

Witching Sound in the Anthropocene (and Occultcene)

By D Ferrett

The witches' ritual chant – “She changes everything She touches, and everything She touches changes” – could surely be commented on in terms of assemblages, since it resists the dismembering attribution of agency. Does change belong to the Goddess as “agent” or to the one who changes when touched? But the first efficacy of the refrain is in the “She touches.” The indeterminacy proper to assemblages is no longer conceptual. It is part of an experience that affirms the power of changing to be NOT attributed to our own selves nor reduced to something “natural.” It is an experience that honors change as a creation.¹

When we think of touch we think also of impact – whether physical, mental, emotional, material or immaterial, whether forever or ephemeral. Touch is the threshold of change...and sound touches – it has an impact and can *change things*. Isabelle Stengers points to the first efficacy of the witches' ritual chant (“she touches”) as a sonic refrain or part of an assemblage that resists the dismembering attribution of agency – dispersing it across multiple agents and forces that ‘honor(s) change as a creation’ within a wider project of ‘reclaiming animism’, and with it, the unbelievable of ‘magic.’² To listen to the ritual witches' chant is, therefore, to engage as a participant in the potential of sonic touch as it manifests and changes things in a series of circuitous agencies and impacts. The touch of the witches' chant, its affective alchemy, reanimates agencies beyond our selves, evokes magic, summons spiritual essences and bodily spirits from the material and immaterial world. This is a kind of touch arguably disavowed by the Enlightenment, tyrannised by Judeo-Christian

¹ Stengers, “Reclaiming Animism,” 6-7.

² Stengers, 8.

religion and white supremacist patriarchy, and forcefully subsumed by neoliberal capitalism into complex systems that seek to translate and appropriate the value of such potential as it manifests in and through cultural figurations of the witch. Following Stengers, the efficacy I wish to raise in this chapter is that of the “witches’ ritual chant” because it recognises the monotonous, rhythmic, repetitive ritual sound of witches as integral to touch, impact, and change wherein agents, agency and intention operates across an active network of material and immaterial phenomena. Witches are therefore vital to the witches’ ritual sound, but they are not the sole agents. Rather, instead of focusing on the agency of the witch, witches are part of an assemblage that affirms the power of “*witching* sound”. ‘Witching sound’ (instead of ‘witch’) refocuses attention on the activity, distribution of agency, power, technologies and practices that propound the craft, the rituals, and the moments in time and space when sound touches, has an impact and changes things.

This touch and impact is different from, and other to, that of the dominant human agent situated at the centre of the distinct geological age we are currently living in named the ‘Anthropocene’, a geological term that names the profound environmental impact of human activities on the Earth and its climate. Listening to the witches’ ritual chant offers a way of reimagining and rethinking agency, touch, and impact in an era of social-political-environmental crisis, beyond a dominant human agency and the narrative of the Anthropocene, towards other life, agency, touch and potential. In this sense, I argue that witching sound raises and makes audible a shadow ‘cene’ to that of the Anthropocene, an ‘Occultcene’, which can, like the Anthropocene, be thought of in terms of ‘impact’, but in contrast, raises other stories of touch that relate to the occult and occulted agencies. In this sense, biopolitical questions and ideologies around what constitutes agency and meaningful valuable life oscillate between the Anthropocene and its abjected shadow: the Occultcene.

The contemporary witching sound of the band Divide and Dissolve and their album *Gas Lit* displaces Anthropos – as the ideal humanist subject and challenges the Anthropocene ‘end of the world’ narratives to reveal the ‘ongoing (settler) colonialisms [that] have been ending worlds for as long as they have been in existence.’³ Connecting the hidden, the othered, the dead and the ‘inert’, this album’s witching sound appeals to the agencies of the Occultcene as a repressed force buried in the geologies of the Anthropocene; it compels a deeper listening to the sonic geology of the Occultcene, the agencies of the subterranean and the origins, history and structures of earth, changing relationships with the atmosphere, the matter of celestial bodies, extra-terrestrial materials, seismic waves and deep time.

