

FEEDBACK: CIRCULATION AT THE EDGE OF MUSIC

Circulation lies at the theoretical center of this book. Even as I describe Noise through its circulation, I want to challenge the comparative models of exchange that represent circulation as something that takes place *between* cultures. I privilege the concept of feedback to emphasize that circulation itself *constitutes* culture. Feedback is a critique of cultural globalization, a process of social interpretation, a practice of musical performance and listening, and a condition of subjectivity. By focusing on the transnational context of popular music, and the specific case of Noise, I show how technological mediation transformed the global scale of cultural exchange, even as it undermined its historical continuity. Ethnographies of media affirm that culture travels and also demonstrate how people experience its movements, and how different interpretations feed back to creative sources.¹³ But describing circulation does not mean merely showing how cultural forms enter into production in one place and emerge changed in reception somewhere else. Output is always connected back to input in transformative cycles of feedback. Seeing the cultural power of media in circulation means recognizing the mediation of culture by circulation. Feedback, in turn, shows how circulation always provokes something else.

Circulation typically describes the distribution of material goods and currency, but its models of economic production and exchange are embedded in a discursive framework that extends to the dissemination of social knowledge, news, ideas, and other productions of cultural content. Increasingly, *circulation* is used to characterize intercultural relationships, paths of migration, aesthetic and expressive forms, and ideologies and imaginaries of cultural globalization. Global “flows” and “scapes” seem to correlate all of the multisited transactions of the contemporary world as interrelated networks of goods, people, and images across space and time (Appadurai 1996; Castells 1997). But circulation can sometimes appear as a transparent background for exchange, rather than a cultural production in itself. Against this, Benjamin Lee and Edward LiPuma have argued that circulation is not just the “movement of people, ideas and commodities from one culture to another.” Instead, circulation represents “the performative constitution of collective agency,” and a distinct “cultural process with its own forms of abstraction, evaluation, and constraints” (2002:192–93). Circulation is not just movement and exchange, but performance and process. Its forms do not simply progress from one place, person, or sociocul-

tural context to another. Circulation is a nexus of cultural production that defines the things, places, and practices within its loops.

If circulation is a culture-making process, what kinds of culture does it make, and what kinds of cultural subjects? What happens when circulations break down? Or, more accurately, what happens when they break down, start up, and break down again in an irregular off-kilter trajectory? What happens to things that are not swept into the paths of intercultural dialogue, to the incremental differences that disappear or hide away? Is everyone always already “in sync” with circulation, simply by being within reach of its ever-expanding grasp? Circulation can easily be compressed into a totalizing entity of global culture. But the feedback I describe in *Japnoise* shows that its circuits can never be fully contained in networks of collective agency or communication. Instead, Noise performs circulation as an experimental force, which is compelled to go out of control.

The cultural movements of circulation reproduce historical relationships of power and trace out the institutional routes of center-periphery formations. Circulation also generates powerful forces of newness and difference that change these structures, and sometimes fundamentally shift their meanings (Urban 2001). Global networks can seem to extend space and place “beyond culture,” to reshape conceptions of self and other, home and travel, contact and adaptation, continuity and change (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). In this, circulation depicts the cultural politics of globalization as an ever-adapting framework of interactive relationships. But the subjects of circulation are not so easily discovered. They are always moving somewhere else, changing situations and being changed by them. Sometimes they reappear where they were before, and sometimes they are diffused into unstable patterns that spread out into a field of differences. Although most circulations cannot accurately be described as purely local or national, few are truly global. They aren’t always communicational and can be difficult to characterize in terms of interaction, dialogue, expression, or agency.

Circulation is full of “missed encounters, clashes, misfires, and confusions” in what Anna Tsing calls the “friction” of global interconnection (Tsing 2005). These circuits are hard to trace because they do not move smoothly or include everything they might seem to. They don’t complete their revolutions; they break down or spiral off into the distance. Some cycles cannot endure the erosion of repetitions; others were never linked in in the first place. It is crucial to recognize that these irregular exchanges

go on even as they fail and their objects are transformed or destroyed. People discover other meanings in culture as it unravels, disconnects, and folds in on itself.

