

# Approaching the Sonic Shimmer of Popular Music

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# Approaching the Sonic Shimmer of Popular Music

*The Shimmer is a prism, but it refracts everything. Not just light and radio waves. Animal DNA, plant DNA. All DNA.*

DR. JOSIE RADEK, *Annihilation* 2018

*Words don't go there. Words go past there. Bent. Turned. Blurrred.*

FRED MOTEN 2003, 52

Popular music shimmers. Even when it is ground into the sonic shards of thrash metal or resampled and down-sampled into the citational glimmers of hip-hop, the music that constitutes the popular has to shine if it is to stand out in an ever expanding library of tracks that aim to be distinctive yet familiar. In such an environment, a track needs to shimmer at least as brightly as the others around it, lest it fade out of aural view. But this too is part of the process. Many tracks that have left the sonic zeitgeist linger in obscure playlists, in sample banks and in the unconscious memories of those they may have once touched. From there they are harvested and reconstituted into the new shimmering forms of ever updated technology and means of distribution. Compression, synthesizers, hi-fi sample libraries, streaming services and lossless files have made music something that resists its own demonetization. Somehow, even now, in conditions that some have described for music as “post-scarcity” (Bruenig 2021), popular music still seems to operate as a viable part of commercial exchanges and this requires it to glisten. Considering this, it is worth asking, what is it these shimmering sonics refract, what are the forces that propel them into us and encounter our capacities to affect and be affected?

In this paper, I will argue that encounters with popular music, and aggregates thereof, can be conceptualized as the exertion of forces that reveal certain political contingencies with implications for the construction of subjectivity. I want to offer the notion of the *sonic shimmer* to conceptualize the complex exertion and interaction of forces that are at play in popular musical experiences. I previously articulated the concept of the sonic shimmer in *Pop Music and Hip Ennui: A Sonic Fiction of Capitalist Realism* (2019, 51–52). There I used it to illustrate the diffusion of subjective intention through the culture industry of “communicative capitalism” (Dean 2009) as the networks of cultural production and distribution transduced these motives into sonic force. Here, I wish to develop the line of thinking behind this concept and attend to some of its theoretical technicalities.

In this paper, I will be referring to popular music as a broad category. To that end there are no hard barriers that would exclude queer experimental art rock, EDM, southern trap or top 40 hits. Instead the indeterminacy of the category is highlighted as proof of the inherent, and arguably progressive, diversity of this form of vernacular musical practice. A diversity in modern popular music that has emerged from a complex history, as shown in the work of Paul Gilroy (2007) and Jennifer Stoeber (2016), among others, of the capitalist exploitation of music produced by the lives and labors of enslaved, colonized and racialized peoples. This is also suggestive of the first definitional point of the sonic shimmer, which shall be explored in more depth later. Popular music is an expansive and expanding category that defies certain limitations for its constituents to function in a marketplace that demands novelty through actions that can be characterized both as colonialist and cosmopolitan.

In the following, I will give an account of *The Shimmer* in the 2018 film, *Annihilation* from which the conceptualization offered here is derived [1]. From there, I will review some of the key approaches to sonic thinking that have influenced my conceptualization of the sonic shimmer. I will then go on to exemplify and theorize the operation of the concept of the sonic shimmer.

## The Shimmer

To articulate what I mean by a sonic shimmer, I first need to articulate the science fictional mechanics from which the idea is derived. In the film adaptation (Garland et al. 2018) of Jeff VanderMeer’s novel *Annihilation* (2015), the zone that has been infested by some kind of alien force is renamed “The Shimmer” rather than the more pulpy “Area X” from the book. This metaphor of light helps to draw attention to the ways in which all those processes necessary for



**[1]** The expedition approaches The Shimmer (*Annihilation* 2018). Photo: Moviestore Collection Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo.

the reproduction and evolution of life undergo a kind of genetic refraction. In this space, surrounded by an expanding and glistening atmosphere, the affects of encounters are accelerated and proliferate. Bushes grow in upright human forms **[2]**, deer's antlers crossfade into branches, root networks explode from the intestines of people exposed to The Shimmer for too long, and a carnivore's roar is imprinted imprinted by the screams of its victims.

