

# ‘Hush Now’: Terre Thaemlitz and the Languages of Silence

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October 1983, the UC Berkeley campus in Northern California. Michel Foucault is about an hour in to the introductory session for his seminar on *parrhesia*, a word usually translated from the Greek as ‘speaking truth to power’ or ‘fearless speech’. He is responding to a question about parrhesiastic friendship, when suddenly the bells of the university’s clock tower start to toll. There are just a few dongs at first, and he tries to keep going – but as the bells get louder there’s a momentary breakdown in the philosopher’s speech, and a momentary breakout of laughter in the room.

The sonic interruption of the bells, and the somatic eruption of the laughter, are both absent in the transcripts of the seminar recordings that were published by Semiotext(e) as a book called *Fearless Speech* (2001). Foucault’s speech in the recordings is erudite but often gently hesitant, with occasional uncertainty about English words and pronunciations, and several moments of laughter. As tends to happen, when the voice is pinned to the page it becomes more stable, more authoritative, more isolated. Repetitions

are cut, as are the philosopher’s various interactions with participants at the seminar. All the ‘ums’ and ‘ahs’ are trimmed away. Laughter is evacuated; silences vanish.

The cover of the posthumous *Fearless Speech* book shows Foucault holding up a megaphone at a protest on the streets of Paris in 1969, and heroic images of the philosopher wielding a bullhorn tend to reappear whenever his work on parrhesia is evoked – but Foucault himself drew no clear or final equation between amplification and empowerment.<sup>[1]</sup> His *History of Sexuality* begins with an analysis of what he calls ‘the incitement to discourse’ in European modernity, where sex is subjected to new discursive regimes of demographic observation, criminal classification, judicial intervention, clinical scrutiny, pedagogical regulation, theoretical elaboration, and so on. The Victorians may have ushered in unprecedented prudishness and unspeakability, but within what is usually characterized as a rule of silence, Foucault identifies an age of ‘immense verbosity’ where sex is forced into a discursive existence.<sup>[2]</sup>

Through such a framework, ‘speaking up’ cannot be characterized simply or only as a necessary counter to imposed silence. As Foucault puts it, silence is ‘less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies.’<sup>[3]</sup> There are many ways of saying and many ways of not saying – and there are many ways in which both silence and discourse can be enforced from above *or* deployed from below. Foucault again: ‘Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. In like manner, silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions; but they also loosen its holds and

provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance.’<sup>[4]</sup>

In what follows, I attempt to tune in to some of the protective and confrontational silences that have been deployed in the work of Terre Thaemlitz, a Kawasaki-based artist, writer and self-described ‘nuisance’ who has released music and audio projects under various aliases, including G.R.R.L., K-S.H.E, Miss Take, Social Material, Terre’s Neu Wuss Fusion, and, most famously, DJ Sprinkles. Writing in defence of what she calls ‘the languages of silence’ within queer critical practices, Thaemlitz has argued that when acquisition and amplification are unquestioned as the sole strategies by which oppression is identified and fought, quietness becomes culturally frowned upon – and that, as a result, ‘we have culturally lost skills for understanding the value of secrets, their protective power and their ability to connect people in deep ways through the cultivation of personally affecting social responsibilities’.<sup>[5]</sup>

The CD design for Thaemlitz’s 1999 album *Love for Sale: Taking Stock in Our Pride* features a pink triangle on a black background, with the word SILENCE written in white capital letters underneath, clearly referencing the Silence=Death Project’s posters which were first wheatpasted around New York City in 1987, and which went on to become emblematic of the HIV/AIDS activism movement. In Thaemlitz’s reworking of the graphic, though, the second part of the equation is removed so that the word *silence* stands on its own.

