

# **Cairo Clarke**

# **Presentism and Sonic Territories**

Defining rhythm feels antithetical to what we know it to be. From within our bodies, amongst friends, on the dance floor, in the streets, on the page, in the air...once you catch it, or it catches you, the rhythm calls for you. Definitions of rhythm have moved from its etymological origins "to flow" to being associated with what feels like hard, mathematical, deterministic vocabulary: Systematic arrangement, strong regular repetition, recurring sequences. No doubt that as an observer of rhythm, these definitions bear truth, but if you create or engage with rhythm, if you join the chorus, "go with the flow", knowledge becomes embodied and shared. It comes from feeling, in all of its complexities.

Rhythm is not merely about the sonic, but it is also when the body is prompted to physically engage with notions of pace and movement; a continuous process of *becoming*. Bodies become the instruments of rhythm, of change, and it's the sensory labour of these bodies, their sonic demands and rhythms of resistance that situate knowledge. Praxis occupies and imbues sonic and physical space.

*"A new context for the political struggles of the disseminated mass of unwanted labour is provided by the streets of civil society. Its territories, the contradictory spaces which are the geographical expressions of the city."*

(Territories, 1984, Sankofa Film and Video Collective)

In their 2016 presentation titled Sound and State, writer and artist Jay Bernard said "It's very difficult to look at the world and not hear it...if you want to know where someone is from, ask them how it sounds." Bernard's question echoes in my mind, yet I'm finding it increasingly difficult to articulate exactly what London sounds like anymore, whether I can hear it or it can hear me. I wonder if it can hear our refrains: "Black Trans Lives Matter, All Black Lives Matter, The UK is Not Innocent, Justice for Grenfell, Say Their Names..."

The question of what the city sounds like means we have to stop, situate ourselves and ask: Who is it speaking to? How does it speak to me? Does it hear me? Sometimes it seems so loud you can barely feel what you are hearing or hear what you are feeling. The dominant - repetitive rather than rhythmic - sonic landscapes constricting us to the beat of the same drum, or rather, the repetitive cycle of capitalism.

*"There are no stories in the riots, only the ghosts of other stories."*

(*Handsworth Songs*, 1986, Black Audio Film Collective)

In general terms, rhythm is articulated as timed movement through space. Now, we are questioning the origin of that timing, redefining and reimagining how it moves and what it is based on...

History? Well then comes the question of whose histories are centred and how do they relate to our bodies now?

Labour? Whose labour? Does time defined by labour account for our exhaustion? Can exhaustion be a point of solidarity - an accumulation of time in the body and the spirit?

Through acknowledging and framing exhaustion as a point of solidarity, perhaps then we can reframe rhythm as movement through space based on multiplicity: *desire, hope, faith (in all beings), community*...Breaking the frame of the legible and the reasonable and making the contradictions louder. Re-articulating the terms of our identity through an accumulation of time.

In a conversation between Lucas LaRochelle and rudi aker they ask why so many words used to describe relationships are so inherently capitalistic and linked to economic gain. The idea of “investing” in a relationship with the expectation of making a return on one another. Capitalism and its language has no space for rhythm that is improvised and free flowing because it excludes, isolates and individualises experiences into exploitative and transactional relations, based on clarity and legibility. Yet, in order to really listen and hear each other, the echoes and incantations, we must ask how we create sonic protection and practice sonic accountability.

Practicing a relationship with the sonic means tuning into the relationship between listening and feeling, deciding what to hold space for and what to be carried by sonically. Whilst at the same time accounting for the sound we absorb, and can be in danger of subsuming. When we consider the sounds our bodies produce by just being, the sounds they make to other people, and the sounds we yearn for but cannot yet hear, we are talking about agency and autonomy over our bodies in space and the sonic histories they carry. To forge sonic protection is to protect our kin, our siblings, our communities, nature and ourselves by considering what we give our sonic attention to.

To me, sonic accountability is to experience the gravity of the body in space. To centre poetic knowledge, hold complexities and emancipate language towards a language of feeling, improvisation and kinship. What potentialities of world building open up when we attune to and center frequencies different to our own?

I think about Saidiya Hartman’s idea of “the chorus”; a community, an assembly. The moments when the margin points become the centre points. When the chorus is at the centre, bodies are in motion and generative possibilities, intimacies, and collaborations mean the relationship between sonic protection and accountability allows us to lean on each other and account for the echoes in order to create a new vibration.

*“I always thought that ‘the voice’ was meant to indicate a kind of genuine, authentic, absolute individuation, which struck me as (a) undesirable and (b) impossible,” he said. “Whereas a ‘sound’ was really within the midst of this intense engagement with everything: with all the noise that you’ve ever heard, you struggle somehow to make a difference, so to speak, within that noise. And that difference isn’t necessarily about you as an individual, it’s much more simply about trying to augment and to differentiate what’s around you. And that’s what a sound is for me.”*

(Fred Moten, *Fred Moten’s Radical Critique of the Present* by David Wallace, 2018, New York Times)

The relationship between the sonic and memory is interesting to consider as a site of reflection and meditation. In these instances we center feeling and listening with our whole bodies as a means of

presentism and futurity. Rebecca Bellantoni's ongoing research and project *C.R.Y: Concrete Regenerative Yearnings* considers the materials, sights and sounds of the city as possible tools for just this. In an Instagram post shared by the artist a handwritten quote by composer Henry Threadgill reads: "People have different names for the life source in them. But it's energy. The only thing that science seems to be able to tell us about energy is you can't destroy it. You can change it but you cannot destroy it. So wherever you house it, it's only being housed until it has to change."

I continue to learn so much from thinkers/artists/writers/family/friends that experiment with and embody rhythm as an energy force that engages with the world in order to relate, negotiate and respond to it. To experience the gravity of the body in space in order to articulate it.

*"Diasporic lives are structured by the absence of monumentality - then the traces become essential."*  
(John Akomfrah, 2020, in conversation with Tina Campt and Saidiya Hartman chaired by Ekow Eshun)

The sonic and the silences that we hear and feel sustain the links between the living and the dead, becoming a communal assembly. The traces, the rhythms, the echoes, the chorus; these spaces of possibility, of sonic demands, incantations and vibrations reverberate and house energy that allows us to hold each other towards articulating and embodying the world we want to bring into being.

When I ask myself how London sounds, how my shared experience of the world sounds right now, it's the spaces forged between and in resistance to the dominant sonic landscape that feel the most generative to fully answer that question. The belly laughter of kids after school, gatherings around a sound system on a park bench or in a relative's garden, intimate conversations and domestic sounds that you catch glimpses of as you pass by open windows, the collective soundings that form in communities, escaping the city and hearing the ocean, catching the beat of a pirate radio station through the window of a car cruising by. These moments become invitations for something else.

Cairo Clarke is a curator, writer and educator whose work is informed by an urgency for slowness, a re-imaging of pace, production and relationships across arts and cultural spheres, taking an intersectional and collaborative approach.