

# Analysis of “Throwing Shade (No, Fuck you)” (2019)

Jessica A Schwartz & Simon Paton

This essay is a rumination on Throwing Shade (No, Fuck You) (hereafter, TSNFY), composed by Si Paton and yxka swarz as part of “Phame,” a sustained experimental project. The piece is based on ideas of resistance to overarching structures, particularly of institutions, like western hegemonic compositional practices, aesthetics, and the university. Moreover, it functions as a living organism, an unfinished commentary on and series of exercises considering the transatlantic political milieu of withdrawal and confrontation. This piece, then, is about the role of interconnectedness in the fragment, the refusal to imagine a simple whole while always working on the fullness and enrichment of a resistant, anti-authoritarian expressivity.

The composers are currently developing a performance practice steeped in a playful interlocution, a non-tonal counterpoint, a non-argumentative argument, and a hopeful anti-enjoiner to perform one’s unique being together, in some respects like Adriana Cavarero’s argument in *For More Than One Voice* (2007) in which she writes on the politics of the individual, interlocking and linking voice. Here, the instruments are voices as well, and through their gestures, they become a resistant spacing of political impositions, of stares and staring, of names and name-calling, and important, of forgetting and feeling forgotten in an overly saturated mediated world. The author-composers begin by situating their work in conversations about gesture, move to describe their creative practices, and conclude by ruminating on the stakes through the words of one of the performers.





### Lucile Ave 9

We use frameworks that blend choreographic questions on obscenity or obscene gesture as part of the politico-scape broadly through the politics of punk performance and the ways in which this framework can engage the interplay between composition and improvisation in the politico-scape broadly through experimental art (avant-garde) musics. The former and latter frameworks dovetail into the subcultural performance of Phame and is crucial to considering the role of musical gesture in antiauthoritarian subject formation as well as resistant potentialities. This plays on the theme of combining frameworks and musics to create something that might bring different communities together to create a new community (Rancière 2004). The work emerges from a particular "socio-cultural geography" (Smith 2000) that extends and complicates the global or transnational, given that the collaboration requires sustained communications, which can be thought of in terms of gestural excesses of the actual performance. These gestural excesses rely on global and transnational media and communications systems but cannot be reduced to them given the affective constructs and transatlantic imaginary that becomes invested in the

performative realizations. Transatlanticism, then, is a neologism for an emphasis on the creative movements, or gestures, that maintain the transatlantic compositional and performance collaboration that is Phame. TSNFY, as an experimental collaboration, can be understood as a multilayered conceptual "double" in terms of compositional and performance process. Yet, the doubleness that is often referred to in academic work (e.g. "double silence") does not sufficiently consider the gestural aspects of collaboration, particularly in the transatlantic framework.

The study of musical gesture has recently received increasing attention in musicological scholarship, the politics of compositional aesthetics and in theoretical, analytic (e.g. behavioral, psychological, phenomenological), and computational work given the technological capacities of human-computer composition and expressivity, as well as the human-human interactions that shape and are shaped by the new medial forms. Gesture proves to be useful to think about the relational spaces in TSNFY due to the resistant intention and outcomes that were both based on notions of spacing as a means of contemplating the social and political—or of contemplating different social geographies of power in our

historical moment and shaping them—impressing upon the world in ways beyond the screen and with each other.

We contemplate the phenomenological value of utterances as gestures (Kendon 2004), and in particular, as musico-improvisatory movements bounded by “the fundamental constituent of any signifying practice is the product neither of a unitary and stable ‘context.’ This is because contexts of each utterance ‘are in a state of constant tension or incessant interaction and conflict,’” that is not the sole purview of the composer or performer but exists somewhere in the “communicative and interactive relations” (Cadoz and Wanderley 2000: 78). Those become manifest through the compositional procurement of score, dissemination and rehearsal, and in performance. Moreover, given the intention of Phame to perpetuate this performance as a collective invitation—as a modality of communal (re)configuration, these dimensions were extended months after the first iteration of the performance. Communication and interaction can be conceived of in terms of the relational gestures that emerge in the compositional and performance processes that have sound-based and observable characteristics as a “whole” (ensemble,

piece) and in terms of the fragments or parts. This can be considered in terms of the “gestural channel.”

