La Negra Tiene Tumbao: Multimodal Resistance Strategies of Afro-Latinxs and Other Queer Constructions

By Kassandra Colón Cisneros

ABSTRACT. The importance of sound in Afro-diasporic communities hearkens back to the slave cry on the plantation field, a sound that showed there is social life within social death. These survival and resistance strategies still exist today, and are not limited to music; they can also be traced through aesthetics, as well as routes and history that connect Afro-Latinxs to the diaspora. The deployment of diasporic resistance through what Juan Flores calls “baggage,” show the possibility and radical potential for survival in white spaces. Recognizing the necessity to dismantle white heteronormative spaces, my research will analyze how Afro-Latinxs—especially those who identify with marginalized gender identities—survive using tools of resistance that can be traced back to the Afro-diaspora. I will contextualize this method beyond survival mechanisms to their influence of queer Afro-Latinx spaces. Through understanding Latinx communities in a diasporic context, I will reveal how an aural politic of resistance, which is tied to the sound and aesthetic of the diaspora, disrupts a legacy of antiblackness. My analysis will be framed through the genealogy of the Afro-diaspora and will explain how our understandings of Afro-diasporic communities transcend into current interpersonal relationships and black performance.

The importance of sound in Afro diasporic communities hearkens back to the slave cry on the plantation field, a sound that showed social life lived within social death. This sound was a rumbling of resistance, allowing a slave’s survival mechanism to transcend plantation fields. Creating new
communication and resistance models, slaves in Latin America formulated survival mechanisms predicated off sound and performance. The deployment of diasporic resistance through what Juan Flores calls “baggage,” shows the radical potential for survival in white spaces. By exploring the use of sound and its contributions to Afro diasporic communities, this paper will reveal how sound disrupts a legacy of antiblackness using tools of Afro Diasporic resistance. Contextualizing this method beyond survival mechanisms, this research will explain how Afro Diasporic communities not only influence Afro Latinx queer spaces, but how they become fundamental to interpersonal relationships.

Sound is a noise, a vibration that can travel across mediums; it does not exist in a vacuum. It’s a rupture, a genealogy, a communication strategy, a politic explaining routes and histories among Afro Latinxs connecting them to the African diaspora. “This noise becomes essential to speech” (Glissant, 1989). In this instance, the slave as the commodity discovers the only way to speak is through noise since speech itself was restricted (Glissant, 1989). “Slaves camouflaged the world under the intensity of their screams,” becoming the only articulation of life on the hacienda. Slaves used aural resistance in Latin America as an irrefutable connection to the body and its performance. By making the body a vessel by which resistance is deployed, black social life escaped and subverted the law existing within death of slavery and its correlation to colonial society (Sexton, 2011). Social death is the exclusion of the slave from civil society, accomplished through law and repetitive practices that denote unworthiness (Armstrong, 2002). Social life, on the other hand is a position that disrupts the cyclical nature of plantation ties. Social life within social death takes shape through sound, which becomes another name for freedom within a legacy of slavery. However, we cannot think of social life and social death as relational opposites, but rather two positions that exist within each other (Sexton, 2011).
Slavery as an institution is not simply the static existence of the slave, rather, it is the range of processes associated with maintaining an institution sustained by black fungibility, such as the Caribbean plantation (Patterson, 1982). To keep a functioning plantation, *hacendados* monitored slaves through watch towers to maintain an institutionalized plantation where the only autonomy of a slave was that of an object. Michel Foucault’s concept of the panopticon, a relational power structure of surveillance and intimidation (Foucault, 1975), explains regulation of property as it prevented another Haitian-style slave rebellion in Latin America. It is here where the colonized identity was formulated from control. As hacendados culminated in a surveillance state from watch towers, an act of power and surveillance that intimated slaves, reducing them to nothing more than a commodity due to lack of agency that derived from political control.

Living in fear after the Haitian revolution, hacendados embraced the panopticon as a tactic to restrain agency of colonized peoples through mechanisms of force and surveillance (Michelakos, 2009). The Caribbean plantation demonstrated not only how power restrained agency, but also how repression and trauma necessitated mechanisms of survival. It is through these acts of repression where sound becomes important, serving as a root of Africa that exceeded the plantation. Sound was a vehicle of resistance on the hacienda, where the commodity spoke into being, an experiential rupture of social life within social death (Moten, 2003). Like the single blade of grass that pokes out a cemented driveway, this critical rupture and creation of power allowed for sound to traverse the realm of social death, defying the horrors of hacienda life.

There is a shared root of Africa that explains our contributions to sound. It is the epitome of positionality, establishing a historical analysis predicated on whiteness and blackness that transcends life on the hacienda and throughout the colony. This African root does not determine the entirety of our positionality, but rather, explains our
embodied politic in relation to social life, social death, and survival in white heteronormative space. It does not make us all the slave, or the object, but is the link between African genealogy and civil society. The subject is inevitably the hacienda worker, who suppresses ruptures of social life through the upholding of antiblackness. Sound counteracts the antithetical root of the subject, gearing the body as a vessel by which resistance is deployed.