The Witch in Witching Sound

The Occultcene and witching sound, as emergent from the Western (occulted) histories and cultural conceptions of the West and the Occult, agitates a deep and chaotic political ambivalence. Despite the adoption of the witch and witchcraft as vitalising symbolism and mobilisation by feminist, queer, trans-rights and anti-racist thinking and activism, witching sound is not necessarily politically affiliated to these intersectional movements. The fragility and potential of meaning within the semiotic-material soundings of the witch are considered by music and sound theorists as a complex negotiation between on the one hand, harnessing the empowering sonic performative forces of the witch and, on the other, confirming the stereotypes and hierarchical binaries that are used to legitimate violence and oppression against women, people of color, queer, trans and non-binary people, animals and nonhuman life. Karina Eileraas, in her journal article “Witches, Bitches & Fluids,” based on the performative resistance politics of (punk/goth/riot grrrl) girl bands, recognises the musical and performative invocation of the witch as a purposeful invocation of misogynistic and

³ Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes*, xiii.

patriarchal genealogy that attempts to appropriate and reverse the assault on women through ‘ugly’ aesthetics (shrieks, hisses, noise, screams, croaks, laughter, ‘hysterical’ soundings). For Eileraas, the adoption of cultural and historically despised figures in music and performances that exaggerate the ‘anti-pretty’ alongside what has been socially construed as the abject of the female body and sexuality, is used by punk and riot grrrl bands as a weapon of resistance against ‘society’s wounding inscriptions’.⁴ However, Eileraas also unsettles this conception of empowerment and intent by questioning whether identification with the abject truly operates as effective resistance when it is precisely the inscription of the ugly, the abject, baseness and bestiality that have been deployed to instil fear and justify violence, slavery, domination and genocide (Eileraas makes reference to Hitler’s deployment of a ‘rhetoric of ugliness’ and ‘contamination’ to condemn Jewish people’).⁵ In his chapter ‘Queering the Witch’, Jason Lee Oakes expresses comparative concerns in that, whilst recognising the positive queering of the hyperfeminine mystical ‘witchiness’ of Stevie Nicks by drag queens and the queer community, he also importantly retains the question of whether it is really ‘possible for women, queers, or other marginalized subjects to reposition these patriarchal myths and their portrayal of femininity, [...]?’.⁶ Similarly, Elizabeth Pérez’s focus on the ‘witch-hop’ of Azealia Banks – as incorporative of Afro-futurism, ‘Black-Atlantic traditions’ and ‘Afro-Cuban religions’ – critically analyses what could be considered Banks’s ‘black conjure feminism’⁷. Pérez questions the ‘strategic’ and ‘ideological essentialism’ of Banks’s Womanism with the particular risk of reinforcing the post-Enlightenment colonial biopolitics that simultaneously establish Black people as ‘less and more than human’ – a white superhumanisation of Black people (wild, savage, close to nature, extraordinary powers), that

⁴ Eileraas, “Witches, Bitches, and Fluids,” 134.

⁵ Eileraas, 137.

⁶ Oakes, “Queering the Witch,” 50.

⁷ Pérez, “The Black Atlantic Metaphysics of Azealia Banks.”

‘merely reinforces stereotypes and fosters anti-Black discrimination.’⁸ Whilst the archetype of the witch and magical femme, queer, womanist practice importantly embodies both oppression and potential resistance, its sonic figures, signs and affects are in continual flux, transforming and mutating in a system of meaning that can be hacked, short circuited, re-coded, re-wired, re-contextualised. As such, the significance of agency and intention returns in that the ‘witching’ craft of a musician, writer, coder, artist, is critical to an assemblage of desire and political impact. In Patricia MacCormack’s terms, in the current geopolitical context, the witch can be understood as nothing more than an oppressed and marginalised subject (made object) ‘who seeks agency over her own body and drives.’⁹ This agency is crucial in terms of the impact of an intersectional feminist orientated witching sound.