Feedback is circulation at the edge. An edge is a special kind of being-in-place; it marks the transition between something and nothing. Edges are limits, and also shape-defining margins. To be at the edge, as Edward Casey puts it, is to exist in the “in” of the “in-between,” in the instant between one time and another (Casey 2008).¹⁴ An edge cuts and changes whatever it encounters. It is where movement must stop or turn in a different direction; it is where people plummet into the abyss, or learn to fly. Things end, and begin, at this place—but nothing stays at the edge forever. Edges mark the boundaries of empty space, but they also represent the transformational places where new possibilities open up again.

The edges of feedback are temporal as well as spatial. In any given circuit of exchange, “to reintroduce uncertainty is to reintroduce time; with its rhythm, its orientation and its irreversibility” (Bourdieu 1980:99). A time lag can radically change the meaning of circulation: it can turn music into Noise and back again. Michael Warner describes how the “punctuality” of circulation orients publics toward their own mediation. Newspapers, for example, are printed, reviewed, and cited at a given frequency; this repetition brings individual readers into a specific relationship of reception. Each particular media cycle creates its own self-reflexive social knowledge, turning a history of “exchanges into a scene with its own expectations” (Warner 2002:66). Postmodern media theory has focused on the global simultaneities created by the ever-increasing speed of circulation (e.g., Harvey 1990; Jameson 2001 [1991]; Lyotard 1984; Soja 1989). But temporalities of exchange depend as much on slowdown, interruption, and mutual exclusion. New media pile up to the point of overload, collecting in bottlenecks that strain the capacity of public distribution. Local infrastructures radically distort transmissions by adding more and more noise to the signal (Larkin 2008). Feedback, then, does not reduce to dialogue between cultures. It shows that circulation defers and distorts communication, even as it enables new possibilities for connection.

Noise spins out of its productive miscommunications. The historical concept of communication included a range of meanings, only a few of which related to interaction between discrete subjects. As John Durham Peters has pointed out, communication could include indeterminate acts of reception (e.g., partaking in Holy Communion, which made the recipi-

ent part of a religious body without any personal expression); it could involve the transfer of a sourceless energy or the unconscious appropriation of an idea for another use. In the twentieth century, broadcast and recording media recast communication as a dialogic world system that could connect different cultural voices through an ever-improving technological network.¹⁵ But the copresence of global connection also involves miscommunication, confrontation, and mutual breakdown. The mistake of communication theory, Peters argues, is “to think that communications will solve the problems of communication, that better wiring will eliminate the ghosts” (Peters 1999:9). In fact, the wired world generates more spectral voices than ever, and more Noise.

MUSIC AS MEDIA

One aim of this study is to complicate historical narratives of popular music through the repetitions, delays, and distortions of technological mediation. I show how the jagged distribution of Noise set the stage for new waves of musical creativity, as its recordings were discovered and re-discovered by scattered listeners around the world. Noise’s perennial newness is generated by its irregularity in the time frames of popular media. It is out of sync with the speedy schedules of corporate industry, and also with local scenes of independent music and histories of avant-garde aesthetics. The newness of any musical genre is determined by the time it takes to become familiar, as it “breaks” in different sites of reception. Music is produced and distributed; it is heard and then named, identified, and placed in comparative relationships with other styles. The clock starts again as a new style is slowly broken into the world. It becomes known as it is distributed, historicized, diversified, and then, perhaps, lost, buried, and recollected in nostalgia.

But as media circulation opens access to an increasing catalog of global forms, its time lags and delays continue to amplify the effects of cultural difference. Distance and isolation are exploited to create separate markets within the misalignments of transnational distribution. When an American musician or band is described as “big in Japan,” this means that their music has run its course everywhere else. It is surprisingly popular in this unlikely place only through some sort of unnatural accident or coincidence, which seems to spring from the gaps between its original culture and its foreign reception. But global popular culture is not staged on a uni-