From the perspectives of the audience and to an ever-diminishing extent the team we follow, the apparently “weird” character of the transformations has to do with the compounding of conjunctive change facilitated by the speed at which the refracted mutations take place and the non-human logic they display. Weird here is meant in the sense defined by Mark Fisher (2016, 10) as bringing to “the familiar something that ordinarily lies beyond it”. The creatures and plants we are familiar with were produced by gradual evolutionary processes that came into being slowly and in tandem with our own emergence so as to become integrated into what we understand to be the environment. Moreover, within the timeframe in which those that consider themselves to be human have produced representational schemas, the results of evolutionary processes can appear to be relatively static arrangements. In *The Shimmer* of the movie, however, something ambivalent to context and adaption is taking place with an alarming rapidity and undeniable force.





**[2]** Dr. Josie Radek (Tessa Thompson) next to plants that have refracted human Hox genes (*Annihilation* 2018). Photo: Moviestore Collection Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo.

To summarize the overall plot of the film, it begins with some kind of alien life form, more like a dome of light or a forcefield than life as we know it, crashing into a lighthouse on the Florida coast near sparsely inhabited swamplands. From this initial crash site, an area of influence gradually expands across the swamps and evacuated rural towns. The area, named The Shimmer, is surveilled and studied by the government and military. But every expedition sent inside has been lost and all broadcasts from within The Shimmer are incomprehensibly garbled. The protagonist, Lena, is a biologist, who has been in a state of grief following the disappearance of her soldier husband, Kane, on a secret mission a year earlier. One night, Lena awakes to find Kane in her kitchen, disoriented and with no memory of what took place or how he returned. His body starts to break down as his organs fail, and he is taken into custody by the military. This sets in motion a chain of events that sees Lena recruited by Ventress, a psychologist and lead researcher of The Shimmer, for an expedition with other scientists into the now massive but still secret area. Inside, the expedition team encounters the weird environment, and slowly they start to realize that they too are being affected by whatever force is at play in The Shimmer. Eventually, Lena is left alone inside and learns that Kane apparently committed suicide under the influence of his doppelgänger from The Shimmer. She then confronts her own emerging doppel-

gänger and seemingly defeats it before escaping. As one of the only people to have returned from *The Shimmer*, she is interrogated and studied. However, in the final scene, Lena meets with what appears to be a recovered Kane. They embrace now with the knowledge that neither of them is who they used to be and, indeed, they may not even be considered human anymore.

The metaphor broadcast in the film for *The Shimmer* is cancer. This is made clear in the second scene of the film, which depicts a lecture given by Lena. The scene is a jump back in the chronology of events to the point before her own journey into *The Shimmer* but *after* her husband's disappearance inside it. The lecture begins with what sounds like an affirmative quasi-mystical story of the cellular origins of life. The cells on the screen are then revealed to be cells forming a tumor that may well kill a young woman. The miraculous has become horrifying. Later in the film, inside *The Shimmer*, another member of the expedition, Cass reveals that her daughter died of childhood leukemia. She remarks, "In a way it's two bereavements... My beautiful girl, and the person I once was" (Garland et al. 2018). This comment underlines one of the ontological claims that emanates from the film; that individual identity is something that emerges from the fragility of a multitude of contingent encounters and entanglements. This further expands the implications of the metaphor of cancer. The idea that within the delimited corporal structures that liberal subjects are taught to accept as the limit of their individual *self*, there could be some other force acting to reshape their bodies and capacities and even impede their vitality is the ultimate weird horror. Unfortunately, this horror of cancerous mutation is itself an emergent property of the processes of life that eventually lead to the formation of identity. A possible reading of this metaphor is that it is incumbent upon those of us with a stake in this conceptualization of ourselves, or way of relating to reality, to expand the notion of the subject to better include these ambivalent dynamics. In externalizing these dynamics – and indeed in showing how, from the perspective of force, the division between internal and external is a recent anthropocentric construction – *The Shimmer* allows us to see the motions of affect through which identity coalesces.

Over time, the characters in the expedition succumb to *The Shimmer* either by misfortune, in the case of Cass, or through their resistance to it, in the case of Anya, another member of the expedition. However, others *allow* themselves to be transformed by *The Shimmer*. Like Josie whose depression had led her to self-harm in the past. When faced with the options of resisting or encountering whatever it is that animates *The Shimmer*, Josie chooses to embrace it, and in so doing can let go of the individualized experience of her mental anguish. In

the case of the expedition's leader, Ventress, whose motivation for taking this mission was informed by her own terminal cancer diagnosis, the main anthropocentric problematic in researching *The Shimmer* is revealed. Following her encounter with the originary point of *The Shimmer*, which is now inside her body, Ventress explains that:

It's not like us. It's unlike us. I don't know what it wants. Or if it wants. But it will grow until it encompasses everything. Our bodies and our minds will be fragmented into their smallest parts until not one part remains. Annihilation.  
(Garland et al. 2018, 1:32:17– 1:33:04)

The Shimmer's process of arrival and expansion defies the symbolic logic – the violent imposition of a system of meaning – of conquest and colonization. Even if the material outcome – the annihilation of those structures that once gave this world's inhabitants a sense of meaning – is the same, the colonist's desire to overwrite what was there before with their own defined ambitions and identity is missing. The Shimmer is force, and it is indeed overcoding but without identity as we know it.