In its original context, ‘Silence=Death’ was a rallying call that demanded vocality in the midst of the literally lethal silence of the Reagan administration – along with all the homophobia, racism, poverty, religious bigotry, big pharma greed, familial neglect, societal indifference, journalistic negligence, and governmental inaction that constituted the AIDS crisis in the 1980s. The isolation of the

word *silence* in Thaemlitz’s reappropriation of the iconic graphic was obviously not about returning to the historical condition of silence that the Silence=Death slogan had addressed. Silence around HIV/AIDS remains deadly, and since it was launched in 1993, Thaemlitz’s website has featured an ‘HIV/AIDS 101’ guide providing information on terminology, transmission, testing and prevention.<sup>[6]</sup> In her *Love for Sale* essay of 1998, and in the album of the same name which was released on CD the following year, however, Thaemlitz was concerned with another kind of silence – an emergent historical process that she called ‘assimilation’s *silencing* of Queer difference’.<sup>[7]</sup>

Following the height of AIDS activism in the US, there was greater representation of queers and queer life in mainstream media and popular culture. At the same time, an assimilationist silencing of difference and dissidence meant that a lot of the earlier political struggles were subsumed under the intensifying regimes of respectability, marketability, and gay and lesbian conservatism.<sup>[8]</sup> The increased attention and visibility might seem to counter the historical violence of anti-queer silencing, but Thaemlitz’s concern was with what became hushed along the way. Writing in 2006, she claimed that direct action AIDS activism in the US had ‘run its course’ by the mid ‘90s:

“Those who declared “Silence=Death” had for the most part fallen silent under a new hush of media visibility, bureaucratic cooperation, and institutionalization (including Community Based Organizations typically reliant upon large, non-community funding bases – in turn absorbing “expansionist” business models of outreach that remained unreconciled with notions of localization and the microsocal) (...) Weakened by exhaustion, desiring mass-cultural understanding of and

sympathy for our various issues, and seduced by the reflection of our own strategies, an unfounded “public trust” was born. We forgot the alternative histories and struggles from which AIDS activism sprang, peacefully hushed by the hypnotic repetition of our reified Pop image.<sup>[9]</sup>

Thaemlitz – who identifies as non-essentialist transgender and uses both she and he pronouns – grew up in the American Midwest. She moved to New York in 1986, when she had just turned 18, to study at the Cooper Union School of Art. He has recalled that going to art school left her disillusioned with ‘the exclusionary politics of the visual arts industry’, leading her to focus instead on cultural theory and electronic music (although her work has increasingly been shown in exhibition contexts in recent years, including at Documenta 14 in 2017).<sup>[10]</sup>

Living in the East Village in the late ‘80s, Thaemlitz also became involved in safer-sex educational outreach and other forms of HIV/AIDS activism, including with the direct-action group ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power). He started DJ-ing at activist benefits under the name DJ Sprinkles, which was in part a tribute to sex work performance artist Annie Sprinkle, who was doing her live feminist sex shows and safer sex workshops in downtown New York at the time. By 1992, Thaemlitz was recording his own tracks, and in 1993 he started the record label Comatone Recordings.

Thaemlitz left New York in 1997, moving her studio and label to Oakland, California – and in 2001 she moved to Japan, where she still lives. He has described his time in the Bay Area in the late ‘90s as his ‘activist burn-out phase’, and it was during these years that she produced her most explicit and most searing critique of the emergent gay and lesbian mainstream – and the new Pink Economy – with the *Love For Sale*

essay and album. The first track on the album, *Taking Stock in Our Pride*, is an audio collage piecing together samples from a local television broadcast covering the San Francisco Pride Parade. A relentlessly cheery business and media friendly affirmation of ‘legitimacy and credibility’ suffocates the acoustic field, as fragmentary voices enthuse over corporate sponsorship, merchandise, product placement, and money: ‘If you want a really fabulous leather outfit, what’s it gonna set you back?’, ‘I like the idea of The Lavender Chamber of Commerce!’, ‘six thousand dollars’, ‘fifty thousand dollars’, ‘a hundred and fifty thousand dollars’, ‘one point six million a year’, ‘tons of money, they’re great people!’.

