instruments that I understand as enacting cuts through the measurements of Reason (Bruce, 2017).

The potentialities of pain, hysteria, and sound come into sharper view when examined as phenomena produced through material, discursive, and social intra-action. Doing so allows for an understanding of how the materiality of pain and the affective intensities of techno have been constituted through social and historical networks, and relatedly, the work of those affective intensities in reproducing, governing, and orienting bodies. According to Barad's agential realist ontology, phenomena are produced through "material-discursive practices" that result in boundaries, whereby "distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action" (Barad, 2007, p. 33). Boundaries appear as a result of these encounters and reflect "diffractive patterns" (p. 72), or the materialization of difference (Barad, 2007). These practices, or "apparatuses provide the conditions for the possibility of determinate boundaries and properties of 'objects' within phenomena, where '*phenomena*' are the *ontological inseparability of objects as apparatuses*" (pp. 127–128). By applying this logic to vulvodinia and techno, diffraction can operate as an analytic that explores the processes through which a multiplicity of differential affects emerges as an effect of material-discursive practices, as well as the diffractive patterns that might come from their intra-action.

It is through these relations that bodies, and bodily pain, form. An agential realist lens allows me to read knowledge, race, gender, and pain as co-constituted in and through one another as dynamic relations imbued with colonial histories and contemporaries, psychiatric tools, practitioners, institutional architecture, and alliances of Mad refusal. Justice is inherent to the remaking of matter and meaning (Barad, 2010), whereby “that which is determinate (e.g. intelligible) is materially haunted by—infused with—that which is constitutively excluded (remains indeterminate, e.g., unintelligible)” (Barad, 2014, p. 178). Similarly, an agential realist account of techno affect supports me in attending to techno as a phenomena constituted through the intra-action of that which is both audible and inaudible (Barad, 2015), and the affective considerations across, within, and between material, social, technological, and discursive sites. Unlike chronic pain, where a large part of my examination focuses on material-discursive practices entangled with coloniality and whiteness, my engagement with electronic music focuses on the production and perception of techno’s affective intensities, and the possibilities that open up in relation to their (dis)orienting affects. This is present in the particular sounds produced across generations of techno producers and DJs, and is animated by the affective intensities of race, the body, surveillance, and the shifting economies and technological lands that characterize Detroit techno (Dalphond, 2018).

Diffraction and/as Mad Methodology

Diffractionally reading texts and concepts across disciplines firmly aligns with a maddening of ethics and supports my analysis by exposing the mechanisms through which knowledge production and disciplinary formation operate as a colonial apparatus (LeFrançois & Voronka, in press; Mills & LeFrançois, 2018), a material-discursive practice that is mobilized to organize, define, and govern knowledge and bodies in diverse projects of settler-nation-state and empire. Thus, reading across Barad, Ahmed, Connolly, Gorman, Bruce, and Thompson demonstrates how the social is always embedded in meaning-making, matter, and materialization.

Diffractional reading also allows me to prioritize challenges posed by Bruce (2017), Gorman (2017), and other Mad and Disability scholars who appeared in “Mad Futures: Affect/Theory/Violence,” a special forum on madness and affect theorizing that was edited by Aho, Ben-Moshe, & Hilton (2017) for the *American Quarterly*. These articles held to account much affect theorizing within the “affective turn” (Gorman, 2017) for centring whiteness and non-disabled bodyminds and thus ultimately reproducing the affective status and classification of subjects and states deemed non-normative, pathological, or criminal. The accounting provided by this forum of the affective impact produced by conditions of settler colonialism, white supremacy and contingent relations of power lead me to reject the essentialization of affective states, and perform a diffractional reading of affect that attends to an understanding of affect “as the product of repetition and sedimentation of ideology” (Gorman, 2017, p. 309). Diffractional reading also enables me to examine how, in relation to pain and sound, perception and orientation function as iterative apparatus that are entangled in the becoming of new relations.

