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Rewiring the Sonus: Letters to Rewire Listeners

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Rituals wrap around the ordinary contours of even your most unremarkable days and evenings, inflecting them with transcendent dimensions. There is a grandeur to it all, a willingness to view your own life as part of a continuum of traditions and transgressions. I carry what fits with me, and set aside what no longer serves me. That's the thing about rituals; there's an inherent freedom in choosing or refusing them. They never really belong to an individual or to a coterie of chosen elect. Even when threatened by the rapacious appetite of capital, the most intrinsically personal and communal rituals have a way of persisting and surviving. They thrive best with no fanfare, requiring no audiences or spectators.

I differentiate these rituals from the rapidly expanding domain of "self-care," a term fleshed out by Black feminist politics. Like much else, self-care has been captured and repurposed as a marketing tool. That goes without saying, but it's hard to accept that our own understanding of it as a philosophy of struggle has also been corrupted. Repetition without reckoning is a sure way of hollowing out an idea of any radical potential it may have once had. What is parroted is often hardly understood. We can't control the lifecycle of a term, but we can acknowledge our debts to its transformative effects while trusting our instincts. To care for one's self is to first recognise the corrosive nature of individualism and the brutal absurdity of a consumer society populated by agglomerations of atomised human beings. During the pandemic's

multiple waves, my understanding of self-care was further deepened by long walks with isolated friends, mutual aid networks proliferating through WhatsApp, members of our local community dropping off food for the sick and sheltering. Through being in service to others. Through rituals of care and interdependence. Such rituals mirrored those I was raised around; elders sending remittances over decades, raising the children of others, visiting strangers in hospitals, and scraping together funds for burials. I recognise the collective lineage of our practices during times of grief and need.

This is the multitude of reverberations I write towards. The artists featured in 2022's Rewire festival stretch and entangle my understanding of ritual. Collectively, they invoke volcanic eruptions, impulsive gestures, murky chants, submarine solidarities, the bloody sinew of girlhood, erratic movements, percussive experiments, mathematical and emotive approaches, physical exertion, and spiritual submersion. They have the power to activate our intentions and reorient us towards relating with each other in more infinitely curious and attentive ways. They trust themselves, and us, to venture beyond the map. They know that every breath is an act of reinvention. ■

This essay by Momtaza Mehri was written as part of the RITUAL zine that accompanied the RITUAL programme as part of Rewire's 2022 discourse programme. Listen to the accompanying audio via rewirefestival.nl/furtherlistening.

R e w i r e t h e S o n u s

Letters to Rewire Listeners
by meLê yamomo and Yağmur
(Yago) Sağlam

Dear Rewire Listener,

I want to begin with a question I use as a tuning device. Not because it offers an easy answer, but because it reveals how listening makes meaning. It comes from my video-performance-lecture titled:

When a lover says 'I love you,' is it the words or is it the sayer that matters? or Is decoloniality an academic drag?

