

DANCING WITH DEATH: A SPECULATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY

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There was the sign from the old pizza place. An empty neon vessel, long starved of illumination. This must be it. I glance back over one shoulder. The deserted street extends behind me. Arrive alone and unseen, they'd said. I step into the alleyway beneath the sign, sinking deeper into the fractured city. The sodden cardboard of a pizza box sticks to the bottom of my shoe. I can just make out the words «designed for sharing» in faded red letters. A relic to an impossible conviviality.

It jolts me back to the present. For some time now, «offline fieldwork» has been little more than a methodological artefact, excluded from the impenetrable tower of institutional approval. The bleached-out residue of «music studies» seems stuck in the nostalgic comforts of an endless historical turn. The complex realities of culture in our contemporary moment left ignored and erased. In recent weeks, I have begun to feel a duty to try and return to research in real time. But perhaps my motivations are in fact more selfish and ephemeral. I crave proximity, spontaneous encounter.

For years, I'd managed to deceive myself that digital connections were enough. Intelligent agents had advanced to the point that connection itself could be simulated: enhanced social interactions constructed out of the behavioural surplus harvested from our everyday existence. Music was ever present – a generative soundtrack, reactive and unrepeatable. Sonic algorithms mutating in apparent synchrony with our own individual desires.

Most of the time, I could luxuriate in this virtual bath, this all-encompassing soporific. But some days, as I scrolled through the marketplace of experience, the efforts required to sustain the fantasy in my own mind would exhaust me. Casting the screen aside, I would stare out my window at the silent, sprawling city – an outdated and illogical architecture for a world in which the convenience and joys of propinquity were now fraught with epidemiological risk.

I peel the stubborn remnants of the box off my shoe and continue along the dimly lit alleyway. Vacant office blocks loom menacingly overhead, their once gleaming glass exteriors hazy with mould and dust. It's been years since I last came to this area. The centre of the city was hollow, a gaping vacuum in the middle of a swollen doughnut. It had been abandoned some decades ago, when it became clear that the mutations of the virus were accelerating beyond the capabilities of vaccination. The systems of global finance were well-prepared for this moment, their networks long detached from tangible conceptions of location or value. Uncoupled from even a nominal geography, their profits multiplied in the unbounded tax haven of the transnational in-between.

For those businesses shackled to an unavoidable materiality, this moment triggered a rapid process of extinction. Mundane terms such as «hospitality» or «entertainment» soon acquired an archaic allure. Music, art and film – all that was once labelled «culture», was subsumed into the flattened, fattened behemoth of «content farming». Spaces of intimate interaction – music venues, nightclubs – found themselves unexpectedly redefined as incubators of infection. Swiftly rejected as a luxury collateral, the communities intertwined with these spaces were cast aside and ignored. Venues had lain as empty shells for some time now, many looted of their contents. Club sound systems of particular renown had been dissected and sold off as functionless objects to collectors. Technologies of collective sonic experience repurposed as soundless decoration for the interiors of the elite.

Reaching into my pocket, I glance at the instructions I'd scrawled on a crumpled piece of paper. My handwriting looks messy, unrehearsed. Leave no digital trace, they'd said. «No phones on the dancefloor» was of greater consequence now.

At the end of the alleyway, I reach a concrete wall, its fissures veined with mildew. A non-descript steel door breaks the textured surface. Fetid green drips into flows of orange rust, cutting across the kaleidoscope of faded graffiti. As I'd been told, the door is unlocked. I push it open and step through to descend a steep metal staircase. It must be the old loading bay of the offices above ground, a graveyard of obsolete infrastructure.

As I make my way across the vast concrete vault, I begin to notice a low rumble pulsating from the distant corner. A muffled rhythm diffuses into aqueous reverb. My synapses flash to attention. Long-buried neurons activate my step, a primal energy allured by vibration. Hurriedly, I make my way around a mangled ventilation structure and the corner comes into view. I stop. People. Five of them, stood in a line against the wall. Fear, disgust and desire swirl through me in equal measure, clamouring for my attention. It feels like another lifetime that I saw this many bodies so close together.