Whilst the Occultcene does not have an identifiable genesis impact moment that can be definitively located (although the Enlightenment might tentatively be referred to as its most effective suppressant), the 2016 US presidential election in the context of climate emergency is a significant node with respect to the reinvigoration and reamplification of the Occultcene, intensifying variable political investments in the power of the Occult as aligned with Nature and supported by the ideals of esoteric knowledge. Post 2016, the porosity between between the Anthropocene and the Occultcene continues to expand, and the social cauldron of drive, power and desire intensifies. In such an era, the witching sound of Divide and Dissolve conjures and bears heavy genealogies in a performative practice with focused intent to “fight for Indigenous Sovereignty, Black and Indigenous Liberation, Water, Earth, and Indigenous land given back.”

⁸ Pérez, 537.

⁹ MacCormack, *Ahuman Manifesto*, 112-113.

In 2016, ‘A month after the election, she [Takiaya Reed] woke up from a dream in a cold sweat with an urgent feeling, thinking, “We gotta do this. It’s not a time to be complacent. It’s a time to turn up.”¹⁰

Heavy Witching Sound

At the time of writing, Divide and Dissolve were a duo based in Melbourne, Australia made up of Takiaya Reed (saxophone, guitar, live effects) and Sylvie Nehill (drums, live effects); they released their third album *Gas Lit* in 2021 (Nehill has since left the band). The genre is described primarily as ‘doom metal’ and frequently fused in music reviews with additions of ‘sludge’, ‘drone’ and ‘stoner rock.’ However, despite the affinities with slow dragging tempos, crushing low-ends and bass-laden ‘heaviness’, the band claims to bear no genre loyalty and in fact specifically disidentifies with (doom) metal music and the metal scene:

“Aesthetically, our music is never gonna arrive at the same place a lot of other metal music does. I don’t wish to pay homage to the same people that a lot of people in metal do. We want to be honouring our ancestors, the earth, and every living thing. That’s what’s at the forefront of our minds when we play music.”¹¹

Drawing heaviness out of the fortitudes of metal territories (dominated by white male musicians, fans and ‘scene’ commentators) is a politicised act. Just the presence of this ‘heavy’ band made up of two women with indigenous heritage is arguably a subversive deterritorialization of a well-guarded semiotic arena of signs, a presence that corrodes what might be regarded as the ‘legitimate’ ownership of heavy sonic signifiers. Despite their ‘heavy’ and ‘metal’ (hash)tags, Divide and Dissolve’s practice has evolved within

¹⁰ Reed quoted in Jackie, “Divide and Dissolve.”

¹¹ Nehill quoted in Clarke, “Heavy Is the Head.”

contemporary feminist queer punk and experimental music scenes rather than metal music subcultures.

In metal music, ‘heavy’ signs are frequently associated with the occult and its connotations of masculinized and satanic power. On a surface level, these heavy + occult signs serve to reinforce an esoteric emphasis within predominantly white brotherhood networks that significantly flirt with the Devil and its white male supremacist powers (sexual and violent power over women in particular). The difference in Divide and Dissolve’s ‘heaviness’ can be read, in part, semiotically and in relation to the band’s representation of identity as repeatedly articulated through indigeneity and Reed’s African-American and Tsalagi (Cherokee) heritage and Nehill’s Māori heritage. Where many ‘heavy’ bands semiotic repertoire, identity and mythology draws from an occult palette of images that include eroticised ‘witches’, skulls, snakes, dark cloaked lords, Baphomet and so on, Divide and Dissolve foreground dull muted landscapes, flora and fauna with surreal color tones, merch that reads ‘Destroy White Supremacy’ and ‘No Prisons, No Slaves, No Masters’, and promo pictures in dresses that are ‘pretty’, sheer, coded ‘feminine’ within pastoral garden settings. Indeed, ‘prettiness’ is not extra to or incompatible with their ‘heavy’ sound but enlaced in a practice that seeks to challenge beauty standards and decolonise fashion and stylistic conventions.¹²