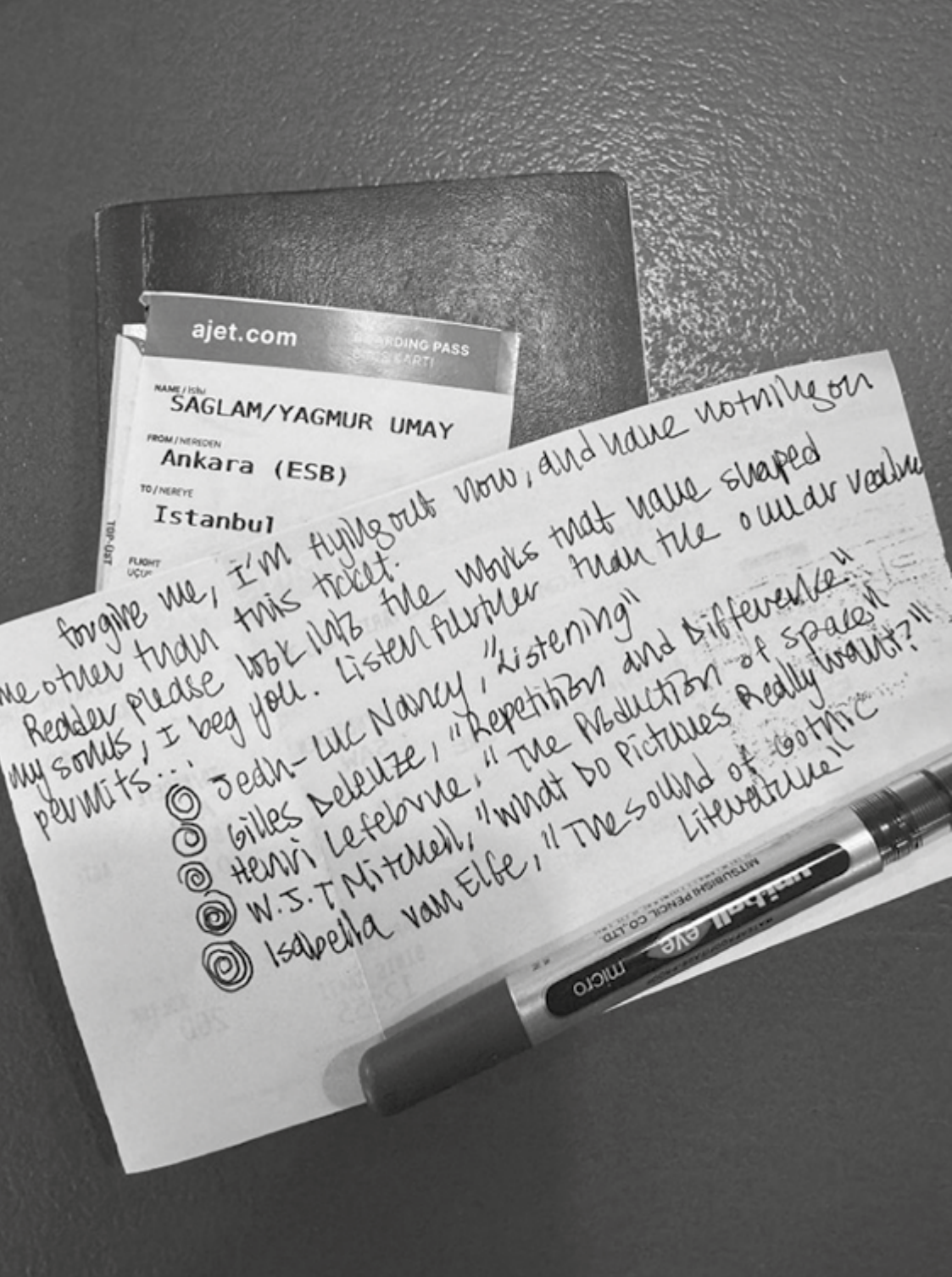
The provocation is methodological. It forces a distinction that underpins the theory I outline in "An Anthropology of Sound."

In that chapter, I define sound as the audible, mediated, acoustic phenomenon we perceive. Sound is what reaches the ear through a medium: voice, music, noise, recording, signal, room. Sound is what the body can register as representation.

But if sound is what we perceive, what is sound mediating?

This is what I call the sonus.

The sonus (plural: soni), in a similar sense as an "image" in visual theory, does not have a tangible or physically hearable form on its own. It is not something we can isolate as an object. Sonus is inextricable from its mediated sounding, and it becomes real only through mediation and perception. I treat sonus primarily as a relationship between body and sound-as-medium, rather than as something contained "inside" sound.



In this configuration, the human body is crucial. It is where the soni reside and are activated through performance and listening. The body is not a receiver at the end of a chain. It is part of what makes the event.