Although I am using Barad's diffractive logics as a model for thinking through sound and chronic pain, I do not faithfully apply the onto-epistemological principles that define Barad's work or regard this work as exceptional. In addition to the critiques noted above, I am particularly attentive to calls from queer, Indigenous, Black, and racialized scholars, such as Ahmed (2010),⁴ Goh (2017), King (2017), Todd (2016), and Willey (2016) who have implicated Euro-western philosophical engagement with new materialist and post-human theorizing as suspect, or violent, in that it continues to centre white colonial epistemologies, which displace the intellectual labour of Indigenous, Black, post-colonial, and feminist studies of materiality, ontology, and science and constructs new boundaries, or diffractive patterns, that function to cordon off Black, Indigenous, and other subaltern ontologies of being, knowing, and in this case, sound.

Mad Materialist Affect

The logics of intra-action and diffraction detailed above, housed within a Mad methodology and a commitment to Mad ethics, makes possible the conceptualization of *Mad materialist affect*. As an analytic, Mad materialist affect merges theorizations of affect across a range of disciplines in order to attend to madness and emotion, feeling, sensation, energy, force, or sound, with the objective being to produce a dynamic accounting of the mechanics and relations through which affective intensities are constituted (and constituting), the disciplinary or orienting work they effect, as well as possible interruptions they gesture toward. Specifically, I broadly analyze three major branches of affect theory: those of queer/Mad-of-colour scholars such as Ahmed and Gorman, who consider affect as socially produced and as the cumulative products of ideology; thinkers such as Connolly (2010), who differentiated between affect as pre-conscious and emotions as culturally mediated; and affect as understood via Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 1987), whose adherents, like Barad, assign agency and affective capacity to non-human bodies.

By understanding all knowledge to be partial and situated, Mad materialist affect makes it possible to grapple with multiplicity and the contradictions between these approaches to understanding affect to advance an understanding that the social and material are always entangled, co-constituted, and situated. Emphasis is placed on objects of perception and their affect, including how orientation is shaped by and shapes body-subjects (Ahmed, 2004). I consider the mechanics of knowledge and power through which affects land on bodies and shape phenomena to produce diffractive patterns that are (re)produced and subverted through (dis)orientation. This (dis)orientation is enabled by states of madness or hysteria, which in its positioning outside of discursive legibility supports its potential as a site of refusal, as well as an analysis of the governing function of Reason (Bruce, 2017). Mad

⁴ Although some of the theories I engage with in this article are connected to new materialist theorizing, I follow Ahmed (2010), who challenges the "new" in new materialism by acknowledging feminism's long engagement with the role of materiality in shaping power relations. For further reading on the coloniality of the ontological turn in euro-western theorizing see Todd (2016), as well as King's (2017) analysis of necro-epistemologies embedded in the claim made by post-humanism to go beyond the human.

materialist affect enables engagement with the potentialities of affect, and in this case, with how the histrionic affect of pain and electronic music can intra-act and disorient in generative ways.

Examining Chronic Vulvar Pain as Mad Materialist Affect

Ahmed (2004) recognized the inseparability of emotion, affect, and bodily feelings as socially produced and circulating. Feelings, or affects, are not produced internally, as a psychological response, but rather move through space, impress upon, and “stick,” disproportionately, to bodies as a product of history and in relation to one’s orientation, and which also “involve ... affective forms of reorientation” (p. 8). Ahmed (2004) generated an understanding that “feelings do not reside in subjects or objects but are produced as effects of circulation,” which “allows us to think about the ‘sociality’ of emotion” (p. 8).

Like Ahmed (2004), Connolly (2010) took a phenomenological approach to affect; however, rather than approaching affect as socially circulating, Connolly (2010) held an appreciation of affect as agentic, or preconscious, and productive through neuro-processes. I reject the ontological primacy that Connolly (2010) prescribed to affect; however, I locate generative potential in his understanding that perception operates as an expression of discipline, history, and sociality. Although neither Connolly (2010) nor Ahmed (2004) engaged with specifics for how bodily sensations are perceived, I extend on Ahmed’s (2004) decision not to differentiate between emotion, feeling, and affect and engage with the relationship between the perception of a sensation identified as pain, and the objects and impressions surrounding that recognition. Moreover, from an agential realist account, pain perception is necessarily recognized as a phenomenon produced through intra-action between discursive and material constituents.