In their analysis of gesture in musical context, Claude Cadoz and Marcelo M. Wanderley (2000) explore the notion of the “gestural channel,” which they write is “unique if compared to other human communication channels (vision, auditory, and vocal) in that it is both a means of action on the physical world *and* a means of communication of information. In this second role, the gestural channel has a double direction — *emission* and *reception* of information. It is therefore impossible to dissociate *action* from *perception*” (Cadoz and Wanderley 2000: 78). They consider the gestural channel through the ergotic function (“material action, modification or transformation of the environment”), the epistemic function (“perception of the environment”), and the semiotic function (“communication of information towards the environment”).

### Lucile Ave 10

After meeting twice at KISMIF (Keep It Simple Make It Fast) conference in Porto in both 2016 and 2018 and at Punk Scholars Network conference in Bolton in 2017, the composers began working together concerning the interstices of punk and art. Since then, Paton and swarz have performed in the



capacity of the transatlantic avant-noise-punk duo / collective, Phame. Over the last year, swarz and Paton met biweekly to monthly via Skype. The meetings functioned in terms of logistical aspects of music-making, such as putting together the tour, a recording session, creating a Bandcamp page and releasing the album (2019). The Skype sessions have also been used to discuss musical investments, influences, and interests in ways that tie into their performance techniques, compositional materials, and creative practices. Moreover, the meetings create the space to outline the goals, objectives, and anticipated outcomes of the scored, implied, and stated materials—such as performance specifications, symbolic language, and any notational convention or technical detail that might prove challenging. And, while all this might seem gratuitous, that is perhaps the point. Why not? Why not create space to make noise and “throw shade” as it were? Or, why not push back from halfway across the world and say, “No, fuck you!”?

More specifically, then, this essay is about two aspects of Phame’s transatlanticism and the ways in which the duo move to and through the compositional and performance process. Whereas ys is interested in punk choreographies - gratuitous

obscenity, obscene gesture, and the compositional politics of obscenity through gesture and gratuity—, SP is immersed in working through the tension between composition and improvisation. He sees himself as an improviser who composes, yet whose works are compositions that incorporate improvising. The work he currently produces consists of structures with instructions on concepts based around the act of improvisation. While he emphasizes that he is more protective of his work than some composers and artists in the field are, he is careful to enable musicians he works with to channel their own experiences into the work which comes from their personal playing style and stylistic background. New projects offer completely different approaches developed through interlocking cohesion between pieces, bands and collaborations. SP’s aim is to develop a portfolio of work that will make up a cohesive whole.

Musically, the piece is based on systems devised by John Zorn with the piece *Cobra* (1984) and Brian Irvine and Jennifer Walshe with their work *13 Vices* (2015). Both of these pieces use improvisation along with direction, in the latter’s case also with standard notation. Like *Cobra*, despite having scored notation and musical directions to follow, the piece was largely taught within the oral tradition. *Cobra*’s use of



The image shows a handwritten musical score on a grid background. At the top, five measures are labeled with numbers 1 through 5, each enclosed in a box. Below these, there are six staves, each labeled on the left with a player's name: Player 1, Player 2, Player 3, Player 4, Player 5, and Player 6. Each staff contains musical notation, including notes, rests, and other symbols, corresponding to the five measures. The notation is handwritten and appears to be a form of shorthand or a specific musical notation system. The grid lines help organize the notation into a clear structure.

Fig 1: Excerpt of the score for TSNFY (Simon Paton's contribution)



interplay between the ensemble is the idea of a musical community and how they interact through improvising. As Zorn himself says to Bailey, "I basically create a small society and everybody finds their own position in that society" (in Bailey, 1992: 78). Phame works in a similar way which explores musical hierarchies by creating subgroups within the piece. These subgroups change in each of the four sections and are primarily at play during sections two and three which explore relationships of ensemble playing over what individuals are doing.