From there, the structure of the theory is simple:

Sound is the perceivable surface: voice through a mic, signal through a PA, music through a room, a recording through a platform. The body realises what is mediated through perception and embodiment; sonus is the event-agency that emerges in this relationship, inseparable from its mediated sounding. (This triangular structure is an acoustemic cousin of an image-body-medium model in visual theory, associated with art historian Hans Belting, but I'm less interested in genealogy than in what the triangle lets us track.)

Because what follows from the triangle is the real point: *mediality*.

A medium is never just a neutral container. Media emerges through specific, local confluences of factors. Communication always communicates the event-character of media itself. How something is transmitted becomes part of what it is.

Festivals make this obvious. A room is a medium. A timetable is a medium. A stage is a medium. A curatorial frame is a medium. The more smoothly these mediums work, the less we notice them, and the more quickly we naturalise what we are hearing as "just there." This is where I want to add a second pressure, one that is institutional.

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu reminds us that what we call "aesthetic autonomy" is never only an aesthetic claim. It is a field effect: a way value, expertise, and legitimacy consolidate inside a self-referential circuit. In contemporary music, that circuit often revolves around technique and technological mastery. The technician becomes a privileged figure of cultural authority, and technical competence gets converted into symbolic capital that then spills into domains where it does not necessarily belong.

I'm not interested in rejecting technology. I'm interested in noticing what institutions do with it.

When technique is elevated as the horizon, the field begins to fantasise that sound can be secured as a self-contained

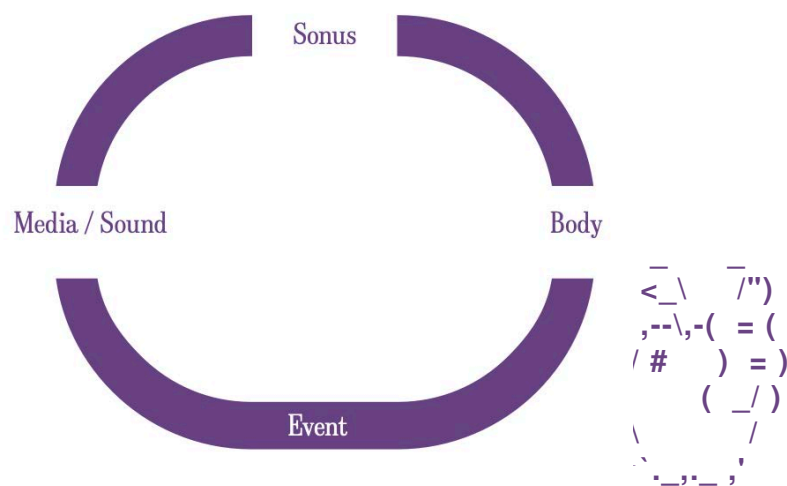


object, detached from the social, historical, and political conditions under which it becomes meaningful. A sealed field has strong incentives to make mediation disappear: if the medium stays visible, technique becomes contestable; if the medium vanishes, technique can masquerade as inevitability, and authority can present itself as natural.

Sonus helps me name why this is not only a moral failure but a theoretical *misrecognition*. If sonus arises through the relationship between body and sound/medium, then technique can never be “just technique.” It always participates in a politics of audibility: who gets trained to activate certain soni, what counts as knowledge, what forms of listening become legitimate, and whose labour remains invisible while the institution stages relevance?

So when I ask, “When a lover says I love you, is it the words or is it the sayer that matters?” I’m asking you to shift the unit of attention away from choosing between word and sayer, and towards the event in which sound/medium and body meet. Sonus is the name I give to that event-agency: within us, between us, and distributed across the infrastructures that organise what can be heard. ■

From there, the structure of the theory is simple:



Warmly, meLê

Dear meLê,

What I value about starting with your video title is its Socratic nature. Stuck between a rock, “the words,” insinuating that meaning sits inside language, and a hard place, “the sayer,” valorising the voice as a self-contained origin, attempting to answer this question is to open a sonic Pandora’s box. As one, like I have done myself, mentally relives past instances of “I love you”’s declared, and ends up involuntarily saying the three words upon encountering your question, something moves.