In the end, the main character, Lena, escapes The Shimmer's attempts to absorb her and retains what we are led to believe is her identity. But in the final shots of the film, her irises shimmer, and we realize that she has been profoundly transformed by her encounter. Whatever remains of Lena is now inexorably part of the process Ventress described. Given the magnitude, expansionist and alien nature of this reorganizing force, a question that lingers is whether the notion of being outside The Shimmer is any longer a meaningful description of a state of affairs or just a temporary illusion.

### **Methods for Sonic Thinking**

The area of alien infestation in VanderMeer's novel was given a sense of ambiguity and mystery with the name Area X. Here, this letter is used to stand in for the unknown, which fits with the book's literary style as an incomplete account of events. In the film, it is renamed "The Shimmer" and depicted as a visual effects version of a swirling post-impressionist sky in motion. These swirls, however, are not only evidence of the refraction of light but also of sounds, radio waves and DNA. Thus, "The Shimmer" is a visual metaphor for something that has capacities of refraction that greatly exceed redirecting the path of light. It is also in this sense that I use the concept. Here, I follow other scholars' use of shimmering as a metaphor for the affective entanglement of forces<sup>1</sup> beyond visible surface

phenomena (Coleman 2021, 57; Seigworth & Gregg 2010, 1). For sound too, shimmers have taken on a similar resonance when talking about music. For example, the term is used in colloquial descriptions of reverbs and in academic research to examine music's social and commercial operations (Cinque 2015) and its experiential and spiritual potential (Bogdan 2010). The Shimmer in *Annihilation*, then, presents another way to consider the implications of this widely used metaphor. In developing the concept of the sonic shimmer of popular music, I wish to highlight this excessive capacity to emphasize how such music can be understood as a force that is able to move through sonics and affect reality in a great many more ways than just the soundscape.

In this section, I want briefly draw attention to a few approaches to sonic thinking that have informed the concept of the sonic shimmer and in so doing position this idea within and between intellectual traditions. These methods attempt to chart the affective, interpolating, subjectivising, and world-producing force of popular music. They include fields like sound studies, musicology, media theory, literary studies, cultural studies and critical theory. They are mentioned, here, in an extraordinarily condensed form to orient readers unfamiliar with this kind of thinking on popular music toward the trajectory of which this work is a part.

Holger Schulze in *The Sonic Persona* (2018) develops a deliberately idiosyncratic approach to investigating sound that combines affective corporeality and discursive forms of subjectification as “symptoms of existence” (117). Central to Schulze's project is the notion of the “implex” (118) which provides a way to understand how subjective and subjectivizing experiences of sensation are directed by “tendencies towards an aspired differing state” which to an extent delimits what can happen or be understood to happen next (ibid). This is, then, to conceptualize sonic experience as the unfolding of already affected contingencies. Schulze expands this concept in a more political direction, as it is, for him, the working through of “[t]he tensions between hegemonic auditory dispositives and idiosyncrasies of a specific sensory corpus [that]unravels in sonic traces” that give a sonic persona its constitutive generativity (212).

Robin James' critical account of *The Sonic Episteme* disentangles certain politically instrumental rationalities as the audial modality of neoliberal governmentality (James 2019, 3). James proposes an engagement with Alexander Weheliye's (2005) notion of *Phonographies* (James 2019, 17), an interdisciplinary approach between literary studies, musicology and history, which “involves using insights from each field to critically reconfigure the other” (Weheliye 2005, 8). James argues for “atten[tion] to sounds and sonic practices that Philosophy [sic]



perceptually codes out of scholarly circulation because they do not contribute to the efficient reproduction of disciplines and a society structured by ongoing relation of domination” (2019, 181).

Anahid Kassabian (2013) derived and developed the concepts of ubiquitous listening and ubiquitous music from a critical reading of the technological promise of ubiquitous computing (2013). She argues for the “serious consideration of listening and ubiquitous music, through an inquiry into their relationship with affect, attention and the senses, that leads to a new theory of distributed subjectivity that challenges what we think about reception and about subjectivities and identities” (111).