“Musical baggage” (Flores, 2004) is not just the historical context of diasporic sound, but is an embodiment of resistance that transcends the highest pillars of social death. It is a tool slaves and Afro queers call upon to exist within a legacy of antiblackness, creating “a language that can be the site and theme of historical action, the locus of contention over issues of identity and community that reach far beyond our preference for, or reliance on, this or that word or grammar” (Flores, 2000). Musical baggage makes sound a historical grammar that ruptures social death, engendering an embodied politic that embraces the object’s root of Africa. Flores (2004) explains:

The musical baggage borne by return diasporas, while rooted in the traditions and practices of the Caribbean cultures of origin, are forged in social locations having their own historical trajectories and stylistic environments, and are thus simultaneously internal and external to the presumed parameters of national and regional musical cultures (p. 292).

With a shared African Root, survival mechanisms began to formulate new codes of life, as sound and rhythm became the focal point for revolution, resistance and existence. Sound and its relationship to rupture does not only exist in the context of a song, or vibration; it is a cry, a stomp, a rattle, and murmur that formulates an utterance in which social death becomes material, making an incoherent scream, a rupture, by which objectivity begins to shift away but never exist in subject. What becomes at stake in this shift then is, “not what the commodity says but that the commodity says
or, more properly, that the commodity, in its inability to say, what must be made to say” (Moten, 2003).

Contextually speaking, musical baggage has connected the routes and histories of the Afro diaspora, becoming a language that understands colonial life in the Caribbean. Providing a cocktail of sound and religion, Vodou in the context of the Haitian rebellion is an example as it geared the overthrow of the French Monarch. A communicative collectivity that was predicated off dance, vibration, and worship allowed for slaves to experience the social life that existed within them, enacting the most successful slave revolt in history. The Haitian rebellion is a diasporic experience that is easy to reconcile within its relationship to sound, as it became a ruptured vector that “harbors a sense of process, freedom, agency and an alternative mode of position” (Flores, 2000).

Sound creates performative trenches such as dance that resist and formulate coded communication among those who are rendered unintelligible, inhuman, slave, Afro queer. It is a rupture that exists and generates survival practices. A “(kin)aesthetic function irreducible to a commodity fetish, a function that prompts and re-articulates embodied forms of knowledge and desire that cannot be bought, sold, claimed or learned by proxy” (Sánchez González, 1999). Sound compounds on itself to become a fully encompassing strategy; it influences and embraces a unique performance that cannot be commodified. Since each performance is unique, its continuous reproduction pulls upon external structures, such as nature, communication and rhythm to give sounds it’s coherency in relation to interpersonal politics. Such performance cannot be commodified due to the originality and organic connection to the metaphysics of blackness. That is, each body articulates survival differently in an anti-black world. As a resistance strategy, sound exists beyond language, creating an activation of performance beyond musicality and irreducible vocalism. A dance floor is no longer a space by which whiteness may exist, but becomes a space that articulate black performance as an embodied
connection to the body and the resistance by which it deploys.

Sound created Tango, a dance form rooted in blackness during the nineteenth century among Afro Argentines. Tango as a resistance practice exists because it is the “dancing one did to the drums,” a reclamation of movement and decolonization (Chasteen, 2012). As slaves reclaimed a culture that was exclusionary to their blackness, tangos resisted humiliation within blackface as other Argentines “spoke African” mimicking slaves and their dancing. Rupturing Argentinean white flight, Tangos contributed to classification and grouping of slaves, creating a community based on belonging versus exclusion like that of ballroom culture in Afro queer space. As a ruptural performance giving Afro Argentines an artificial place within white colonial society, blackness and queerness became cemented in Tango’s ability to rupture white flight.

Spatially speaking, the emergence of ballroom culture posits queering as a rupture. Rooted in defiance and necessity, ballroom culture was an underground gathering among Afro diasporic communities that contributed to gender expression, sexuality and life. As a break and instance of black performance existing within white place and space, ballroom culture was a survival mechanism that imagined the possibility of a world inaccessible to the human. By creating a grammar that rearticulated the confines of civil society and its relationship to blackness, ballroom culture was an outlet by which unaltered queerness could be performed absent whiteness’ surveillance. This approach made Afro queer performance a unique rupture, connecting them to their root of Africa that rendered vibrations and dance as an incoherent escape from social death.

Ballroom culture is not merely just a rupture that displaced and subverted whiteness, but is an example of kinship’s technicality that corrected fractured displacement. As an affirmation, ballroom kinship formed communities of deracination, where bonds of belonging juncture blackness into existence within an insuperable world. This is where
ballroom houses and communities of displaced slaves are a juxtaposition, as blackness’ familial bond strengthened interpersonal relationships, combusting fissures of solidarity that breached white heteronormative institutions. The creation of houses and kinship within ballroom culture and displaced slave communities provided not only a support system for Afro queers, but is the politic of hope that aids social life to rupture social death.