Fig 2: Excerpt of the score for TSNFY (yxka swarz's contribution)



This whole – the concept of the whole – fragments, however, in the collaboration with ys by which it becomes an unfinished whole unto itself. In this respect, a novel interlocution occurs when ys's oeuvre meets SP's repertoire and creates a particularly nuanced pressure as gestural channel in the noise-punk-experimental-avant-garde inflections of Phame, and in particular, the composition and performance, "Throwing Shade (No, Fuck you)" (2019). Ys works through notions of corporeal capacitations and abilities, both from the political notion of (dis)ability and also from the perspective of performative abling through postures that might be read as unconventional or (problematically) abnormal. Y's emphasis on punk gratuity and obscenity created frames for performers through iconic punk styles and choreographies as they were staged for the Met (NYC) exhibition "Chaos to Couture" (2013). These (dis/en)abling frames worked with SP's improvisational and thus aleatoric model that was nonetheless defined through a series of sketches based on (un)pitched interval, timbre, texture, duration, and activity. Prior to the performance, SP led rehearsals while ys journeyed to Birmingham from Los Angeles. Due to a flight delay and performer commitments the night prior to the performance, ys was only able to make one of the rehearsals.

### **Lucile Ave 12**

The piece can be described as pressure, as tension in auditory, visible, and movement-based means or as gestural channel itself of intensities experienced by the composers, performers, and audience members that moved through the space. Directions were reiterated beforehand.

With personal circumstances affecting full objectivity of the performance, the other notable event that happened was when the audience of another show at the conservatoire of a well-known jazz musician finished in a different room and proceeded to enter onto the Phame performance in the foyer. Initial reception of this group was mixed with several of this audience group unsure how to interpret the performance without any context to either the aforementioned personal events or an understanding of the compositional practice. A split-second decision was made by the group to play up to the antagonistic atmosphere created. With an antagonistic spirit being present in several of the performances the group have made, this felt like a natural instinct. This confrontation to this group reflected the core ideas of the Phame approach: the confrontation of institutions and the uneasy relationship the composers have with them.

The decision to co-write a creative-reflective essay on this





Fig 3: Performance of TSNFY. Photo credit: Paul Norman.

collaboration and the first iteration of “TSNFY” came from the work as gestural dynamic itself, a product of this transatlanticism through which we worked out issues, concerns, and questions concerning the role of freedom in performance, the stakes of lies and truth-telling on stages, and the political sensibilities of stage-craft, direction-making, and direction-following. Ys and SP’s interests, then, dovetail in the musico-experimental

expressivity that is endemic to the political milieu that binds (and perhaps breaks) their respective nation-states. How far are performers, musicians, and artists willing to go to push “the truth” or “a lie” and what is improvisatory, what is composed, and what is obscene? The question makes more sense as well when thinking about the legacies of punk and experimental music and the roles of obscenity, gratuity, and shock and awe of, for



example, watching a Cage or Fluxus piece or hearing punk musicians blatantly scream “fuck this, fuck that, fuck the world” and so forth that is no longer obscene in the wake of the obscenity of political life in transatlantic capacity. The composers adhere then to the tension in their work as fragmentation and see it as a continuous work-in-progress, a constantly developing work and believe that artistic reflection—on movements and on one’s repertoire—is a political endeavor, a site and strategy of resistance to the hyper-efficiency of McDonalds’ “freedom fries” or disconnection from global networks. They understand the piece as a constantly developing collaborative medium and they solicited input on the scores and performance for the present essay and future performances since they endeavor to engage a collaborative methodology that reflects the inspiration and creative process behind TSNFY (resistance to over-arching structural domination, hegemony).

