

Novel Sounds and Hybrid Ecosystems: The Performance of Quarantine Clapping in New York City

Konstantine Vlasits

Abstract

This article examines the performance of quarantine clapping in New York City during the height and wane of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. I use the concepts of novel and hybrid ecosystems to frame quarantine clapping events, as a way to interrogate notions of normalcy, novelty, permanence and change as experienced in New York City during quarantine. This cross-disciplinary approach is also an attempt to contextualise quarantine clapping within multiple registers – the pandemic, the climate crisis, and ongoing socio-cultural moves toward justice.

Keywords: clapping; ecosystem; novel; hybrid; COVID-19; New York City; conservation;

Dedication

For Our Courageous Workers

Biography

Konstantine Vlasits is a scholar and artist based in New York City. His work examines the intersection of sound, music, and aural culture in relation to the climate crisis, and spans a wide interest in soundscape ecology, environmental sound art, and the relationships between listening practices and conservation aesthetics. Vlasits is published in a special “environment” issue of MUSICultures journal wherein he uses the metaphors of pathways and path formation to explore how music and nature have shaped cultural identity in 21st-century Iceland. Additionally, he was a finalist for the 2021 Alpine Fellowship Academic Writing Prize for his piece, “Listening to Wilderness: Sonic Preservation of the Great Smoky Mountains.” Vlasits is a PhD student in ethnomusicology at New York University. His dissertation examines the rapid melt of glacial masses in Iceland through music and sound.

Introduction

Hands clap.

Fleshy bodies in contrary motion collide. Percussive “pops” of skin-to-skin contact echo from rooftops, windows, balconies, doorways – the hybrid spaces between seemingly safe and potentially hazardous environments (note 1).

Hands clap, but they clap in the company of others.

Musicians across the five boroughs mobilise brandishing their timbres of choice. Amidst the tuning and twiddling of instruments a man named Robert Galinsky exclaims, “I ain’t alone today!”

Hands clap. Voices shout. Instruments sing.

Sonorous waves crest and break. Like a swelling surf, they rise in solidarity with essential workers on the front lines of an unprecedented engagement – wave against wave; natureculture in sonic-synchronicity (note 2).

The scene is April 29, 2020 in New York City. Anxieties surrounding crumbling infrastructures, limited medical resources, socially-distanced lifestyles and the collective fragility of multiple systems have reached a new threshold. Such is the reality of a metropolis under strain – a novel set of circumstances created by a novel virus. And yet, applause peals and a symphonic fanfare commences (see [video](#)).

* * *

The New York City iteration of quarantine clapping began in late March 2020. Every evening at seven o’clock, individuals emerged from their quarantined locations to applaud essential workers (medical staff, sanitation crews, grocery clerks, industrial labourers and others) who continued to work in-person during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Inspired by this daily performance, Frank London, alongside Hajnal Pivnick and Dorian Wallace, conceived and composed the musical work *For Our Courageous Workers* to be performed alongside the clapping event. In this instance, clapping was absorbed into a broader artistic gesture and was transformed from a “noise” or “sound” into music.

While the performance of *For Our Courageous Workers* was specific to New York City, numerous acts of applause and performance emerged alongside the spread and impact of COVID-19 in cities around the world [BBC News; Scribano and De Sena 2020; Hess 2020]. At the time, these environments were characterised by a plethora of harrowing circumstances – growing case counts and death tolls, economic adversity and feelings of exhaustion, vulnerability and uncertainty to name only a few. For many, these circumstances and sentiments are still present today, prompting questions surrounding quarantine clapping. For a phenomenon that was so quickly celebrated world-wide, its decrescendo was just as swift. Has the applause tapered? Has the applause ended? Or has quarantine clapping simply taken a new form?

This article examines quarantine clapping in New York City and the ways that these musical performances frame ideas about normalcy, novelty, permanence and change during the height and wane of the COVID-19 pandemic (note 3). It is not difficult to personally reflect on these notions (surely, almost everyone has pondered some type of

new normal over the past several years). But to consider the almost infinite contexts of what constitutes normal is a critical examination of value and utility – both in an individual sense, and within the broader environments of society, culture, or nature.

An examination of quarantine clapping necessitates a framework that grapples with the scale and scope of the COVID-19 pandemic; a framework that attempts to blend terminological and contextual divisions (between society, culture and nature) into one entangled case study. Although this kind of amalgam might sound a bit too cacophonous, it is precisely this cacophony that quarantine clapping sounds-out. In recognition of a Harawayan natureculture and Mortonian Hyperobject, rethinking common place binaries and divisions alongside planetary-scale ecologies is perhaps the only way to analyse quarantine clapping – as a phenomenon that is inextricable from a mutating virus, environmental concern, social justice issues, and cultural aesthetics [Haraway 2003; Morton 2013].