What this research seeks to explore is not just the relationality between sound and object, but the contingency rupture has on performativity to disrupt white heteronormative space. Sound as a language not only explains a slave’s relationship to colonization, but provides a coherent communication strategy that explains a world predicated from antiblackness. This relationship between sound and performance combusts into a medium of movement and praxis as it exists on the plane of the inhuman. Moten (2003) explains this phenomenon:

To ask this is to think what’s at stake in the music: the universalization or socialization of the surplus, the generative force of a venerable phonic propulsion, the ontological and historical priority of resistance to power and objection to subjection, the old-new thing, the freedom drive that animates black performances (p. 12).

The question then becomes, how does white heteronormative space become a site where black (queer) resistance is thinkable? Black performance, in it of itself, is the answer, creating a subversion by which resistance is thinkable. It is a break revealing the importance of space and its connection to resistance, as “each break evidences the same substantive crisis—the compulsion to articulate a contradictory in others, rhythm, tone or lyrics” (Cooks and Eng-Wilmot, 2016). Here is where black performance becomes distinct as its performativity generates metaphysics of the unthought (Hartman and Wilderson, 2003). That is, the underbelly of performance designed to
view civil society through a lens of blackness versus just merely about blackness.

Sound as a medium does not only exist within a realm of slavery. When contextualized to queer space, sound generates revolutionary praxis as Afro queer performance ruptures white heteronormativity, an articulation of agency and disobedience. As a survival mechanism, sound within Afro queer space generates new knowledge based on lived experience and performativity. This becomes necessary, insofar, as the act of queerness itself is exclusionary, and is one of the biggest problems with LGBTQ+ and Queer Studies. Queer scholars are so quick to think about race, but never through race. Immediately positioning race as a byproduct of queerness, scholars coat over how queerness and resistance operate within different positionalities leaving their analysis colorblind. This paper does the exact opposite, situating a historical analysis of sound and its relationship to movement and performance among black and brown queers. It renders and ruptures the plane of the human, where current white LGBTQ+ studies lies, creating a theory that is not based in philosophical abstraction, but based in the materiality sound has as a medium.

Much too often, we beg the question of how queerness is performed, but never why queerness is performed the way it is. This is especially true in the context of black and brown queers and their performance; we cannot simply identify phenomena and theory without understanding implicated action. That is, if queer violence is the gun, blackness determines where it’s pointed. Palatable positionality and its contribution to white heteronormative space is dependent on black sound. Since blackness always exists on the register of the inhuman, it never subverts back into the subjectivity that is accessible to white queers. Jennicet Gutierrez’s and Cece Mcdonald’s inhuman cry and shriek for trans equality and resistance is the opposite of palatable. Their sound ruptured, displaced and repurposed, it fractured normative civil society and in result led to a false criminalization. Their object status is what makes rupture
unique, as black and brown queers create sound that transgresses a common theme of ancestry, like hacienda rebellions that are confrontational to white hegemony.

The diaspora carves our understanding of queerness, in that blackness is already and will always be queer. Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley (2008) explains:

The brown-skinned, fluid bodied experiences now called blackness and queerness surfaced in intercontinental, maritime contacts hundreds of years ago... the black Atlantic has always been the queer Atlantic... captive African women created erotic bonds with other women in the sex-segregated holds, and captive African men created bonds with other men. In so doing, they resisted the commodification of their bought and sold bodies by feeling and feeling for their co-occupants on these ships (p. 191-192).

Tinsley’s articulation of blackness explains the telos of resistance, as blackness’ fungibility and performance becomes situated as queerness. Resistance and survival as a framework analyzes the connection between blackness and queerness, making any discussion of blackness—regardless of its context—a discussion of queerness. A register of indifference is what formulates the intertwined relationship between the two, situating “queerness” as the crux to blackness because of the beautiful abnormality existing on slave ships, paving the commodity’s existence and resistance. The act of blackness as queer explains the relationality of slave’s resistance in Latin America, as ruptures derived from their blackness, or more specifically, queerness.

Sound as an affirmation and rupture exists within an Afro queer context because of its relationship to blackness and the diaspora. Generating an aural politic of resistance, sound weaves and melds together the incoherence of a world controlled by whiteness and heteronormativity. It challenges a dominant narrative that assists with the disruption of sameness. Since sound is not vacuous, it does not just exist in vibrations, but is an embodied performance for resistance to surface on a plane of the inhuman. Sound is the banging of
drums, it’s a dance, a shriek, the speaking commodity, it is the ballroom culture that exists within slavery and outside. It is a medium that generates the queer routes of Africa to exist beyond the plantation, existing within a realm of social death. But more importantly, it’s a survival politic among Afro queers to gather around a common theme of displacement through black performance.

References


**Kassandra Colón Cisneros** is a first generation Afro-Indigenous Latina from Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Attending West Virginia University, Kassandra is a double major in Women’s and Gender Studies and Latin American Studies with a minor in History. Their research highlights the intersections among race, gender and sexuality and its correlation to power, politics and law.