Clicks.

The sonus is animated. The human body has been roped into a Socratic dialogue with the flowing soni that has been saturating the air they listen to. The sound that comes out of the mouth of the innocent participant is now a sonic event. The event that whispers the answer in their ear: yes, the words matter, and yes, the body matters just as much, but there’s something that escapes this construction. It’s the sonus that twists the symbolic knife in the chest of a lover praying their “I love you” is repeated back to them.

I can’t help but question the accumulation of soni past. I have loved and I have lost, do the ghosts of my past lovers haunt my body, my sonus? Does my “I love you” contain the thousand deaths my soul has experienced? Does the repetition, the spatiotemporal relocation hang on to the sound or the sonus? meLê, tell me, please:

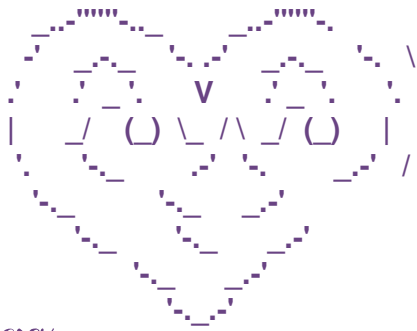
I have sounded out your question till my voice fractured and my body became a sonic vessel. But I still can’t grasp it.

I know, realise, that the sound is only the perceivable surface; that it arrives as representation, as something the body can register and describe; that the sonus cannot

be removed from the event—it is intimately connected to the sound that carries it, just as much as the bodies that deliver and receive it. The soni of these past loves reside in me, I know they do, but I don't have the sound anymore, nor the body.

I have never loved someone as much as I loved the person who never spoke those three words to me. Does that even count as a sonic ghost, if the event never happened?

I swear I felt it meLê. Now, I'm in the middle of a concentric spiral where every repetition is different, but I can't make out what that difference is. How can I find the ordinary sonus? How can I listen for it in my resounding body before I allow it to flow to other bodies?



Dear Yago,

dear Rewire Listener

Yours, Yago

Thank you for naming something important: that sonus is not a concept to “apply,” but a way to stay with the event without reducing it.

To close, I want to return to the plural:

soni.

One reason I insist that sonus is inseparable from mediated sounding is that it makes movement audible. In my video lecture, I speak about flows of soni: how they move from one sound to another and migrate from one body to another. This links back to the chapter's insistence that the body is not a receiver at the end of a chain

but a crucial component where soni reside and are activated through listening and performance.

In a festival, this is not a metaphor. It is an ordinary condition.

You move between rooms. A sound system reshapes what a voice can do. A crowd changes what you permit yourself to feel. A genre expectation changes what you allow yourself to hear. The same technique can land as tenderness in one space and coercion in another.

This is also where institutional critique becomes concrete. If, as Bourdieu argues, fields consolidate legitimacy through internal norms, then what we call “good technique” is never only sonic. It is also social. It trains bodies into certain listening positions, rewards certain forms of attention, and sidelines others. From the perspective of sonus, the problem with a sealed field is precise: it isolates technique and mistakes that isolation for universality. But if sonus arises through the relationship between body and sound (as medium), then technique is always implicated in the distribution of audibility: who is authorised to produce, who is trained to perceive, and whose labour becomes inaudible?

So here is a simple listening practice for Rewire. It keeps the theory close to the body, without turning the festival into homework.

Sonus as Relationship

Start with the motif-question: When a lover says “I love,” is it the words or is it the sayer that matters?

Then translate it into the room you are in:

What is the sonus here? Not “What is the sound,” but what is the event-agency this sounding produces in and between bodies. What is the relationship between your body and this sound/medium? How are you being addressed, positioned, invited, pushed, or held?

If you want a follow-up: what is being negotiated within that relationship? What is being allowed through, and what is being resisted?