To this end, I use the concept of novel ecosystems to frame my study of quarantine clapping. My employment of novel terminology primarily draws from the fields of restoration ecology and conservation biology, and reflects the temporal and spatial stratifications of ecosystem functioning, transformation and management [Chapin and Starfield 1997; Collier and Devitt 2016; Moscaro et al. 2013; Murcia et al. 2014]. Moreover, my use of novel ecosystems in this project not only suits my overall approach to ideas about normalcy, universality, permanence and change, but is also an explicit experimentation with cross-disciplinary research.

Outline and Scope

As part of this framework, I argue that quarantine clapping mirrors the characteristics of a novel ecosystem – namely, the presence of novel interactions, the crossing of thresholds, the potential for self-sustainability and the influence of human agency (the overall format of this article follows this progression of analysis). To be clear, I do not equate the objects of sound or music to abiotic or biotic entities, nor am I concerned about whether New York City can be classified, holistically, as a novel ecosystem. Instead, I suggest how the concept of novel ecosystems enriches an analysis of quarantine clapping, and in turn, how a study of quarantine clapping might complement dialogues related to novel ecosystems. In part, to examine musical performance with a concept from ecological disciplines widens the perimeters of an ecosystem site (and what constitutes an ecosystem) to include samplings of human agency within the plot. This creates a space where human/non-human positionalities, biotic/abiotic entities and wild/urban locales intersect (note 4).

The synthesis of biological concepts with social experience prompts a way of thinking that prioritises histories, continuums and entanglements, rather than a boundary laden site or static moment in time [Descola 2013; Helmreich 2011]. This approach situates my study of quarantine clapping within, what Bill Cronon calls, the “middle ground” – the actual places where each of us live and call home [Cronon 1995]. In this way, idyllic imaginaries of wilderness or the sense that nature is somewhere ostensibly out there is problematised. Essentially, to interrogate virus-related happenings within the densities of an urban city is to demand that these spaces function and exist as ecosystems. Here,

the exploration of “nature and civilisation as systems serves to accentuate the interactions and connectivity of the different parts of the systems and the interactions between the various organisms” [Baraket and Weinstock 2016]. Quarantine clapping, then, not only becomes a component within such ecosystems, but a force that guides acts of ecosystem maintenance and classification through claims of value and utility.

The first section, “Novel and Hybrid Ecosystems,” details the concepts of novel and hybrid ecosystems across environmental domains. The next three sections analyse quarantine clapping using the defining elements of a novel ecosystem. In “Novel Sounds,” I describe the sonic qualities of clapping and applause, contextualise their value and more broadly ponder comparisons between normalcy and novelty. In the next section, “Thresholds and Sustainability,” I detail the shifts in quarantine clapping overtime – its inception, performance trajectory, musical adaptation, and wane – and question the temporal significance of these moments. The third section, “Human Agencies,” explores human positionalities and exceptionalisms in relation to environmental management aesthetics. The last section, “Hybrid Ecosystems,” investigates that concept – as the coalescence of biological and sociocultural systems – in order to contextualise quarantine clapping in New York City.

This work draws from the fields of sound studies, ethnomusicology, environmental philosophy, conservation biology and environmental humanities. As a contribution, this article may be most generative to readerships interested in sound studies, environmental humanities, and soundscape ecology, as well as scholars interested in cross-disciplinary writing. The majority of the research presented is assembled from online data collection and literature review. I also conducted interviews focused on essential workers, quarantine clapping and the composition *For Our Courageous Workers*. Finally, the transdisciplinary structure of this project was partly inspired by my own experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, which have changed the way I think about sonic phenomena and environmental concerns more generally.

Novel and Hybrid Ecosystems

Early modeling of novel ecosystems depict a spatio-temporal spectrum between a historical system and one that is heavily managed. By historical, I mean a baseline that references a specific moment in time that often classifies the state of an ecosystem before the introduction of invasive species, loss of biodiversity, or anthropogenic influence. The accompanying figure illustrates these relationships (Figure 1). The arrows below the ambit line indicate how novel characteristics can manifest when a “wild” ecosystem becomes compromised by the growth of invasive species or human influence, or when environments previously shaped by humans are abandoned because of biological unification, over-cultivation or necessity. The arrows above (with their accompanying question marks) represent a hybrid ecosystem – an ecosystem that includes an amalgam of historical and novel qualities, which can either return to a previous state or transition to a novel ecosystem. While other models have emerged more recently, this initial representation clarifies how novel and hybrid ecosystems are connected, how they provisionally function, and which components are vital to their definitions.

