

Sound + Bodies in Community = Music

Barry L. Shank

Abstract

The analytical framework of sound studies is transforming our understanding of the political force of music. Following the lead of scholars like Nina Eidsheim and Salomé Voegelin, this essay considers the resonating force of listening bodies as a central factor in the musical construction of political community. This essay traces the tradition of African American music from congregational gospel singing through early rhythm and blues up to the twenty-first-century rap of Kendrick Lamar, showing how particular musical techniques engage the bodies in the room, allowing communities of difference to find their rhythms together.

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Sound + Bodies in Community = Music

Barry L. Shank

What happens to music when sound itself becomes an object of cultural analysis? What happens to the fields of popular music studies and American studies when music is disarticulated from the previous understanding of pitches, rhythms, and timbres into a collection of sounds? How does the reconceptualization of sound as a force field of relations change our understanding of the political force of musical beauty? Recent interventions in sound studies are beginning to influence the way that some music scholars, particularly those interested in cultural musicology, think about the relations between music and political subjectivity. The capacity of music to reinforce existing political communities and even to generate the potential for new political communities can be approached from new directions now that sound and all its dispersed resonances shift our understanding of musical sound to the sonic experience of social relations.

The field of American studies began to address directly the agency of sound in the mid-1990s, when scholars such as Michele Hilmes turned their attention to the history of radio.¹ A special issue of *American Quarterly*, published in 2011 (and re-published as a book in 2012), included work by many young (and not so young) scholars who helped establish the significance of the audible components of the cultural history of the United States, building on the already established field of sound studies and setting the stage for much work to come.² Ethnic studies scholars have built on this foundation to articulate the sounds of self-recognition. Inéz Casillas has studied Spanish-language radio in the US as a technology of belonging.³ Roshanak Kheshti's *Modernity's Ear* (2015) demonstrates the links among early anthropology, world music, and sonic otherness.⁴ Jennifer Stoeber's *The Sonic Color Line* (2016) examines the history of the uses of sound to enforce white supremacy in the nineteenth century.⁵ Christine Bacareza Balance has opened the world of Filipino music production to identify spreading networks of sound and bodies across distant geographies.⁶

In the last twenty years, sound studies has become a clearly identifiable field with canonizing efforts such as David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny's *Keywords in*

Sound (2015) and Jonathan Sterne's *The Sound Studies Reader* (2012) providing the required introductory texts.⁷ Innovative work such as Marina Peterson's interrogation of the entanglement of sound, space, community regulations, and corporate power in the air over Los Angeles airport and the ground beneath Appalachian Ohio demonstrates the analytical power that derives from focusing on auditory sensation. For Peterson, the key fact is that sound is immanent, inescapable. Sound becomes noise when it occupies the center of legal, political, or cultural disputes.⁸

Of course, music scholarship has been in existence for centuries, grounded in the celebration of the classic composers of the European tradition. It is well known that traditional musicology attempted to isolate musical sound and musical listening not only from other auditory signals, but from all connection to political, social, or cultural determination. This is the origin of the myth of music as a universal language—a secret colonialism of the ear. Biographies of musicians and composers could cross the line from sound to life, but only under the methodological imperative of uncovering the precise intentions and meanings that lay between the ears of the Wolfgangs, Ludwigs, and Franzes who had composed and performed the music. Although it took longer for the musics of non-elites to become legitimate objects of scholarly analysis, they were quicker to acquire social grounding. Traditional ballads became a separate object of study that focused initially on the words, collected as evidence of a coherent folk who could represent the common foundation of the modern, that is European, nation. By the 1930s, folk music scholars, funded by cultural wings of the New Deal, insisted that musical sounds could characterize many types of social categories. With the development of recording devices, collectors in the US reached beyond the traditions of folk music scholarship as a way to study the ancient origins of white nationalism, to build libraries of songs by indigenous and formerly enslaved peoples. Closely connected to the study of folk music, ethnomusicology developed in nineteenth-century Germany. The Society for Ethnomusicology was not founded in the United States until 1953, and its methodological imperatives have shifted significantly since its establishment. But for many decades, the focus in this field followed the assumptions of traditional anthropology—music was directly linked to a particular ethnos, and the music to be studied in this way was the music of others, not western art music.⁹