Someone in one of the sound bites who wants to acknowledge ‘the Stonewall drag queens and transgender people who started the whole movement in New York in 1969’ is promptly cut short by the presenters.<sup>[11]</sup> By the end of the two minute and forty-six second track, it is clear that within this noisy embrace of the previously silenced, there is also active erasure, as well as completely unchecked continuation of transphobia, and general contempt for gender nonconformity. One nervous exchange between the presenters goes like this: ‘they’re *cosmetically enhanced*’, ‘um, *excuse me?*’ ‘apparently they’ve had ... things ... done to themselves ... surgically’, ‘ok, well I think it’s about time that we can take a break here’.

Against any sort of sweeping progress narrative that would draw a simple equation between the acquisition of cultural visibility and queer liberation, Theamlitz notes that heightened visibility can at times not only *coincide with* but also *occlude* continued and newly targeted procedures of marginalisation.<sup>[12]</sup> ‘Concealed by the mist of our newfound love and reconciliation with the “public,”’ she writes in the *Love For Sale* essay, ‘there has been a corollary increase in legislation and police activity against the Queer community,

particularly in relation to “public sex” and cruising.[...] The Gay and Lesbian mainstream silently scrambles to distance itself from such acts, giving way to the pretense that police sweeps are serving a “public interest” – a public whose interests supposedly include those served by the Pink Economy.’<sup>[13]</sup>

In more recent years, Thaemlitz has refused the logics of maximal exposure by trying to prevent his own releases from being openly shared through online platforms like YouTube and SoundCloud. ‘Protect the unusual and minor!’ reads a pop-up window at her homepage, which asks fans to refrain from uploading her work for free circulation. ‘Terre wishes to keep ‘queer’ audio and media functioning queerly, contextually, and with smallness’, the announcement says. ‘Indiscriminate file sharing, YouTube and SoundCloud grant *too much exposure with too little precision*’.<sup>[14]</sup>

In his *Naisho Wave Manifesto (Secrecy Wave Manifesto)* – which was first published in 2014 – Thaemlitz writes about how his removal requests through these online corporate platforms end up being misunderstood as copyright claims or legal reassertions of authorship, when really they are about maintaining the protective tools of ‘secrecy, closets, invisibility and silence’ that were historically cultivated by queer communities as means of self-defence within dominant cultural spaces.<sup>[15]</sup>

Practices of openly sharing content online might feel generous and celebratory, but Thaemlitz insists that such indiscriminate distribution can mean that things end up in the wrong hands. ‘Randomly uploading things for anyone, anywhere – including homophobes, transphobes, misogynists and religious fundamentalists – does not make uploaders the all-giving sweethearts they imagine themselves to be’, she writes.<sup>[16]</sup> In one example, Thaemlitz

points out that when the content of a work is explicitly queer and explicitly anti-religious, and when people who collaborated on the work live in contexts where association with that sort of content could incriminate or otherwise endanger them, preventing the work from circulating freely online can help to minimise risk.

The *Naisho Wave Manifesto* also considers how audio sampling practices have become increasingly risky for artists, with corporations using scanning software to identify controlled content that has been posted online. Strategies of silence and withholding are again crucial for protecting critical subcultural practices, when their existence depends on remaining undetected by corporate interests, and surviving instead through small-scale, context-specific appreciation. ‘This is why something seemingly innocent, like posting a list online of all the samples used in one’s favourite underground dance track, is a horrible tribute’, Thaemlitz notes. ‘Horrible in that it is intended as a display of one’s intimate understanding of a subculture, when in actuality it betrays a total lack of understanding for how to protect and cultivate subcultures’.<sup>[17]</sup>

Paradoxically – or, to use a word Thaemlitz often claims for her own practice, *hypocritically* – there’s a lot of language going on within the artist’s strategies of silence. He has tracks with titles like *Meditation on Wage Labor and the Death of the Album (Sprinkles’ Unpaid Overtime)*, and once gave a conference presentation with the title *Please tell my landlord not to expect future payments because Attali’s theory of surplus-value-generating information economics only works if my home studio’s rent and other use-values are zero*. Her songs can feature extended spoken word segments; albums are often amply annotated; liner notes become long critical essays. Far from being a silence of serenity, vagueness, or detachment from the social, Thaemlitz’s is a

confrontational silence which marks a withdrawal from dominant regimes of visibility; an insistence that not everything is best served by achieving the widest possible reach; and a commitment to context specificity.