Heavy power in this album wrests away from cloaked identities, God/Devil good/evil masculinized power dramas, satanic/occult signs and ‘funeral’ doom, nor is the sound heavy from withdrawals of weighted cultural capital, subsumed in a ‘cool’ death. On the contrary, in *Gas Lit*, beauty, love and life coexist with destruction, rage and death in a ‘heavy’ sound that carries the trauma of indigenous people and the dehumanisation brought by colonialism whilst it also serves to articulate the force of freedom, joy, resistance, bringing into being

¹² Hernandez and Attaffuah, “Heavy Doom Duo Divide and Dissolve.”

diverse worlds in which life lives without white supremacy. Reed clarifies: “It’s about hope as a practice,” [...] “It is so important for black and indigenous people to not have to only focus on trauma.”[...] “The things that black and indigenous people are forced to think about every day are heavy”.¹³

Gravitas of other energies

From the band’s perspective, the gravitas of their ‘heavy’ music is not primarily about representation but rather, in actuality, connecting with the past whilst creating new futures. “Music is a great facilitator of connecting with the past. Through music and practicing art we can connect with ancestors, and engage in lines of communication centuries old. Art helps us not just imagine but create futures.”¹⁴

In the droning low-end vibrations of drums and guitar, Divide and Dissolve’s witching sound creates something that can be regarded as material and immaterial, conjured via their own agency and intention (continually articulated by the band as important) as well as agency other than themselves (Fig 18.01). Reed elucidates: “it’s not just us.”¹⁵ Both Reed and Nehill elaborate on their heavy sound by directing attention to the depth and space that invites other energies: ancestors, water, earth.

Gas Lit (produced by Ruban Nielson) creates depth, weight and space more than it focuses on the teleology of musical development. It opens and closes with an interplay of reverberant melodic lines from the soprano saxophone in sound unlike the recognisable ‘warmth’ and ‘smokiness’ of the sax. A far less identifiable crystal clear, at times glacial, nonhuman but nevertheless ‘voice’ flows through the underground cavernous album in sonic currents, surfacing, plunging and re-surfacing as a melodic stream between the rock and boulders of the album’s sonic sedimentary strata. The sax heralds and brings into being a

¹³ Reed quoted in Jackie, “Divide and Dissolve.”

¹⁴ Nehill quoted in “Fifteen Questions.”

¹⁵ Reed quoted in “Supersonic Festival Interview.”

dark subterranean cavernous space, repeating an unresolved melancholic melody; with theatrical anticipation, a chthonic stage is set. When drums and guitar arrive, they do so with such immediate epic intensity that the musical staging offers a glimpse of operatic and orchestrated drama before it is shaken and reduced to rubble. Their presence is sudden and seismic. Saxophone notes swirling in cold-rock space are eclipsed in an explosive volcanic instant by beat and riff as it produces earthshaking bass and drone vibration. Looping in the circuit: bass stacks, subwoofer, distortion, fuzz, floor toms, ride cymbal, bass pedal, down-tuned kit, down-tuned guitar, pedals, effects – all acoustic and electric technologies in the service of ‘low-end’ drone, sluggishly looping ‘heaviness’ to a point that threatens absolute stasis. As the body is immersed in this thick and heavy circuit continuum, the stasis transforms into static which transforms into space as the body begins to perceive not only a violently felt corporeal impact (body-shuddering) but the detail and layers of incandescent tones and overtones beyond the riffs and beat expanding the sense of space and depth to conjure and reveal the occulted strata of the Earth - effectively voicing material and immaterial geology and genealogies to expand the vibrating dynamism of life and death between layers. We feel not stasis but space and transformational potential.