A diffractive reading of Ahmed (2004) and Connolly (2010) allows for a robust appreciation of how affects are disciplined in relation to spatiality and orientation, including their productive effects. Ahmed (2006) offered an understanding of emotions and affects as produced through encounters with objects which impress upon the surfaces of bodies in differential ways based on one’s orientation; relatedly, they affect new relations and movements:

For an object to make this impression is dependent on past histories, which surface as impressions on the skin. At the same time, emotions shape what bodies do in the present, or how they are moved by the objects they approach. (p. 2)

From this reading, I understand the materiality of pain not as one essential intensity, but as a multiplicity of affects that shape the surfaces of bodies through encounters with the objects of, and the orientations of settler colonialism, white supremacy, hetero-patriarchy, and bio-medicalization, in intra-action with the specificities of race, gender, time, and place. Connolly’s (2010) approach to orientation assists in considering how the objects of these orientations discipline perception through a sense of “*potential* observability” (p. 188). That is, through “the anticipation of being seen by the objects you see” (p. 192). Noting the “half-second”

delay between receiving a sensation and experiencing a culturally mediated perception, Connolly (2010) explained:

To perceive depth is implicitly to feel yourself as an object of vision. In a disciplinary society this implicit sense morphs into a more intensive experience of being an actual or potential object of surveillance in a national security state.... As such methods and devices proliferate, the experience of potential observability becomes an active element in everyday experience. (p. 188)

It is within this gap, Connolly (2010) claimed, that subjects relate to sensations and perceive and respond to the world in relation to affective disciplining. In relation to pain, I have come to understand the implications of potential observability as operating multi-directionally, such that not only is the perception of one's own bodily sensations governed but so, too, is one's perception, or understanding, of possible sensations in others. Said another way, orientations of coloniality, whiteness, and hetero-patriarchy that discipline one's perception of one's own pain also discipline one's perception of others' pain. Reading Ahmed and Connolly together therefore supports an analysis of pain, as perceived in self and other, as historical, relational, and material.

To further examine how the "pain of others" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 1) is perceived and materialized I turn to Labuski (2015), who, in grappling with the racialization of pain, engaged Ahmed's (2007) "A Phenomenology of Whiteness." Labuski (2015) meditated on whiteness as an orienting force in recognizing the pain of others, asking "whether the *vulvar* pain of an African-American woman can be apprehended as such if she is first encountered in the resident clinic—the space of *pelvic* pain (Ahmed 2007)" (p. 63). Labuski (2015) was speaking to the racial logics and histories embedded in medical spaces, tools and practices, such that vulvar pain brings certain "habits," both personal and interpersonal, that render what is knowable and see-able for different bodies (Ahmed, 2007). By reading the similarities in diagnostic profile and racialized discourses of white nervous sensitivity between 19th-century hysteria and the contemporary conceptualization of chronic vulvar pain alongside the pattern in which white women are assumed more likely to experience chronic vulvar pain, and Black women chronic pelvic pain—associated with less precise sensations, as well as different, predominantly lifestyle-related risk factors—Labuski (2015) argued that chronic vulvar pain, like hysteria, must be interrogated not only for its role in reflecting, but also in constructing "privileged whiteness" (p. 66). I recognize this in the way that chronic pain, like hysteria, emerges through the intra-action of diverse forms of racist technology, such as diagnostic practices that reproduce racial folds and the white modern human. Reading Barad's (2007) suggestion that apparatus result in the differential materialization of phenomena, implicates diagnostic tools and "racialized medical imaginaries" (Labuski, 2017, p. 166) in the materialization of pain as racialized.

Labuski (2015) referenced vulvar pain as a "*biocultural*" product (citing Wile & Allen, 2013) product or new materialist "*entanglement*" (citing Barad, 2007), speaking to the way "that events and ideas thought to be exclusively social are registered *and* reflected by material bodies, and that disease conditions are constituted by this

multidirectional process” (Labuski, 2015, p. 4). I must point out that my acknowledging the body as produced in relation to sociality should not be confused, here, with the neuro-logics of pain processing, such as those outlined by Sadownik (2014), wherein psychiatric rationalities are subversively embedded in pain explanations and interventions. As Tam (2014) revealed regarding the psychiatrization and somatization of racialized oppression and dissent, I argue medical research and practices that overemphasize the incidence of innocuous sensitization in women’s pain serves to quell social protest and pathologize social traumas.