I approach cautiously, moving to take my place at the back of the queue. Heads turn in my direction. Suddenly I feel self-conscious, ashamed of my government-issue KN98 mask. Surely it's obvious I'm not a regular here, they all look so confident, so at ease. I'd forgotten these counterpart emotions – the anxieties, the desire to be accepted. Stealing glances along the line, I see that they all belong together, their affiliation to the tribe and to this place expressed through appearance. They are a cohesive spectrum of black, grey and silver, as though they have spawned from the decaying underworld in which we stand. Some bodies are hidden beneath loosely flowing leather, transmitting an almost ceremonial aura. Others wear lustrous fabrics which grip the contours of their body, like skin dipped in liquid metal. Each of them has a

mask customised with urban detritus. A tangle of wires and rubber hose protrudes from their faces, some clearly without function. Protection merging with aesthetics. Signifiers of gender are juxtaposed with a playful fluidity. The mundane neutrality of my own mass-produced hazmat renders me strangely conspicuous in this context. Since clothing was largely reimagined as just another line of biological defence, I'm overwhelmed by these simultaneous expressions of individual and collective identity.

I stand at the back of the line lost in these thoughts, when those in front of me begin to shuffle slowly forward. The set of rusty metal shutters ahead of us is hoisted open and one by one each person ducks through. The portal to intimacy. That same throb emanates from the opening, its rhythm more distinct now. Just before I reach the doorway from the rear of the queue, the shutter drops once again. It hits the concrete floor with a clatter that reverberates violently across the room. A knell to my rejection and sudden loneliness. Entry is not guaranteed, they'd said. Perhaps it was a sign. To pass through that door was to reject a vast constellation of social, legal and moral conventions. The notion that I could publish any of this experience as research was misguided at best.

They must've decided I don't belong here. Perhaps it's my standard issue protective gear, arousing suspicion or perhaps just ridicule. I should've made more effort with my appearance. I notice a CCTV camera above the doorway and look into its lens. A small red LED light blinks back at me, but its monotonous pattern gives nothing away.

My disappointment morphs slowly into relief when the shutter abruptly lifts once more. I find myself stood less than a metre from a tall figure in the doorway who I recognise from the queue. The visor of their mask is foggy but I can just make out the face behind it. I detect a deep rage in their stare, the whites of their eyes standing in stark contrast to their rich black skin. We share a brief moment of eye contact before they stride away defiantly. I want to call out to them but public conversation with strangers feels impossible. All I can do is observe. From their dress, they look like they must be a regular here. I speculate that their rejection may be the result of a newly paranoid discrimination: in recent weeks, the so-called «Congolese strain» of the virus had spread rapidly across Europe, and inflammatory public health campaigns had emboldened a resurgent anti-Black racism. Perhaps I was naïve to assume that the legal grey zone of this underworld would be immune to such prejudices. Memories of my own musical youth are undeniably clouded by nostalgia, a rose-tinted utopia projected from the cocoon of my own whiteness. In this moment of collective planetary fear, are clandestine musical communities underpinned by greater structures of care? Or have the risks served to embed practices of exclusion more deeply?

I stand still waiting for the shutter to close in front of me, but nothing happens. The moment lingers, time suspended at the edge of a growing precipice. From the darkness on the other side of the portal, a small screen flickers on. At first, there is nothing but static, black and green quivering in diagonal lines. The chaos settles for a second before a single word flashes in a lurid lime green. «ENTER». Almost unthinkingly, I heed this disembodied command and step through the portal. The metal shutter closes behind me and the screen goes blank, leaving me in darkness, the memory of the text etched on my retinas. The rumble of bass is visceral now and the vibrations surging through my facemask into my skull merge with the rattle of the shutter behind me. For an instant, I close my eyes and surrender myself to that place where hearing and touch blur into a single sense. I bat my eyelids open as the screen stutters back to life. A sharp line of green appears on the floor before me and I imagine that I can feel a gentle

burn on my skin as it passes across my body. With the scan completed, the laser disappears and small text flashes on the screen, scrolling from top to bottom:

«BODY TEMPERATURE: 37.6°C»

«CT SCAN: no abnormalities detected»

«BLOOD TYPE: AB+»

«ANTIBODY COUNT: moderate»

«VACCINATION HISTORY: National Health Bureau standard issue - two doses; BioCorp Advanced Viral Guard
- single dose»

«HEALTH INSURANCE: up to date [moderate cover]»

«TRAVEL HISTORY: no international travel in last 10 years»

«ETHNICITY: white Caucasian»

The pixels of the last line of text fizzle off the edge of the monitor, my earlier suspicions apparently confirmed: ethnicity evoked alongside measures of medical risk. Discourses of race and biology converging in an alarming societal regression. A disembodied racism cloaked within technological infallibility.

I am left staring into the void of the blank screen, anxiously awaiting my fate. Variations on these kinds of spot check tests – «SCTs» – had been popular ten years previously, until a controversial BioCorp research project had deemed their +/- 0.5% margin of error too unreliable for governmental authorisation. Shortly following the publication of the paper, BioCorp had collaborated with a number of governments around the world in the rapid rollout of their human microchip implant, which integrated biometrics, medical records and an overwhelming array of dynamic biodata as part of an immense centralised database. Since the mass adoption of the implants, the vast majority of SCTs had lost their official certification. It made sense to find one in this context, in which both biosecurity and anonymity were required.

Several minutes pass before the test comes to its verdict. Distant memories come to mind, of anxious moments spent in front of bouncers, performing disinterest to seek some claim of agency over our fates. Here I was fully submitted to machinic rationale, my body reduced to data. «Access granted». This is clearly a first-generation technology – subsequent SCTs could analyse data and produce a result within seconds, but somehow it feels like this particular delay is an almost conscious decision, perhaps a nostalgic nod to the theatrics of expectation. Entry through this portal occupies a murky and mysterious space between science and subjectivity. Like the functionless form of those masks I'd seen people wearing in the queue, this is the aestheticization of bio-surveillance. Is this a subversion of creeping totalitarianism, or the wholesale absorption of desire?

On my right hand side, what I assume to be a wall splits in two with a hiss of compressed air, revealing a small lift with just enough space for one person. A body of text is embossed onto the rough metal surface: terms and conditions which place all biological and legal risks within the realms of individual liability.

I scan the words mechanically. My retinas have long been impervious to the small print which marches as the foot soldiers of omnipresent bureaucracy. There is an ironic dissonance to this legal grey zone. What atmospheres of musical joy are possible after such heavy fortifications? Perhaps the sanctity of joy deems it worthy of protection. Is my attachment to a less regulated experience merely an outdated and irrelevant craving suffocated by nostalgia?

Stepping out the lift I fall abruptly from the sky into the depths of another existence: a synchronous dimension with no apparent start or end, running in a parallel act of outright refusal. After struggling through this world's scorched outer shell of concrete and corrosion, I find myself swallowed deep into its breathing, sweating, throbbing core. Bodies. Hundreds of them, pulsating and writhing in exhilarating proximity. Thick clouds of haze cling to the air which is sticky and viscous with the heat of perspiring skin. Gazing around the room, I try to discern individuals from the mass, but the darkness is broken intermittently by explosive stroboscopic flashes. Flows of movement are sliced up into a series of discrete after-images. Time itself seems to stutter. Overwhelmed by the disorientating oscillation of light and dark, I close my eyes, exposing myself to the audible.