She is best known for her musical output within the registers of deep house and contemporary ambience, but he refuses associations of universalism and transcendental escapism in such genres – and his use of language within and around the music is part of her insistence on contextual precision and non-universality. Take, for instance, DJ Sprinkles' celebrated debut full-length album *Midtown 120 Blues* (2008), which is a deep house album shot through with a corrective treatise on deep house's origins – and a meditation on the erasure of those origins in the genre's embrace by mainstream culture. As Thaemlitz narrates in a digitally processed spoken word segment in the opening track, 'The contexts from which the Deep House sound emerged are forgotten: sexual and gender crises, transgendered sex work, black market hormones, drug and alcohol addiction, loneliness, racism, HIV, ACT-UP, Thompkins Sq. Park, police brutality, queer-bashing, underpayment, unemployment and censorship – all at 120 beats per minute.'<sup>[18]</sup>

During the early '90s, DJ Sprinkles was a resident DJ at queer voguing balls thrown by Sally Maggio's 'House Of Magic' at Sally's II, a trans sex worker club off Times Square in pre-corporatized midtown Manhattan.<sup>[19]</sup> The third track on the *Midtown 120 Blues* album, *Ball'r (Madonna-Free Zone)*, addresses Madonna's hit single *Vogue*, and its decontextualising appropriation of ballroom culture. Refusing the equation of visibility with empowerment, Thaemlitz's concern here is with what became *invisibilised* through voguing's increased visibility, noting (in a spoken word layer of the track, and in the liner notes) that Madonna 'had taken a very specifically queer, transgendered, Latino and African-American phenomenon and

totally erased that context with her lyrics, "It makes no difference if you're black or white, if you're a boy or a girl"'.<sup>[20]</sup>

While Madonna's *Vogue* became the world's best-selling single in 1990, Thaemlitz recalls that 'the Queen who actually taught her how to vogue sat before me in the club, strung out, depressed and broke'. If anyone requested a Madonna track during a DJ Sprinkles set, he would tell them, 'No, this is a Madonna-free zone! And as long as I'm DJ-ing, you will not be allowed to vogue to the decontextualized, reified, corporatized, liberalized, neutralized, asexualized, re-genderized pop reflection of this dance floor's reality!'.<sup>[21]</sup>

In 2006, the audio art/activist collective Ultra-red asked Thaemlitz to contribute to their free download compilation album *A Silence Broken*, for which a number of electronic musicians were invited to work with Ultra-red's field recordings from a queer protest in LA in the year 2000.<sup>[22]</sup> In response, Thaemlitz as DJ Sprinkles produced a hypnotic ten-minute+ deep house track called *Hush Now (DJ Sprinkles Broken Record Mix)*, whose fragmentary, repetitive sonic layers include the voices of protestors chanting 'silence equals death' in unison, the crackling sounds of a broken record, and a looped vocal sample with the words 'hush now' sung on loop.

'Hush now' is what the dominant culture says to its assimilating dissidents as it becomes more inclusive for them, but the same words can also be an anti-assimilationist invitation, where silence can equal refuge from the incessant demand to become legible through a reproduction of the dominant culture's terms... Beyond a binary logic where silence is set up in opposition to sound, there is space for amplification and proclamation as well as coded, disguised, whispered and withheld speech – recalling Thaemlitz's proposal, back in 1998, for queer sound as 'an irresolvable

sound which declares its presence at the same time it eviscerates itself'.<sup>[23]</sup>

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[1]

See for example the image for the event series *Fearless Speech* at Hebbel am Ufer:  
<https://www.hebbel-am-ufer.de/en/archive/fearless-speech/>

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[2]

Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 33.