This social-material entanglement was also implied through Gorman’s (2017) depiction of affect, which I propose can be appreciated as extending a Mad materialist affect response to Ahmed (2004), as well as Labuski’s (2015) suggestion that chronic pain produces privileged whiteness: that is, as a social manifestation, or “the experience of the intensification of ideology, in which the diversifying complexes mediating social relations vanish into the appearance of unmediated essence” (Gorman, 2017, p. 311). However, Gorman distinguished this understanding from common theorizing of affect pertaining to “capacities to affect and be affected” (p. 311) at the level of “nonconscious bodily capacities” (p. 309), and detailed the crucial role that “representations of madness” (p. 311) have and continue to play in securing Ferreira da Silva’s (2007) ground-breaking claim that “the modern (white) subject is initiated in its subject-hood through its capacity to *affect* and *not to be affected*” (Gorman, 2017 p. 311). Unlike Ahmed (2004), who didn’t distinguish affect from emotion, Gorman (2017) claimed a crucial difference exists related to representation, whereby emotions are discursively organized, as opposed to affects, which are presented as illegible and thus akin to madness. This results in a system of signification where, “those who are sane have emotions, while those who are pathological have affects” (p. 311). Thus, reading chronic vulvar pain in relation to Gorman’s (2017) articulation of affect, madness, and white supremacy allows for an understanding of chronic vulvar pain as a phenomenon historically, socially, and materially produced by and implicated in the (re)production of whiteness. Although chronic vulvar pain is a diagnosis most often applied to white women, who also are subject to sexist and psychiatric violence, the diagnosis operates as a material-discursive practice that through coloniality, hetero-patriarchy, and rationality secures white subjectivity, defined against the racial Other. In recognizing vulvodinia in relation to hysterical logics of nervous sensitivity, and therefore affectability, I propose, not that the white vulvar pain subject is outside of whiteness (Gorman, 2017), but as with hysteria, that sex and gender differentiation are technologies of racial differentiation (Schuller, 2018), and that the psychiatric production of whiteness is generated, in the case of vulvar pain, through a certain shade of madness. Mad materialist affect enables the dual awareness that ideology and discursive practices constitute pain and codify normative orientations, while said pain also constitutes a form of (dis)orientation.

Simultaneously, engaging pain through a Mad methodology that draws on Ahmed (2006), Gorman (2017), and Bruce (2017), reveals how the affective intensity of vulvar pain phenomena can constitute a form of (dis)orientation. As Ahmed (2006) said of queer affects, pain(ful) affect, too, can be said to create a

sense of (dis)placement, demanding that one becomes attentive to where one is situated and the forces one encounters. Reading Ahmed and Connolly together illuminates pain itself as an example of affective intensities that constitute a place from which to “more readily call into question simple models of vision and better appreciate how a disciplinary society inflects affect-imbued perception” (Connolly, 2010, p. 192).

Histrionic Encounters

In this section, I theorize encounters between chronic pain and techno music as sites of affective intensity and disorientation. Engaging techno music as histrionic affect, as read through a Mad materialist affect lens, supports me in identifying techno’s affective intensities as animated across generations of sonic shifts, producers, and DJs—all present in the encounter detailed at the start of this essay.

Techno emerged through the intra-action of an economic downfall, in the context of neoliberalism and white supremacy; a changing technological landscape; the trace impressions of house, funk and soul; collective organizing; generative sites of escape; Black craft; and the success of an underground economy—which can all be mapped onto the aesthetic and subversive qualities of Detroit techno (Dalphond, 2018). Thus, even within states of potential (dis)orientation, the act of listening or becoming is not simply a neutral encounter between bodies and sonic affect. Affective intensities circulate and intra-act, sticking to and shaping bodies in ways that are both constituting of and always already a product of race, gender, and sex (Ahmed, 2004). Given these relationships, I do not suggest there exists a state of innocence that is disconnected from power or history. What I propose is the value of working from within a situated state of wonder regarding the potentiality of (dis)orientation, as experienced through the histrionic affects of pain and sonic encounters. A Mad materialist affect framework supports an understanding of which affective intensities matter in shaping my encounters between pain and techno music, and therefore the specific impressions one might identify as a result. An unresolved tension for me in this work relates to my place as a white settler engaging this literature, and with a “post human [affect]” (Williams, 2001, p. 154) made possible through the utopian mapping of Afrofuturism (Maynard, 2018).