That muffled rumble which had ignited my neurons above ground was here in its abundant glory: the full sonic spectrum unveiled to vibrate air, flesh and concrete as one. A crystalline treble shifts into focus, piercing through the folds of haze. At that moment, the low end intensifies and an eruption of bass courses through every particle in my body, the vibrations of my cells mirroring the newly animated movement of the bodies around me.

This was my first exposure to amplified sound in years and my eardrums were overwhelmed. In this moment, any recognisable notion of musical form dissolved into an abstract, imposing sonic pressure. Despite the intensity of my youthful passions, I had become wholly estranged from music since all listening had shifted into an inherently isolated, individual practice. Amplified sound was subject to coercive regulation in public space, such were its associations with collectivity, and thus with contagion.

Perhaps I need movement to make sense of this collective musical experience, to break free of the limiting demands of logic. Yet my body feels stiff and unresponsive. With so little use, the pathways between my brain and limbs have grown tangled and obstructed. Suddenly I feel isolated in my hazmat: not only resistant to external stimulation, its membrane now acts as a container to my own festering anxieties.

Hugging the wall behind me as a reassuring blanket of stability, I make my way along the edge of the room, dodging the heaving tide of bodies. In the corner there's an archaic vending machine set into the wall, displaying a selection of beer and spirits. Most are contained within regulation compression vials, but I'm shocked to see a few regular glass bottles for sale alongside them – a rare sighting in public commerce. I select a small vial of overpriced beer and screw it into the consumption bay on my suit. The sweet refreshing nectar flows abundantly through from the ingestion tube in my mask and I gulp it down eagerly, desperate to suppress my paralysing inhibitions. I repeat the process with two more vials in quick succession, fervently taking advantage of this unregulated supply. The strict night time curfews during the early days of the pandemic had quickly settled into an unwavering anti-hedonism – accepted and unquestioned by the general populace – its ideological moralism disguised within a discourse of public safety. The bubbly liquid bloats my stomach uncomfortably, but it's tempered by the consoling numbness that oozes through my arteries.

Emboldened, I resolve to enter the fray, when my shoulder is engulfed by an unfamiliar sensation, gentle but firm. A gloved hand is deliberately and confidently clasping my flesh. Yes, this is skin mediated by layers of fabric and synthetic mesh, but this is still that unmistakeable joining of human bodies which I had not felt for so many years, that completion of a circuit which can electrify terror, comfort or desire. Oblivious to my inner frenzy, the figure leans in close to my ear, our headgear awkwardly colliding.

They ask me if I want «something». Their words sound muffled and distant despite their proximity, buried among bass frequencies. They repeat the question and I hear their words clearly this time, but my blank face betrays my confusion. Apparently, it's obvious that it's my first time here. They suggest I need something to relax. Two options are presented: «protection» or «denial». Cautiously, I opt for the former. They reel off a list of substances with rehearsed precision: liquid urumin, didmenin capsules, hyper strength vitamin D, doses of discontinued first-gen BioCorp vax spray. I know very little about any of them but recognise the names as treatments that had all been discredited and subsequently banned during the early years of the pandemic. I now realise that they had continued to circulate via underground distribution networks. Clasping an array of tablets and small vials in one hand, I try to justify the decision to myself. Surely the social and sonic immersion necessary for my research requires chemical mediation? To understand this space and its people from the «inside». But perhaps my motivations are more selfish, wishing to excavate the dregs of carefree abandon that I know still lay somewhere deep within me. The contradiction lingers as I stride through the throng of surging bodies toward the centre of the room.

Another hand clasps my shoulder, forcing me to turn around. Security. I feel my pulse accelerate and my body tenses, conscious of my illicit cargo. My academic position is precarious at best – even a minor drug charge would result in automatic institutional blacklisting. Without a word, they raise a handgun-shaped instrument and point it menacingly at the centre of my forehead. I breathe a sigh of relief: it's just a routine temperature check. An LED on the infrared thermometer glows a reassuring green. The security guard walks off indifferently. I wonder how people are able to let go within this atmosphere of surveillance. Perhaps it's just a skill to be learned like any other.