A final thread is Sonic Fiction. This term was coined by Kodwo Eshun (1998) to provocatively problematize the discourse surrounding music in the late twentieth century and, so-called black music, in particular, while simultaneously producing new creative discursive imperatives. Schulze’s interpretation of this notion is as a heuristic fiction for both “activist approaches” and new avenues of “critical sound studies” (Schulze 2020, 143). In my work, I conceptualize the methods of sonic fiction as a deliberate and reflexively critical aestheticization of the suspension that characterizes the gesture of theorizing sonic and musical experience (Holt 2019, 18–19).

### **The Sonic Shimmer**

In my previous attempts to articulate a sonic shimmer, I suggested that the shimmer was animated by an “[i]ntention that may be semantically inexpressible but nonetheless gives forms to [the sonic shimmer’s] affective refraction patterns” (Holt 2019, 51). These intentions included those of the artists, the producers, industry people, marketing teams, streaming platforms, event planners, DJs, and your friends with all the playlists to name but a few. My argument was that these intentions form the soundscape of popular music and shaped how we experienced it and by extension ourselves. On further reflection, however, this point needs to be amended. Following from the analysis of the film *Annihilation* in the context of many existing models of sonic thinking, it would be more proper to say that what gives form to the refraction of affective force in the sonic shimmer is not intentions themselves but their spectral remains as intentionality. As Ventress reflects, wanting and intention are not the right things to attribute to The Shimmer. Each creature within it may experience wants and desires, but the process of which they are a part cannot be said to share or acknowledge them or even have its own. To the extent that we can think of the sonic shimmer working in a similar way, it is not animated by the actual

desires of those who helped to produce it, but rather the force of the representation of these desires acting in the world absent of comprehensible ends. Each person in the process of producing the affective artefacts of popular music may have had more or less clear intentions behind the actions they took to bring this music into the world. However, under the swirling cacophonous canopy of the sonic shimmer, all we have access to is the residual force of the actions. All these processes and forces are intensified by the “assignifying” mechanisms (Lazzarato 2014, 80) of rapaciously “illiterate” capitalism (Deleuze and Guattari 2013a, 276). For popular music, this means those discursively recognizable motives, which may have energized the production of the sonic shimmer, have vanished from its glistening artefacts by the time we encounter their affects.

The field of popular music is always faster than analysis. So, the questions multiply for even one example of music moving through the sonic shimmer. For example, how are we to grapple with a statement that is as seemingly straightforward as “This is America” (Glover et al. 2018), when expressed through Childish Gambino’s song and video as an “afropessimist” (Wilderson 2021) assertion of this state’s constitutive “anti-blackness” (196)? What does this sonic shimmer envelop and recombine? The vernacular of the lyrics is disorienting:

Don’t catch you slippin’ now  
Look what I’m whippin’ now

And the polyvocality of the ad-libs – improvised vocal accents – that surround the main vocal (Young Thug, Slim Jxmmi, BlocBoy JB, 21 Savage and Quavo) underline the impermanence of Gambino’s centrality. The dissonant semitone sliding bass synth is affectively disquieting as we tap into the ecology of fear through means that Steve Goodman refers to as “bass materialism” (2012, 28); a way in which to think of the vibration of bodies as the ontological condition of precarity that also makes enjoyment an imperative. “This is America” is about the dissonant jouissance of a particular kind of lived experience. It is about, speaking with Fred Moten, “how beautiful the beauty has been against the grain of that terror” (Moten & Hartman 2016, 35:33–35:37). This is jouissance more in the vein of how Lyotard describes it as the proletariat finding enjoyment despite and through their being chewed up by the machine of racializing capital (2015, 111), rather than the petty thrills that characterize Lacan’s bourgeois frustrations.

The cuts and disjunctions in the music, as it jumps from an affirmative but deliberately derivative pop appropriation of Nigerian jùjú into a sparse disso-