In a discussion regarding the affective turn in ethnomusicology, Hofman (2015) brought Ahmed (2004, 2010) into conversation to advocate for a dialogic approach to sonic affect and relationality that blends the material and ideological:

To quote Sara Ahmed, “I do not assume there is something called affect that stands apart or has autonomy” but rather that it is something related to the “messiness of the experiential” (2010: 30)... For theorizing about sonic affect as impersonal intensity and force, I agree that auditory experience is much more than just hearing or the bodily experience of the sequences of sound. It is multi-layered and marked by extra-auditory experiences based in the social context of the moment of the experience. (p. 48)

Hofman’s (2015) approach is useful in considering the open-ended nature of sonic affect as it intra-acts with listener and space and the differential affects of

sound on different bodies across different times and places. Relatedly, Thompson (2017), in stating the intractability of onto-epistemology, demonstrated that the specificity of sonic affect exists, not just at the level of perception, but in the multiplicity and situatedness of sonic ontology itself. Thompson's (2017) articulation of "white aurality," which is "a racialized perceptual standpoint that is both situated and universalizing" (p. 266), is particularly useful in recognizing that the perception of techno, like pain, is a situated affect produced through an encounter, or an intra-action, with a sound object. Given that "nothing exists outside of its relations" (Barad, 2007), the objects of techno music that a subject encounters, and their affective intensities, are themselves diffractive phenomena, experienced from within a specific orientation. Techno, like vulvar pain, is, thus, a multiplicity of audible and inaudible intra-actions, which relate not only to disciplined recognition but also materiality; the affective intensities of sound are produced and productive with the material-discursive practices of gender, madness, race, and the accumulation, or sedimentation, of technological, social, colonial, and historical affects.

Garcia's (2015) description of encounters between bodies and sounds in the context of electronic music supports an understanding that listening to techno takes place through inter-sensory processing, and gestures to the micro-political potentials noted by Connolly (2010). Moving away from an audio-centric understanding of "listening" to techno, Garcia outlined the mechanics of touch, texture, and haptics, through which "not only do you hear [techno] music, but it also has a direct, corporeal impact" (p. 61). Garcia (2015) stated that through haptic encounters, vibrations induce a range of sensations and affects within the body, registered, for example, as pain and pleasure:

For Goodman, the materiality of bass beats provides a concrete basis for new political and subpolitical formations. In a similar fashion, an important dimension of EDM's affective impact is the felt materiality of its beats, which can be experienced as energizing, oppressive, driving, disorienting, and so on. Through volume, bass frequencies, and a preponderance of percussive sounds, EDM's beats constantly engage the body's haptic senses during listening and dancing. (p. 64)

Garcia (2015) identified the bass materiality, or vibration, in electronic music as containing a generative and disorienting affective intensity. By reading this insight with Connolly's (2010) call to experiment with affective intensities, I query whether the disorienting affects of techno induced by the vibratory nature of the bass might enable a troubling of painful sensation, such that sensation disciplined as pain might, even momentarily, escape as pleasure. I reflect on the narrative with which I started this article, and recall the break from recognition that I experienced from the effects of sensory overwhelm; the intra-action of corporal sensation, sonic vibration, and flashing lights facilitated my sonic escape from pain perception.

I began this essay with a proclamation that the recognition of a sensation as pain brings one into awareness of the border between self and other; however, in contrast to pain, Ahmed (2004) demonstrated that queer "pleasure involves an opening towards others; pleasure orientates bodies towards other bodies in a way that impresses on the surface, and creates surface tensions" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 165; see

also Ahmed, 2006). If perception can be distorted by experimenting with affective intensities, as Connolly (2010) suggested, then perhaps there is political hope situated within affects of Mad and sonic pleasure, whereby “bringing us closer to others, from whom we have been barred, might also bring us to different ways of living with others” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 165). Thus, through Connolly’s (2010) writing, I locate potential not in the erasure of pain, but in the moment when the perception of a sensation as pain is briefly overridden by disorienting affects that enable discerning and pleasurable practices of relationality, and which attune one to the folds in which they are oriented.