Once they have disappeared into the crowd, I ingest the full cocktail of medicines in quick succession, willing some kind of protective aura to take shape around me. I begin to sway rhythmically, trying to focus all my attention on the beat. Despite my best intentions, I struggle to sustain the fictional shield in my mind. I try to ignore the elbows brushing against me, the limbs that flail frenziedly amid this rapturous constellation. Every touch arouses an automatic anxiety within me, perforating that strictly bordered sense of personal space which has hardened around and within me. Everyone else in the room seems so free and easy.

A clumsy rubber sole stomps on my foot and two hands suddenly take hold of my forearm, apologising for their clumsiness. The voice is concerned, genuine. Our eyes lock for a second. Their pupils are wide and dilated, floating within molten emeralds. Two eyes, naked and exposed, unimpeded by plastic or glass. I'm so close I can see orbs of sweat dripping down their nose, each globule refracting the light beams which ricochet chaotically around the room. In the high definition of unrestricted proximity, I see that their face is animated yet somehow sedated: enlarged eyes hooded by drooping lids. They are «without mask» and my shock is palpable. The naked face warps into a manic grin, mouthing the word «denial». They enunciate each syllable dramatically, exaggerating what is to them clearly a self-evident truth. The word

eventually clicks and they can see it on my face. Their eyes become playful now and they smile at me knowingly before vanishing deeper into the crowd. Now I understand how this place functions.

I squeeze my way back to the edge of the room, searching for the fateful chemist. I find them in the same spot, in the midst of another deal. As I approach timidly, the dealer smirks, my desires are obvious. They hand me a single small capsule. It alone costs more than the assortment of quack remedies I had stupidly purchased from them before.

Fully lost in my motivations now, I ingest the capsule hurriedly before I have any more time to think. I have no idea what I have just put into my body. «Denial». I play the word around in my head. A necessary defence mechanism. A refusal to admit. A sign of weakness. A temporary tactic in the face of interminable darkness. These thoughts surge around my head, accelerating into an indecipherable vortex. Inexplicably they begin to slow – not into a clarity of knowing, but a clarity of being. I swim through a pool of calmness whose murky depths can still not be seen, yet they are no longer something to be feared.

A new sonic intensity cascades through the room and bodies brush chaotically against mine. This time contact is divorced from terror. I detect a strange numbness in myself, each touch somehow neutral, dislocated from any prior association. Feeling safer now, I submit to the common energy, integrating myself into the assemblage of sound and motion. We move separately but together, our individual and collective experience mutually amplified. An unmistakable refrain creeps into the mix, dialling into a long-buried synapse. My body recognises it before my mind: an anthem from the before times. Its significance is deeply personal to me but somehow it feels archetypal, eternal. Those around me are much younger but they can feel it too, a totem to what once was and somehow, somewhere will always be. Any youthful yearnings I once had for the shock of the new dissolve in this instant. What had become a tired sociality in previous times feels radical once again. These sounds are familiar and unchallenging, but it is music as pure function – the auditory fuel of the collective. A short loop modulates imperceptibly, propelling us forward to nothing and everything. Archetypes of sonic euphoria. There is only the moment.



The following morning, I walk home through the desolate streets. This time, the emptiness of the city is deflected by the effervescent armour of my surrounding afterglow. I reflect on how I can record this night, in all its messy contradictions. It has always been a challenge to conjure musical experiences through words. A process of approximate translation. But in this context, ambiguity itself feels vital. At what point does my desire to tell untold stories become just another institutional co-option. Just another disguised, misguided transformation of lives into «content». I think about ways to narrate the history of the present. To render it familiar and unfamiliar. To multiply and merge it with imagined futures, desired and undesired. For now, I focus on the tingle which echoes across the surface of my skin: itself the most evocative documentation.

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