Mediality Returning to Sonus

Now notice mediality, but keep it tethered to sonus rather than treating it as background:

What is new in us, the thing that has supervened, has entered into our heart, penetrated to its innermost chamber and not lingered even there—it is already in our blood. And we never know quite what it was. One might easily suppose that nothing had happened, but we have altered the way a house alters when a guest enters it. We cannot say who has come, perhaps we shall never know, but there are many indicators that it is the future that enters into us like this, in order to be transformed within us, long before it actually occurs.²

Please, please, please listen to/with the ghosts beside your shoulders. Try not to think about the absence of your first love, the people you met at your first festival, or the version of you that does not exist anymore. But if you do, you know where to find me. If I have hit a chord that you have heard before, I implore you to read what has spoken to me, driven me to the graveyard of sounds heard.

“Do what you are going to do,”
and tell me about it, Yago



² Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet* (London: Penguin Classics, 2016), 41.

Rewire Reflections —Part II

Over the last years, Rewire has hosted Rewire Reflections, with a pilot in 2023 and a workshop since 2024 inviting aspiring and early-career critics, writers, and researchers to join intensive writing workshop sessions, and to create a zine to be launched on

the last day of the festival. Participants are given the opportunity to interview artists and speakers or to reflect upon the festival’s music, context, and film programme, whether in traditional reviews, discursive essays, or more experimental, playful

forms of the writer’s own invention. Limited editions of the printed zine are distributed during the festival. María Mazzanti: “2025 marked the second edition of Rewire Reflections, the writing workshop I led as part of Rewire’s 2025 context programme. Over the course of the weekend, a group of

writers, artists, and curious listeners gathered to tune into the textures, rhythms, and atmospheres of the festival. Together, we navigated the challenges of writing in real time, while catching fleeting impressions and turning them into something tangible. The resulting zine holds a wide range of voices: from poetic fragments and personal meditations to analytical essays, interviews, and experimental texts. Some pieces linger on the body in relation to sound; others trace how performance spaces shape listening; others still grapple with how to remain present amid both sonic immersion and the noise of the world beyond the festival. Co-edited with Callum McLean and designed by a brilliant team of graphic designers, this publication is a snapshot of Rewire 2025 through the eyes and ears of its temporary chroniclers.”

A few pieces are included below, while the full zine can be read via: [\[link\]](#) [\[link\]](#)



When music breathes, what kind of future does it leave behind?

by Jung Hoon Ra

One memory: I’m in combat uniform, off-base, waiting for a bus home. I’ve got my AirPods in—not for music, but for invisibility. I’m not paying attention to what’s playing. Then, suddenly, I’m startled. Something howls behind me—or so it feels. I grab my phone, shaken. It’s “Reborn” by Colin Stetson, from Ari Aster’s film *Hereditary* (2018). A spray of fractured saxophone notes endlessly spiral. I feel hunted. How can this be so terrifying? How can sound alone out-scare the image? And what kind of body plays like this? Stetson embodies the saxophone, merging instrument and

flesh, physically transforming his body into an apparatus of sound production. His technical mastery isn’t just about playing the instrument. It lies also in his breathing. Circular breathing is a technique that allows a person to inhale through the nose while simultaneously pushing air out through the mouth. As laborious as it sounds, he’s mastered it to the point of seeming infinite. The horror I felt may have stemmed from this very fact, the way his performance no longer felt human, but not in the way of a Greek monster or a fairy tale beast. It was something else, something more unsettling: a human body, still recognisably human, making sounds that should not be possible. Breath turned creature. The French writer Pascal Quignard, in *La Haine de la Musique*, writes how shamanism hints at this condition: “Shamanism is the hunt for souls . . . A good shaman is a ventriloquist. The animal penetrates the one who hails it with its cry. The god enters the priest. The animal rides: the spirit entrances whomever they possess.”⁴ And perhaps

⁴ Pascal Quignard, *The Hatred of Music* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).