Here, I note that there is a broader context and a body of literature that attends the weaponization of vibration as a medical technology used in the “treatment” of hysteria.⁵ While attending to this history is outside the scope of this article, Tosh (2019) called in Briggs (2000) to connect the practice of “genital stimulation” to not only to the hetero-patriarchal character of medicine but “colonial fears of a shrinking white race and what was considered to be a comparatively greater fertility of people of colour and Indigenous peoples” (p. 54). In this article, I am exploring what it means to re-signify the use of vibration as a site of refusal, without denying the histories in which vibration is embedded.

The potential for pleasure and discernment in sonic modalities is further demonstrated by Boon (2015), who, like Garcia (2015), engaged Goodman’s vibrational ontology; however, like Parker (2001), he turned to Kristeva (1984) to identify generative potential in disorientation. Boon (2015) emphasized the semiotic as a resource, such that sonic modalities, like hysteria, offer a route from which one can fracture disciplined arrangements of matter and discourse. Fracturing disciplined arrangements of discourse allow new voices to enter, and thus relying on the semiotic extends access to those typically locked out. As Halberstam captured, in a discussion of Moten’s interpretation of Fanon, “In order to bring colonialism to an end then, one does not speak truth to power, one has to inhabit the crazy, nonsensical, ranting language of the other, the other who has been rendered a nonentity by colonialism” (Halberstam, 2013, p. 7). Applying this ethics of unruliness to Connolly’s appreciation for the potential of disorienting affects, we might appreciate techno as a histrionic affective intensity that constitutes a material-discursive practice capable of “dramatiz[ing] a sense of disruption already lurking within experience in a world marked by the acceleration of tempo” (Connolly, 2010, p. 192). Still, pain is not produced through perception alone, but is material, which, as Ahmed (2004) said of emotions, has “accumulate[d] over time, as a form of affective value” (p. 11), such that “pain is not simply an effect of a history of harm; it is the *bodily life of that history*” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 34). Although the disruption of pain is not enough to erase the historical accumulation of pain(ful) affects, reading Ahmed and Connolly together demonstrates that disrupting “anticipatory habits and sedimented dispositions” (Connolly, 2010, p. 191) holds potential to disrupt “repeated and habitual actions [that shape] bodies and worlds” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 3).

⁵ See also Starr and Aron (2011) and Maines (2001).

Charting (Im)perceptible Paths

If disorientation is rendered possible within techno encounters, then one is necessarily re-oriented toward something new—in a material sense, surely, but also perceptually. This leads me to ask how ethically to attend to this “something new”: to states of disorientation, and the Mad knowledge couched within chronic vulvar pain and techno encounters? In grappling with sonic affect as impressions left by sound objects, I discern how an ethical practice of techno listening might align with Ahmed’s (2004) suggestion for an ethical response to the pain of others, mentioned above. I interpret Ahmed’s (2004) call to listen, not only in terms of audibility, but as an inter-sensory practice requiring that we “learn how to hear what is impossible” (p. 35). I suggest that this certainly involves listening to the “so-called rants and raves of madpeople” (Bruce, 2017, p. 306), and also dictates engagement with both the social histories and decolonialities situated within techno music, as well as the potential for techno to support greater attunement to differences that have come to matter; that is, the histories, voices, and affects of chronic vulvar pain that appear in both intelligible and unintelligible form.

In a discussion of situated knowledge, Goh (2017) engaged Barad’s diffractive methodology and agential realist ontology to discern the production and reception of sonic knowledge as always partial, local, and productive, emphasizing the need for both embodied and situated encounters. In approaching the echo as “an apt feminist figuration for the diffractive methodology in sound” (p. 296), Goh (2017) stated its capability of both “mobilizing an awareness of heterogeneous subjectivities [and as] ... part of a conscious endeavor to get to a political and epistemological elsewhere” (p. 296). Goh’s (2017) engagement with the echo provides a frame through which to consider what it might mean to “listen” to the histrionic affects, or echoes, of chronic vulvar pain and techno as a situated phenomena that is produced through intra-action in relation with the listener, but which also carries the trace of multiple and even contradictory histories that are animated in the life of bodily sensations, sounds, and affects, whereby “the past lives in the very wounds that remain open in the present” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 33). Informed by these writers, I “listen to histories of [my] pain as part of the histories of injustice” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 58) and engage the pain of others “as a pain that [I] cannot claim as [my] own” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 35).