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[3]

Foucault, *History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, 27.

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[4]

Foucault, *History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, 101.

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[5]

Terre Thaemlitz, 'Naisho Wave Manifesto (Secrecy Wave Manifesto)', *Afterall* 41 (Spring/Summer 2016), 38–45. Revised and abridged version of a text previously published in the bilingual Japanese journal *Farben* 1 (June 2014), 1–27.

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[6]

Terre Thaemlitz, 'HIV/AIDS 101', Comatonse, 1993, <http://comatonse.com/hiv aids101/>

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[7]

Terre Thaemlitz, 'Love for Sale: Taking Stock in Our Pride', Comatonse, 1998, <http://www.comatonse.com/writings/love.html>

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[8]

For historical accounts of this process of assimilation, see for instance Sarah Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination*, (Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2013), or *That's Revolting!: Queer Strategies for Resisting Assimilation*, ed. Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2008).

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[9]

Terre Thaemlitz, Ultra-red's *A Silence Broken* liner notes: <http://www.ultrared.org/publicrecord/archive/2-04/2-04-001/2-04-001.pdf>

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[10]

Terre Thaemlitz, Profile: [https://www.comatonse.com/thaemlitz/profile\\_more.html](https://www.comatonse.com/thaemlitz/profile_more.html)

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[11]

While the central role played in the Stonewall uprising by drag queens and trans women of colour like Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera is still often whitewashed out of historical accounts, Sarah Schulman recalls that Donald Suggs once said to her, 'The drag queens who started Stonewall are no better off today, but they made the world safe for gay Republicans.' Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind*, 115.

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[12]

Gestures towards inclusion do not on their own equal structural change: While *Time* magazine optimistically declared the 'Transgender Tipping Point' in the year 2014 – with a cover story celebrating increased trans visibility – the US saw record numbers of known murders committed against transgender people, most of them trans women of colour. See Audrey Silvestre, 'Me Vestí De Reina: Trans and Queer Sonic Spatial Entitlement', *We Are Not Dreamers: Undocumented Scholars Theorize Undocumented Life in the United States* ed. Leisy J. Abrego and Genevieve Negrón-Gonzales (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020), 168–189.

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[13]

Thaemlitz, *Love For Sale*.

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[14]

Terre Thaemlitz, homepage pop-up window: [http://comatonse.com/popup\\_youtube.html](http://comatonse.com/popup_youtube.html)

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[15]

Thaemlitz, *Naisho Wave Manifesto*, 40.

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[16]

Thaemlitz, *Naisho Wave Manifesto*, 44.

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[17]

Thaemlitz, *Naisho Wave Manifesto*, 43.

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[18]

Terre Thaemlitz, *Midtown 120 Blues*, Comatonse, 2008.  
[https://www.comatonse.com/writings/2008\\_midtown120  
blues.html](https://www.comatonse.com/writings/2008_midtown120_blues.html)

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[19]

The club was forced to close in 1997, after the city of New York effectively sold Times Square and the western end of 42nd Street to Disney. In 1998, DJ Sprinkled released his 12" Vinyl EP *Sloppy 42nds: A Tribute to the 42nd Street Transsexual Clubs Destroyed by Walt Disney's Buyout of Times Square*.

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[20]

Thaemlitz, *Midtown 120 Blues*.

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[21]

Thaemlitz, *Midtown 120 Blues*.

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[22]

Ultra-red, *A Silence Broken*, Public Record Archive  
2.04.001, 2016.  
[http://www.ultrared.org/publicrecord/archive/2-04/2-04-  
001/2-04-001.html](http://www.ultrared.org/publicrecord/archive/2-04/2-04-001/2-04-001.html)

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[23]

Thaemlitz, *Love For Sale*.