Calling into being the density of the earth and its stratification reveals the Anthropocene narrative about the Earth as it seeks to provide a geological account of human impact on the planet when that impact is drawn through the totalising History of Man and Civilisation in relation to an ultimate dystopic ‘end of the world’ – that will happen at some point in the future in relation to the linear time upon which the Anthropocene is based. As Yusoff argues, the narrative of the Anthropocene is not neutral or apolitical but rather configured without recognising the ‘extinctions already undergone by black and indigenous peoples’ and the colonial marks within the geology of its grammar.¹⁶ In the semiotic-

¹⁶ Yusoff, 51.

material-immaterial context of *Divide and Dissolve*'s decolonising work, what the sound summons to account is the strata of the Anthropocene story – the layers of muted colonial violence settled between geological neutrality. Geology for Yusoff is deeply imbricated in the Western colonial inscription of race and its enslaving and extraction practices.

The organisation and categorization of matter enact racialisation. This enactment is productive of racial logics that extend through and beyond mineralogy and the deterritorialization that accompanies extraction. Geology provides the logics to elide those attachments to geography through its classification system of value and resource. While the search for geologic resources instigated the imperative to enslave, geology quickly established itself as an imperial science that both organised the extraction of the Americas and, in the continued context of Victorian colonialism, became a structuring priority in the colonial complex, especially in India, Canada and Australia. [...] The ownership of strata and surface-subsurface bifurcation in Australia and Canada by the Crown continue to unsettle native title and reservation lands. This the classificatory logics of geology have implications for ongoing colonialism.¹⁷

In this respect their sound works to sonically decompress the Anthropocene's compression of geologic time and unsettle the white supremacist colonizer beneath the given humanist subject of this discourse: Civilised Man. In other words, alongside the burden and impact of enforced labour, dispossession of land, mining and extraction technologies, the band listen for and seek to amplify the very quiet of the Anthropocene which pretends to be irretrievable sound hidden in the rock. When shaken so forcefully, these layers crumble to reveal the fossilised White geologies and grammar of the inhuman at the hard core of colonisation all the way to the surface of now... a geologies which inscribes the inhuman categorisation of

¹⁷ Yusoff, 82-83.

the Earth, Indigenous people and people of color. (Yusoff 2018). In heavy sound, the gravity of colonisation is summoned and revealed as that which compresses indigenous people and their land into object and resource. This hitherto equilibrium is pummelled into a state of destabilising oscillation. Relentless low vibration creates a pressure that agitates the time/space of Anthropos, orchestrating a seismic shift from within the earth as heavy counterforce that formulates through intimacy and alliance with inhuman earth, politically charged ‘subterranean force that travels underneath and through colonial technologies of space and time.’¹⁸ This is a heavy witching sound that surrounds and immerses the psychological/cultural/physical body of listeners, a connective warmth of alliance for indigenous listeners and an earth/time/space/ shattering end of the world quake for the body of Anthropos.

The band’s heaviness can be interpreted through a central driving combination of politics and what could be perceived as ‘magic’ in that they foreground a deep connection with ancestors and the earth at every stage of their songwriting and performance process. They exhibit in this respect an extraordinary sense of musical engagement with and focus on ‘connection’ with human beings and nonhuman being, dead and alive – raised, touched and touching in and through sound. This ‘magic’ is not contingent up vocal spells, chants or incantations – indeed, aside from the spoken word poetry at the centre of *Gas Lit* delivered by the poet Minori Sanchiz-Fung, the majority of the album is mainly instrumental, comprising of saxophone, guitar(s), drums and effects. Magical power and meaning are not therefore primarily invested in the human voice which is here decentred despite their intention to communicate profoundly political intention to destroy and decentralise white supremacy, to demand indigenous sovereignty and liberation, to fight for reparations and the return of water, earth and land to indigenous people.

¹⁸ Yusoff, 99.