Cultural studies of music took root in the interdisciplinary field of American studies as early as the 1950s, with David Riesman analyzing the listening practices of college students and early jazz scholars like Martin Williams establishing a canonical history that linked particular musical techniques with cultural traits.¹⁰ By the early eighties, the Birmingham approach to cultural studies gave new impetus to the investigation of commercially produced and distributed music, insisting that the political significance of popular music was not erased by its transformation into commod-

ities. Rather, following the intellectual leadership of Stuart Hall, popular music was understood as a site of political struggle over the pleasures of group belonging.¹¹ In the 1990s, cultural musicology adopted many of the theoretical and methodological approaches of cultural studies while recentering musical analysis as a crucial starting point, as in the work of Susan McClary, Lawrence Kramer, Tia DeNora, and others.¹²

Throughout this academic trajectory, however, scholars have always assumed that they knew what music was. It was voices and instruments sounding notes in harmonic and rhythmic relation to each other. Genres were established sets of conventions that guided listeners to expect particular notes or timbres following the ones just heard. And this set of expectations, whether immediately resolved, or delayed and toyed with, established the basis of musical listening pleasure. Avant-garde music, noise music, and other extreme forms that resisted the centrality of notes, carved their challenge into the mainstream using the same tools. Even John Cage's legendary 4'33" (1952) worked on its listeners' expectations of musical sound. When David Tudor lowered the lid on the piano keyboard, the audience's assumptions that they would hear notes led them to either feel cheated and hate the piece, or to hear the ambient sounds in the room as music. Whether the ear engaged with canonical works like John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* (1965) or searched out neighborhood DJs spinning at parties, the entanglement of bodies and sound centered on the commonly accepted components of musical sound: pitch; timbre; rhythm.¹³

The current engagement with sound studies encourages music scholars to think again about the material basis of sound. Where music studies has most often focused on an object—a recording, a score, an individual performance—recent sound studies work identifies its content as, in Sterne's words, "types of sonic phenomena rather than as things-in-themselves."¹⁴ Sound studies scholar Salomé Voegelin insists that centering sound as the material for analysis does not move us fully away from the musical object but demands that we hear the object as fundamentally relational. As she puts it, "The aesthetic materiality of sound insists on complicity and intersubjectivity and challenges not only the reality of the material object itself, but also the position of the subject involved in its generative production. The subject in sound shares the fluidity of its object. Sound is the world as dynamic, as process, rather than as outline of existence."¹⁵ To the extent that the sound object is fluid, the hearer is also fluid. The point of sonic origin is immediately dispersed throughout a field of relations that, in turn, position the listening subject in that field, not in permanence but for a moment in time.

In one of the more important attempts to reorient music studies in the wake of current sound studies, Nina Sun Eidsheim urges us to think about music as "transferable energy." Eidsheim describes music as a vibrational practice. As she puts it,

music is “something that crosses, is affected by, and takes its character from any materiality, and because it shows us interconnectedness in material terms, it also shows us that we cannot exist merely as singular individuals.”¹⁶ Following Eidsheim, we can state that sound is always a process and always a relationship. The experience of music, then, is the experience of social relationships through sound. Sound becomes music when it is felt to *be* that experience.

For me, this concept grounds some of the more speculative yet intriguing statements from Jean-Luc Nancy’s book *Listening* (2002; English translation 2007). Nancy is mostly known as a philosopher of political community. But his little book about sound and listening extends his interest into the vibratory aspects of music. For Nancy, listening to music

is a relationship to meaning, a tension toward it: but toward it completely ahead of signification, meaning in its nascent state, in the state of return for which the end of this return is not given (the concept, the idea, the information), and hence to the state of return without end, like an echo that continues on its own and that is nothing but this continuance To be listening is to be inclined toward the opening of meaning.¹⁷

It can be hard to understand fully Nancy’s gestural writing here. But if you situate those words in the context of recent sound studies, a kind of material clarity appears. Eidsheim asks us to “denaturalize” our musical listening, to think about it again “as action, as materially transmitted and propagated.” Music is a vibrational force that establishes a relationship not only between the originating point of the sound and the ears of a solitary listener but among all the bodies—human and otherwise—through which those vibrations pass. “Singing and listening are particular expressions of the processes of vibration. What we understand as sound ultimately reverberates throughout the material body that produces and senses it; it is precisely because sound—undulating energy—is transduced through the listener’s body that it is sensed We do not engage with music at a distance but, by definition, we do so by entering into a relationship that changes us.”¹⁸ Nancy’s understanding of musical listening as a “tension towards meaning” that vibrates through and across the bodies that are present becomes concrete when we consider Eidsheim’s materialist theorizing:

Music arises in the confluence between the materiality we offer up and the vibrational force that is put forth into the world. As a consequence, (1) to participate in music is to offer oneself up to that music; (2) to put music forth into the world is to have an impact on another; and, therefore, (3) it is as propagators and transductional nodes of that thick event of music—the full vibrational range, including sub- and ultrafrequencies—that we participate in and are privy to music That is, if music is not something external and objective but is trans-

mitted from one material node to another, music indeed puts us into an intrinsic dynamic, material relationship to both the so-called external world and each other. Musical discourse then shifts from the realm of the symbolic to that of the relational.¹⁹

Music is the result of sound vibrating through bodies in community. Those vibrations, understood as music, weave auditory fabric from our social relations.

What are the consequences of this rethinking of the materiality of music? Must we abandon a concern with the musical text? Does the destabilizing of the musical object leave us with nothing musical to talk about? Must our understanding of music's force stop when the particular moment of listening comes to an end?

I do not think so. Instead, this way of understanding musical sound reorients our own listening towards recognizing the musical object as a temporary and temporal instantiation of a set of social relations occurring at a particular historical moment. For example, Jennifer Stoever's *Sonic Color Line* describes the process whereby "Listening became a key part of understanding one's place in the American racial system, viscerally connecting slavery's macropolitics to lived racial etiquette."²⁰ During the nineteenth century, it became possible to hear racial difference. The ability to hear racial difference became central to debates about music, identity, and authenticity.

The historical moment that Stoever identifies is also the historical moment of the development of blackface minstrelsy. Being able to hear racial difference was central to the double illusion whereby white men could compete with each other to become the most authentic "Ethiopian imitators." Within popular music studies, genres also carried social and cultural associations—a sense that a particular kind of music was made by and listened to by that kind of people. Identifying and categorizing music by the people who made it and identifying the people who were part of that group by the sounds of their music established the intricately repeating loop of music and political identity. In each of these cases—and every other instance where sounds are experienced as music, we experience particular types of sound as an embodiment of the social relations among us. The experience of such a connection is not a guarantee that the relationship is positive. It is frequently said that other people's music is noise. Rethought in line with Eidsheim and Voegelin, other people's music is not so much noise as it is a demand for the recognition of relationship. Of course, this demand can be resisted. But it resounds.

From Anthems to Songs of Insistence

In her beautiful chronicle of the anthemic music of the African diaspora, Shana Redmond states, "Black anthems construct an alternative constellation of citizenship—



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new imagined communities that challenge the ‘we’ of the ‘melting pot’ or democratic state, yet install new definitions of ‘we’ in its place.”²¹ The power of the anthems Redmond studies is at least in part an effect of the social movements that take them up and use them as solidifying performances. A complex pleasure in collective self-recognition supplements and supports the aesthetic power of these songs, creating a feedback loop where musical beauty feeds political force, which then reaffirms musical beauty. While Redmond’s book focuses on the work these anthems achieved when linked with social movements, she also speaks of the power they retain after their initial historical moment: “The ways in which the music continues or fails to illicit comment and/or action in the Black United States and beyond is a commentary on the continuing legacies of Black political action and self-determination at the closing of the twentieth century and the opening of the twenty-first.”²² Through their connection to the long Civil Rights Movement, Black anthems remain the model for songs of resistance. Whether the song be “Lift Every Voice and Sing” or “This Little Light of Mine,” the presence of dozens or hundreds of bodies singing together amplifies the political force of its musical beauty. They reverberate the solidity of resistance.