The potential relationship between techno music and listening can be further contextualized by England’s (2019) call for a settler stance of listening to noise as a decolonial practice. England (2019) engaged Halberstam’s (2013) reference to the cacophony in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, to argue, “Noise—the chatter, the indiscernible, the nonsensible, the waste—might be an effective aesthetic in sound art because it subverts the value judgment that we must eliminate what we cannot understand” (England, 2019, p. 16). Situated in an understanding of the mechanics through which material-discursive boundaries are formed through knowledge practices, as well as the productive effects of “white aurality” (Thompson, 2017, p. 266), England’s (2019) nod to noise constitutes a maddening of ethics committed to decolonial knowledge production and colonial disruption unruliness, which can be aptly applied to ethical engagement with the histrionic affective intensities of techno.

Similar to the weight that Connolly (2010) afforded to vision, in both orienting and disorienting perception, England (2019) suggested that “noise brings to attention the ways listening is never neutral and can be a catalyst for social action precisely because it makes listeners conscious of how they listen and what they hear” (p. 15). Thus, engaging with noise, or the illegibility of techno, can produce states of disorientation that support moments of rebel perception. However, Bruce (2017) assisted in understanding that the knowledge situated in noise, including the knowledge rooted in techno, as well as pain, is better left not fully excavated from the “noise,” for trying to render intelligible the specifics of Mad knowledge that is not mine to know, or claim, will necessarily reproduce a form of epistemicide, not so unlike the psy-violence outlined by Mills and LeFrançois (2018). Rather, as England (2019) noted, “The posture of listening as a form of suspension provides an embodied and metaphorical gesture for suspending colonial attitudes and a willingness to decentre oneself” (p. 25). As I meditate on my own listening stance in the excerpt with which I opened this article, I suggest what is required is an endless grappling with how to sit most responsibly in tensions animated at the intersection of generative disorientation, while simultaneously “being open to being affected by that which [I] cannot know or feel” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 30).

Conclusion

Orientation indeed shapes the codification of, among many other perceptible and imperceptible specificities, race, madness, pain, and gender; but orientation also dictates the tools of recognition available to subjects in interpreting sensation (Connolly, 2010). Not only has chronic vulvar pain construed my understanding of gender and sexed subjectivity, but the intelligibility of my own pain as perceived has likely functioned to reproduce whiteness (Connolly, 2010; Labuski, 2015). As the scholars with whom I have engaged in this article have demonstrated, perception is by design vulnerable to change and mishap; however, pain also materializes as a historical and ideological artifact. This necessitates an understanding that disrupting perception alone is not enough to disrupt the sedimentation of pain. Said another way, disrupting perception alone cannot erase the materialization of the “wound” (Ahmed, 2004). Affective intensities, or histrionic affects, can, however, constitute a form of (dis)orientation, whereby a lack of belonging (Connolly, 2010) forces one to account for how their surfaces (Ahmed, 2004) have come to matter (Barad, 2007).

By engaging a Mad methodology and a diffractive approach to reading affect theorizing, I have worked to unhook the potentialities and incomprehensibilities at the intersection of chronic vulvar pain and techno music. I am in no way suggesting that techno offers a post-human solution to pain, nor that a utopian appropriation of hysteria is useful or possible; rather, this article has aimed to deploy a new analytic through which to think through knowledge, sound, and pain, as well as to grapple with the simultaneous refusal and reproduction of power(ful) affects. I suggest that the conceptualization of Mad materialist affect has helped to make visible the mechanics through which psy-knowledges operate as colonial apparatus in shaping the lived experience, perception, and recognition of chronic

pain, as well as support a broader project committed to the production of Mad knowledges and an ethics of unruliness.

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