“The abhorrent history of colonial violence, genocide, slavery, rape, and murder is still continuing today. It is this past, and the lasting and active power structures present in our world today that has driven me to prioritize decolonization.”¹⁹

Divide and Dissolve’s anti-racist politics and commitment to decolonisation is central to the development of their music, but it is not words, lyrics or the human voice that primarily address these politics or the ‘gas lit’ experience of indigenous people and people of color. It is rather an understanding of the “tethers of a circuit” (Minori Sanchiz-Fung) across frequencies and vibrations that the living and dead can hear. Sound, and the space created within sound to listen, is understood by the band as the potential to communicate across time and sedimentary strata, bringing into being that which was and that which will be with a focus on land, on earth and indigenous people connected through electronic circuits of instruments, amplification and effects, networks of interconnected nervous system, genealogies and geologies: “We are tethered to a circuit that excludes nothing, a song the dead can hear.” (‘Did You Have Something To Do With It’ by Minori Sanchiz-Fung from *Gas Lit*).

Listening for impact and change.

Divide and Dissolve’s connective listening may be comparable to ‘deep listening’ as conceptualised by composer Pauline Oliveros in that meditative attention focuses in on the interplay of sound and silence; one can expand consciousness and awareness through deep listening and ‘Sound is not limited to musical or speaking sounds, but is inclusive of all perceptible vibrations (sonic formations)’ (Oliveros xxiv, 2005). Certainly, the band think in frequencies and vibration, “of tuning in to frequencies’ with each other and with ‘other realms’ in sound that is understood as a continuous feedback loop which shifts and moves the

¹⁹ Nehill quoted in Treppel, “Divide and Dissolve Use Drone to Combat Oppression and Intolerance.”

body – the entire body, not just received via the ear: “We are completely invested in communicating with sonic vibrations which are received not just in the ear but the entire body.”²⁰ They listen and play at the compositional stage and during live performance in ways that facilitate improvisation and open responsiveness – open to diverse voices, other agency, contingency and change - connecting with indigeneity as a source of strength and power and to open up this space of connection. In this respect, Divide and Dissolve’s engagement with sound, silence and space is closer to Nina Sun Eidsheim’s understanding of listening beyond established and normative paradigms to the material and multisensory dimensions of music as vibration in order to yield deeper insights into relationships of force, power and impact, as sound works on consciousness through bodily tissue (2015). For Eidsheim, this type of relationship to sound requires intention – a willingness to undergo change:

“[...] for a relationship with sound to take place, we must be willing to take part in, propagate, transmit, and – in some cases – transduce its vibrations. From this it follows that entropy occurs when we focus on the preconceived identity of another rather than on our own ability (or inability) to undergo change.”²¹

Divide and Dissolve regard their live performances as a ‘ritual’ in which the audience’s energy is an important part of the creation. The audience’s listening body must be willing to take part and transmit – and this requires a certain level of vulnerability in relation to ‘heavy sound’. In one interview, Reed and Nehill give examples of when (white) audience members have spoken over and/or disrespected this ritual, and the band has directly challenged individuals, stopped playing, in effect calling out the event as opposed to playing on. (Reed and Nehill in *Supersonic Interview* 2021). A refusal to carry on playing demonstrates their commitment to create and respect a ritualistic connection whilst simultaneously calling out

²⁰ Nehill quoted in “Fifteen Questions.”

²¹ Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound*, 25.

gendered and racialised dominant modes of listening which determine a hierarchy of sound, or in other words white supremacist hierarchies as they seek to establish which sounds to amplify and which to ignore/suppress.²² Agency and intent is therefore vital to Divide and Dissolve's heavy sound since it speaks to the energy required to simultaneously bear the weight of oppression and trauma whilst opening up a space for other agencies and intention – to have impact and create change. Attention therefore is drawn back to the Anthropocene in a heavy witching sound that tells us the way to reimagine and create a 'beyond the Anthropocene' is to decolonise listening itself and think differently about how the intention of soundings matter in the Occultcene.

²² Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line*, 108.

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