Anthems of resistance, however, do not emerge in isolation, but gain force through their connections with songs of insistence that tell “us how people live and love, work and play, survive and die over time,” again quoting Redmond.²³ Their musical metaphors extend the structures and habits of black community life to embrace more of the population, helping more of us to lean together towards that new and larger community that marks the only way a larger we, one that embraces difference, will survive. Pop anthems, songs of insistence, can reinforce already existing political communities, but they also do more. The simultaneous comprehension of relations of timbre, rhythm, organized waves of tonal exploration and resolution can generate a recognition of mutual predicament and mutual pleasure. This recognition can permeate the boundaries of the ordinary, slipping through and across intimate publics and knotting together their distinctive threads of difference, rendering nearly palpable the texture of a new political fabric, entraining expanded publics with the sensory capacity to survive dark times.

Music of insistence, centered in private space, can reinforce existing political communities, but it can also do more. It can generate the sense of common feeling that enable populations to reaffirm their political foundation, to reenergize their movements, to reorganize the relations that stabilize an orientation towards the world, to store up the emotional and psychic resources necessary for the long, hard struggle ahead. Songs of insistence might sound like party songs or dance songs or pure love songs. They might drive you to the dance floor. They might force you to pull a tissue from your pocket. Selena’s “Como La Flor” (1992) is a song of insistence. Sol-

ange's "Weary" (2016) is a song of insistence. In order to make clear how the vibrational energy of a song of insistence works, I want to listen carefully to one of the great songs of insistence, Sly and Family Stone's "I Want to Take You Higher" (1969).²⁴

As many writers have documented, the musical sensibility of Sylvester Stewart, along with that of his brother and sisters, was nurtured in St. Andrews Church of God in Christ in Denton, Texas. After moving to Vallejo, California, the family's skills developed in both sacred and secular settings, with Sly studying music theory at Vallejo Junior College and joining a series of vocal groups and R&B bands. Even in their pop dance anthems, Sly and the Family Stone were producing music of insistence, music that built upon Pentecostal congregational traditions of musicking through a compositionally precise insertion of rock styles. In so doing, they extended the embrace of their insistence and began to train new members of an expanded political community.²⁵

Indeed, Sly's most political work does not turn on the evocation of a particular political project but consists of the establishment of a musically performed political complexity. All those voices and horns and organ chords, harmonicas and guitars pulsed forward by kick-snare drive and fluid bass lines enable in his listeners an embodied sense, the vibrational force, of the abstract complexity of a collective of difference. As Ricky Vincent has made clear, "Sly's music created such an open atmosphere of tolerance and truth that the wicked elements of racism were exposed and thrust into the pop dialogue like never before."²⁶ Through deliberate compositional and performative effort, a political collective of difference was constructed through musical beauty.

In order to illustrate the skill of Sly's vibrational force, I want to quickly focus your ears on one of the more misunderstood songs of his entire output, the song that most of his fans heard as nothing but a paean to intoxication, "I Want to Take You Higher." This was the song that dominated the movie *Woodstock* and shaped the reception of Sly and the Family Stone among white boomers, reducing the band's and the song's complexity to the ritual of a bong hit or a snort of a line. By the mid-seventies, after every Sly and the Family Stone concert for five years had ended with this song, Greil Marcus deemed it "a stupid lie."²⁷ It did not start out that way. It began as a reach for transcendence.

At the very beginning of the song, you hear Sly's characteristic blend of rock and funk, with a standard blues pentatonic descending riff settling into a vamp on the tonic A major chord. It almost sounds like Sly's toying with part of his audience saying, "See, I can make even Cream sound funky." The bulk of the song consists of that vamp and demonstrates the band's mastery of one-chord funk. The song never moves off that A chord, but you only become conscious of that if you listen carefully or sit down



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to learn it. This speaks to Sly and the Family Stone's status as world leaders at disassembling a simple major triad and changing the relationships among its parts, shifting the emphasis from the tonic to the major third to the tonic to the fifth over and over, and occasionally adding a seventh or a fourth just to demonstrate the flexible capacity of their mode. If you listened casually, as most of the band's listeners did, you were not aware of the real work the song was doing to your ears and to your sensibility. When you listen again to this song, pay attention to the very beginning. As the riff descends, please listen to the horns and the harmonica in the background.