nant trap track, serve as “black aesthetic [...] refusal” (Moten & Harney 2013, 48). Especially once it is translated into the visuals of the music video that show Gambino’s face struggling to keep up the façade of affirmation before committing senseless but, for him at least, relaxing acts of violence. This is a refusal of the white, liberal narrative that one can simply overcome centuries of violence. This narrative understands the struggle against racism in the US and beyond as being largely confined to the era of the civil rights movement. This narrative is perpetuated by the politely reverential trope that would have it that the civil rights movement was one unified cause for liberal inclusion that used religion to unify the people against the aberration of racism and provide the vicarious redemption of the nation. Gambino is happy to rupture this story. His response is a “refusal [that] takes place inside” (65) both the realities of racialized life in the contemporary US and the structures of meaning-making that disavow them. This is most clearly seen in the movement through gospel break. Aside from the massacre of the choir in the music video – murders which Gambino walks away from as an echo of the real-life, white, murderer, Dylan Roof – there is the nonchalance with which it is conducted and how the riots that follow it are ignored. Gambino can articulate the refusal of this narrative only by placing the scenes of violence and the bass based “sonic warfare” of trap alongside tropes of innocence, redemption and cosmopolitan celebration (jùjú-pop, gospel and Gwara Gwara dancing) that a liberal white audience are primed to understand. Gambino is at the limits of the safety that “techniques of Black performance” – “the ‘proof’ that blackness is not or is lost or is loss” (48–49) can buy him. A problem he is aware of as he runs from a white mob in the video’s coda. The centrality of his voice is lost now, replaced by Young Thug singing, “You just a black man in this world, You just a barcode, ayy”.

As these relationships pile up, one thing that slows the analysis of the sonic shimmer is the questions it continually poses on the (in)stability and directionality of the quasi-objects it produces as it examines. That is to say, the sonic shimmer’s refusal to relegate fast moving phenomena to the category of the mere ephemera can lead to an irreducibly infinite conjunction. In writing on the classed and racialized politics of memes on black social media, Aria Dean articulates the following idea, which could just as well apply to the contemporary formation of popular music’s shimmer and its racializing affects as it too is steered by the legacies and dominance structures of the United States. She writes:

It may seem trite, in times like these, to focus on objects whose banality is without comparison. However, I think that it also has never been more useful. As black people, we are constantly grappling with this question of collectivity.

Where do you end and the next person begins? Faced with the immense pain of watching other black people die on camera, our sense of autonomy is thrown. When we speak of “we need,” “we grieve,” “we hope,” “we demand,” and so forth, we speak of something beyond a collection of individuals and something beyond a community. The history of western thought denies this sort of organization of bodies and subjectivities, instead figuring us all as static, even proposing that we all aspire to this static individuation. As the world crumbles around us, all of us [...] it is worth questioning some of the things that we have been told we desire. (Dean 2016)

What Dean’s text describes, what Gambino’s music video deploys and what the concept of the sonic shimmer helps to diagram is the functioning of a device attributed to the video work of Arthur Jafa, namely, “affective proximity” (Mala-vassi 2020). That being the all-at-onceness of terror, joy, violence, solidarity, power and history, which informs the production of art, music and culture whether it is acknowledged or not. In being forced to acknowledge it, Dean’s notion of “beyond”, then, refers to a similar subjective entanglement that was seemingly only made apparent to Cass, who lost her daughter in *Annihilation*, through grief, which, for Dean, is always already present. This revealed entanglement is what The Shimmer, in its apparent weirdness, amplifies and accelerates. A constitutive entanglement through which Josie, the only black member of the expedition – in the words of Édouard Glissant expressed by Fred Moten as an “ecological disposition” – “consents not to be a single being” (Moten 2017, xv) and dissolves into its relational processes. This, however, terrifies Lena as the white, Hollywood protagonist in her desire to understand and thus contain The Shimmer. Following Dean then, the horror of The Shimmer in *Annihilation* is a horror that is apprehensible only as a horror to those whose being is articulated through a commitment to a limited and historically contingent notion of subjectivity as “static individuation”. A position that, as we see in the work of Gambino and Dean, is not available and perhaps not even desirable for all. While the force of the sonic shimmer is not strictly speaking extraterrestrial, it could be conceptualized as the world historic, capitalizing, racializing, gendering, aestheticizing and more forces that constitute the experience of implex in the ongoing encounters with popular music. We are, of course, already of what is forming us. But to consider popular music as a shimmer of intentionality in the form of affect allows us to better see certain traces of this process.

## By Way of Conclusion

This article started as an explanation of what The Sonic Shimmer might be. But as it shifted into a demonstration, which is to say as it entered a mode of shimmer-like sonic thinking, the method's capacity to reveal the affective traces of music was also an encounter which affected the author and the text. Just as at the end of the film, Lena and Kane are no longer who they were before their encounter with the shimmer, the sonic shimmer transforms those who think with it and displaces the conclusions that can be drawn. So, by way of conclusion, I wish to articulate some reflections on the position of subjectivity in relation to the sonic shimmer of popular music.