Since all the performers (including the composers) were directly engaged in this collaborative resistance, the push and pull of the sonic and choreographic elements of the compositional design, the Phame duo opted to solicit the performers’ input via an email and stressed they would credit them with performing as part of

the larger process, which is being done herein regardless of email response. SP and ys hoped that the performers’ feedback could be pivotal in the ongoing process of interlocking gestural remembering in experimental fashion, phenomenological capacity, and through advancing the piece’s notational system to make it feel more resistant while generous in its aleatoric prospects of embodiment. The inquiry was brief and unfolded in three prompts. First, performers were asked “Taking the choreographic and musical elements of the score, share 2 sentences of the first thoughts that come to yr mind” (sic). Second, “In the next iteration of the score, what (aesthetic) dimensions of the scores/performance would you highlight would you get across the feeling of the push-and-pull of collaborative resistance -- with an emphasis on the tension between cohesion and breakdown? Please share 2-3 sentences.” Ys and SP concluded by asking for “Other comments, questions, concerns? If you wish instead or as well as, do offer thoughts on your experience - whether this be the compositional process, the score itself, us as bandleaders, the approach to performance.”

One performer, Richard, chose to answer. “I felt that the choreographic element to the score gave performers who are less used to being put [in] the position performing this kind of work



puts you in a reason to behave or move or act. Being precise with them, however, was near impossible for me," (sic) he wrote.

"A discernible relationship between the scored material and the performance was greatly diminished in the final outcome. As with the choreography, however, the focus that it gave us i think was valuable to the overall effect. The last moment was pretty savage and that was completely down to the scoring and direction. Managing the percentages of freedom felt pretty impossible at the time but its an interesting way of working and with more time and thought it could work" (sic).

With that in mind, the composers see the work as a guide for performance as opposed to the musical score being the work in itself. Less an accurate representation of the performance, but rather, a mentality that alters how ensembles can approach performance. This became apparent watching the video back where some performers followed the score more rigorously than others, yet the whole ensembles playing was affected by the instructions given as opposed to a guided free improvisation, such as the one that members of the collective, including SP and yx, performed in three days prior (Apocalypse Jazz Unit, 2019).

The use of gestures in TSNFY was one step removed from the practice of conduction developed by Butch Morris. Instead of a conductor guiding the ensemble, members of the ensemble (in this case the trumpet and saxophone) directed each other what to play. In section two, the musicians were given a list of musical directions that each player had to instruct for the other. This was chosen to amplify the theatricality of the piece and to give each distinctive sub-group a different role – the flexibility of these sub-groups would drastically change during the performance of the piece, with each of the four sections having four specific groupings and roles in the overall ensemble.

### **Lucile Ave 13**

Issues of freedom, of interaction, and of the spaces they provide for self-expressive and communitarian gestural channels is created through the actions of the performer-non-composer, in this instance. The composers are still exploring the possibilities of TSNFY and agree that the piece is still very much seen as a constantly developing and evolving work in progress. Future plans for the development involve incorporating the piece with a flexible lineup of both more and less players, seeing how this performance was very much written for eight performers. The merging of



directed improvisations inside a compositional framework with the act of movements imitating obscenities within socio-political structures inside environments both inside and outside the academic institutions is something that is very much at the heart of TSNFY.

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Jessica A. Schwartz (AKA XY) is an Associate Professor of Musicology at University of California, Los Angeles. YX has published on music, gender, and militarism in journals, such as *Women & Music*, *American Quarterly*, and *Music & Politics*, and is co-editing a collection of essays, *Nuclear Music* (Oxford University Press, with Noriko Manabe). YX's current research explores the intersections of (invisible) disability, (nonbinary) gender, and (mixed) ethno-racial categorizations mediated through punk experiential practice. And, YX plays noise-punk guitar, going by yxka s.

Simon Paton (b.1988) is a composer, bassist, academic and promoter. He is a doctoral researcher at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, researching composition for improvising large ensembles searching for a shared musical language between different stylistic origins. As an improviser, he has performed with the likes of Nils Økland, Steve Tromans, Chris Sharkey, Maria Chiara Argirò, Cath Roberts and regularly plays with Apocalypse Jazz Unit. He is also the curator of Thinking/Not Thinking Fest – a three-day festival celebrating musical juxtapositions.