Behind the guitar and fuzzy bass of the riff that goes A-G-E-E-D-C-C-G-A, the harmonica, trumpet and saxophone hit a D above the riff and then slowly stretch it up though the D-sharp to the E that is the dominant of the chord. During most of the riff, these instruments sound a tension created by harmonic dissonance that you can identify only if you are paying attention. But even if you do not notice it, you feel it. Your shoulders rise up and your neck muscles tense just a bit. You know something is not fitting together until the rise is completed. This is the musical meaning of "Higher." There are many ways to think of the desire to go higher and intoxication is only one of them. This song is about determination. It is about an insistence that could grow from spiritual communion. It is directly about the tense hard work of hitting that harmony. The song's refusal of easy harmony continues throughout, always signaled by the horns. During each chorus, as the guitar and bass (and most of the organ) hit on that A, the saxophone and trumpet fall away from it, landing hard on the dominant seventh, G, placed precisely on the off beats. The full insistence of the song emerges from the musical beauty produced from the temporary and impermanent quality of consonance, in the process, performing political complexity.

Sly and the Family Stone were masterful creators of songs of insistence. Beyond "Higher" lay "Everyday People" (1968), "Family Affair" (1971), "Hot Fun in the Summer-time" (1970), "Sing a Simple Song" (1970), and others. Each uses specific techniques of pitch, timbre, and rhythm, blending into sonic strategies developed most powerfully in the Black musical tradition, to generate a vibrational force capable of embracing a broadly encompassing political community. I do not mean to paint a ludicrously rosy picture of the sixties. I only mean to highlight the powerfully insistent work done by Sly and the Family Stone's music at the time.

Vibrational Insistence and Bodies in Community

The world we inhabit now, half a century later, is a world where the aspirations for a political community of difference seem impossible to realize. Nationalist movements around the globe are reinforcing the isolation of countries and exacerbating the divisions among people. The United States elected a president who cares only for his

own might and fame. This chaos-monger-in-chief has named acknowledged racists, climate change deniers, and public-education defunders to run agencies whose job it is to protect against racial injustice, to safeguard the environment, and to promote public education. When he gets angry about the way the news represents him, he threatens to drop bombs, fires someone, or simply tweets more outrage.

The possibility for a political community based on agonistic (as opposed to antagonistic) dissensus (or disagreement) feels very far away now. Even before the apparently endless string of catastrophes, we witnessed a state more willing to confront its citizens with violence than engage them via political speech. The two dominant parties in the United States had limited the publics to which they responded, focusing only on those with sufficient cash. Coercion had wormed its way fully into systems of economic domination, which shape so much of everyday life. The rules of finance, the rules of education funding, the rules of health care, the very rules of our political process, have all been bent to the desires of the powerful, as they pull the ladders up behind them. When the disenfranchised cry out against this situation, the response seems to come directly from Rancière's critique of the political order: "If there is someone you do not wish to recognize as a political being, you begin by not seeing them as the bearers of politicalness, by not understanding what they say, by not hearing that it is an utterance coming out of their mouths."²⁸

Now more than ever, we need music of insistence to enable us to survive, to illuminate the networks of relations that connect us. We need vibrational force transduced and amplified by all the bodies around us, bodies that look different and speak different languages, that move differently to different sounds, that move in patterns that shift the sonic resonances just enough to include more and more of us in our political community of difference. Now more than ever, we must expand the category of political music to include the music that enables common feeling, that establishes a ground of shared sensibility, that creates spaces for joy and renewal. Music of insistence centered in private space can reinforce existing political communities, but it can also generate the sense of common feeling that enable populations to reaffirm their politicalness, to reenergize their movements, to reorganize the relations that stabilize an orientation towards the world, to store up the emotional and psychic resources necessary for the long, hard struggle ahead.

What made Sly and the Family Stone's "I Want to Take You Higher" so powerful was its intricate intertwining of different sensibilities, different approaches to time and timbre, different constructions of community, to come together in one musico-aesthetic whole. The complexity of the song indexed the complexity of the political community it brought into feelingful existence. This is the work performed by many of the great albums of the past couple of years—the highly celebrated double



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masterpieces of the Knowles sisters, Solange's *A Seat at the Table* (2016) and Beyoncé's *Lemonade* (2016), primary among them. This is music that asserts its political capacities through its meaningful and feelingful organization of difference, its deep knowledge of the internal rhythms of shared being.