As I notice its use in the final sentences of the previous section, it bares mentioning that *we* is a problematic pronoun for me to use here. In addition to the *we* in my remarks throughout this paper having a shifting addressee (academics and pop audiences and people), my deployment of the word is clearly not the same *we* as the politically focused racialized constituency that Aria Dean's remarks address. Dean is of course talking to those who are understood to be black within the machinations of "racial capitalism" (Robinson 2000, 1). So, while some of what is said in this paper may be of some relevance to the *we* that Dean not only addresses but enunciates by way of, it should be made clear that the *we* for whom this paper may contain anything novel would be "those who believe themselves to white" (Coates, 2015, 97). What is meant by this phrase is an ideological disposition more than a designation. Indeed, this constituency is well articulated in James' formulation of "Multi-Racial White Supremacist Patriarchy (MrWaSP)" (2015, 12), as the superficially diverse mode of neoliberal governance that, in addition to managing the material conditions of social life in line with the demands of a capitalist market, also codes a particular kind of white bourgeois identity as the norm of productivity. This normative mode of being that can be read, following Foucault's analysis of neoliberal sovereignty (2003, 241), as ostensibly entitling those engaged in its reproduction to protection from the violence that would seek to disrupt this arrangement and the violence which produces and reproduces it. In this sense, those who believe themselves to be white refers to those whose involvement in the reproduction of the status quo is done as an affirmation of this violent arrangement. So, while it may go without saying, if this power deluded subjectivity is part of a definition of *we* that I can use, then it should be noted that I am in some way implicated in it, as are my addressees, my peers, in this peer reviewed journal article.



What I want to do is to use this articulation of the sonic shimmer – this forceful glistening conceptualization of commercial aurality – as a way to juxtapose the *we* of Dean with the *we* so often invoked as the subject of popular culture’s critique – and in so doing provide another account of the disavowed precarity of neoliberal individuality and helping to engender further “questioning some of the things that we have been told we desire.” Following the example of Dean’s work in moving this concern of contemporary art theory discourse (Lloyd 2019) into an investigation of memes, the concept of popular music as a sonic shimmer, attempts to force such examination into the popular and with it expose the profundity of everyday capitalist intentionality. But most importantly it seeks to foreground the notion that the functioning of the quasi-individual experience of popular music is illustrative of the “question of collectivity” inherent to any discussion of situated individuality. This to me is what is suggestive of an ambivalent political potential in popular music. This music facilitates the mass production of the sensation of personal haecceity in an inherently and excessively social form. Popular music can produce a sense of a *we* that is at odds with the political economy that makes it a product.

Drawing on the depiction of The Shimmer in the film *Annihilation*, I have articulated how one might conceptualize the constitutive forces, implexive experiences and distributed subjectivities implied by the specific political circumstances of popular music as a sonic shimmer. To the extent that there is some utility to this conceptualization of popular music as an affective conjuncture in motion, the kind of intervention I would hope to see following from this paper is not so much direct citations or invocations of this set of words. Rather, I would hope this can add another set of epistemic resources to those calls for critical work that, while it might be illegible to the dominant discourse of academic career advancement, risks inhabiting, using the language of Glissant (2010), the opacity and errantry required to keep some pace with the shimmer of popular music.

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## ABSTRACT

In the film adaptation of Jeff VanderMeer's novel *Annihilation*, the zone that has been infested by some kind of alien force is renamed "The Shimmer". This helps to draw attention to the ways in which all life processes in this space undergo a kind of genetic refraction as bushes grow into human forms, deers' antlers become branches, root networks explode from people's intestines and a carnivore's roar has the screams of its victims imprinted upon it. In my book, *Pop Music and Hip Ennui: A Sonic Fiction of Capitalist Realism* (2019), I used this image to conceptualize popular music as a "sonic shimmer". This is to say, as an acoustic space of desiring-production through which power, aesthetics, history, sexuality, capital, technology and intention are refracted. In this paper, I explore the concept of the sonic shimmer more fully. Drawing on cultural studies, musicology, sonic anthropology, black studies, libidinal economics and rhizomatics, I articulate how the sonic shimmer can help us to understand the intersections at play in popular music and provide epistemic tools to problematize the neoliberal construction of subjectivity.

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## NOTES

- 1 Throughout this article affect is used in the sense of the Deleuzian branch of affect theory, which is to say "affect as an entire, vital, and modulating field of myriad becomings across human and nonhuman" (Seigworth & Gregg 2010, 6).

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