A recent example of the vibrational force of the music of insistence is the collaboration between Kendrick Lamar and SZA, "All the Stars" (2018), the first single from the soundtrack to *Black Panther* (2018), and a commanding video that presents an elegantly complex image of a political community of difference. I would like to call your attention to the sonic mapping of space in the song and the way that the visual presentation of social and political space reflects the sounds back, amplifying the vibrational force of the track. As you watch and listen to the video, note the use of hands in the opening scene—hands waving as ocean waves, pushing the boat forward as the track begins. Those waving hands visually reinforce the handclaps that sound throughout the song but that are more forward in the mix at the beginning than elsewhere. Synthesizers map out the sonic space, with the low notes carrying the track forward and the little bubble-popping sound at the top measuring out the tonal range. Throughout the video, Kendrick finds himself in different social or mythical spaces. In each of these spaces, the music suggests its reach, its possibilities, and its limits. As the autotuned singing begins, Kendrick walks slowly through a standing crowd of young boys lined up in front of a queen or a goddess. When SZA's chorus comes in, her hands command your visual attention as your ears hear a synthesizer rise that leads straight to the note that her singing lines begin with. Surrounded by stars, the synthesizer chords fill in the space suggested by the Milky Way that is projected behind her. Stars fill the spaces where the humans were before. The echo on her voice is mixed high in this section, reinforcing the sense of space. Of course, echoes map a space on earth, not the space of the stars, but, as Blesser and Salter argue, reverberation is space the way it is heard, not seen.²⁹ As Kendrick's rap starts, he is seen to be standing in a village, surrounded by men. You hear a synthesizer drop down, both in volume and in pitch, sounding bass notes that lay the groundwork for the rap on top. But those bubbling top sounds continue, marking time, as the chords carve sharp edges into the musical lines, again marking the edges of the social space within the village. As he walks through a desiccated forest, the synths rise up again filling the space and leading us back to SZA singing in the stars. The next verse is not rapped, but sung, with SZA surrounded at first by women dancing with pink feathers, then men and women posing in cobalt blue, then back in a village setting where once again the chords sharply mark the edges of the social space. The scene shifts again to Kendrick walking through an Egyptian tomb, and the sonic space fills with the full chords on the keys and both voices mixed in, as intensive and extensive as the artistic style stolen or borrowed from Lina Iris Viktor. SZA sings the chorus one more

time dressed more plainly than in any other scene, as the Milky Way is replaced by four goddesses who tower over Lamar, and SZA's hair reshapes itself into the African continent.³⁰

Why should one care so much about space in this audiovisual text? If Eidsheim is correct, and musical sound becomes itself as it passes through the vibrating materials that give it resonance, then the visual presentation of space gives us a way of imagining the vibrational force of insistence that connects the persons presented into an imagined political community. Although the conventions of music videos require that Kendrick Lamar and SZA be represented in highlighted form, distinct from the other people shown, the shaping of the scenes, the spacing of the bodies, and the audible fulfillment of those bodies in those spaces position the rapper and the singer as members of a fully political community. The presentation of grace, the depiction of traditions, the use of dress and art and choreography work together to establish aesthetically the legitimacy of the claim to political speech not simply by the stars, who are closer in this video, but all the persons presented in it. The musical beauty of this song is extended by the visual beauty of the video. Together, they present an insistent message. These people are present. They are political. When we join them through the enjoyment of this music, we join into the vibrational force and become co-transducers of the political force of its beauty.

These people are also private. We do not all belong together in the same way. As Kendrick Lamar says in his rap, he hates people that feel entitled, that look at him like he is crazy because he did not invite them. He is not inviting everyone. T'Challa, the leader of the fictional nation of Wakanda in the film *Black Panther*, does not invite everyone into his home. Some of us must remain spectators or at best the most respectful and dutiful of potential collaborators. But when this music plays, it resounds through all the bodies present and shapes itself to match the space in which it sounds. The sounds of "All the Stars" are the sonic manifestation of the relationships presented in the video, but the potential for further amplification extends beyond those limits to embrace all caught up in its beauty. Songs of insistence take up sounds known for their ability to resonate bodies together and recombine those sounds in an effort to broaden their reach and expand the enclosure within which they vibrate. The force of those vibrations links bodies together in communities of difference and recognition. Thus, we find a way to move forward.

Notes

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