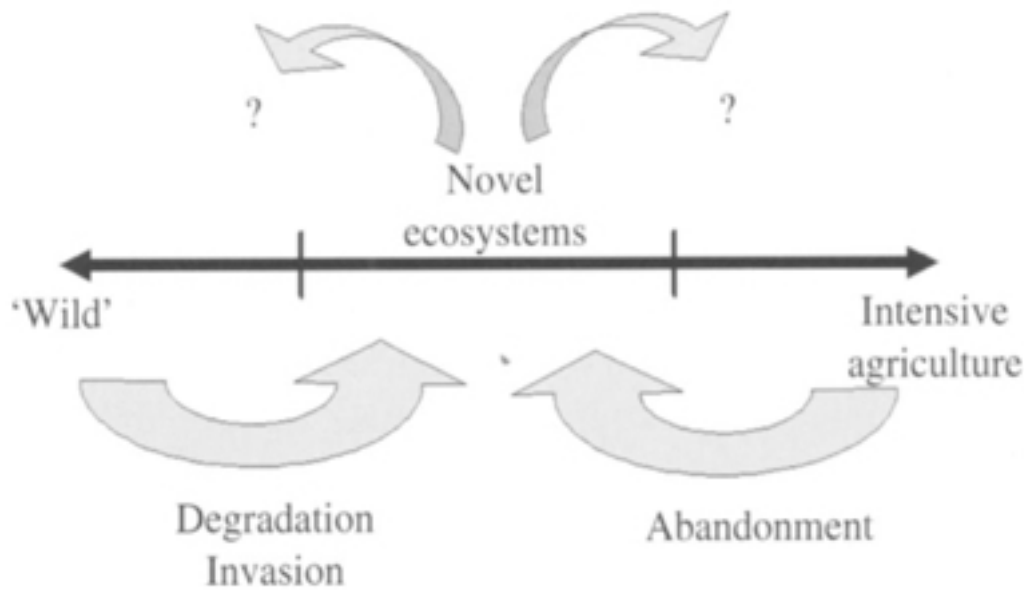


Figure 1: The concept of novel ecosystems [Hobbs et al. 2006].

Following this visualisation, “a novel ecosystem is a unique assemblage of biota and environmental conditions” that can only exist as a “result of intentional or unintentional alterations by humans” [Morse et al. 2014]. While this definition highlights novel conditions and human agencies as primary characteristics of a novel ecosystem, it also notes temporally significant moments of transition. Therefore, novel ecosystems are not only characterised by novelty and human influence, but also by the crossing of environmental thresholds and their potential to self-sustain [Morse et al. 2014; Moscaro et al. 2013]. Hybrid ecosystems are crucial to these moments of transition. In this case, the term “hybrid” refers to “a mix of historical and novel characteristics” that precedes a transformative threshold – when an ecosystem can either become novel or return to a historical state [Hobbs et al. 2013, 59; Miller and Bestelmeyer 2016, 578]. Moreover, understanding the concepts of novel and hybrid ecosystems are important to identifying environmental management practices and aesthetics, as well as their associated logic train and value hierarchy [Backstrom et al. 2018; Smith 2019].

The most salient contribution of novel and hybrid conceptualisation, in general, might centre on how they challenge the status quo of leading environmental management models. Since their inception, the concepts of novel and hybrid ecosystems reexamine how entities inhabit and (re)shape space; they question dualisms and bifurcations; they foreground the complexities of climate and anthropogenic change; they attempt to account for varying spatial and temporal scales; and foundationally, they demand “a new way of thinking about our interventions in and responsibilities toward ecosystems” [Hobbs et al. 2013, 3]. While it is clear that novel and hybrid ecosystems are not the silver- (or green-) bullet through which these environmental frictions are resolved, they do, at the very least, reveal the “competing normative visions of the appropriate relationship of human beings to their nonhuman surroundings” and surface the “deeply held values that

inform and explain our actions” [Thompson 2017, 137-8; Hobbs et al. 2013, 59-60].

For me, herein lies the novelty of novel ecosystems (and the hybridness of hybrid ecosystems). Just as William Cronon’s “middle ground” or Emma Marris’s “post-wild nature,” the concepts of novel and hybrid ecosystems force a “need to reinvent or at least rethink [environmental management] goals and how [they] are anchored” [Cronon 1995; Marris 2011; Hobbs et al. 2013, 60]. Moreover, they recognise how such classification measures are, from the outset, “a social construct” that “hinge[s] on biodiversity conservation values held by individuals and society, [as] principles, preferences, and virtues associated with a quality of relationship with nature” [Backstrom et al. 2018, 109-10]. The concepts of novel and hybrid ecosystems are, therefore, not only pragmatically suitable for conservation biologists, but are also philosophically relevant to domains and objects of study outside the sphere of ecological endeavours. Central to these concepts is the role of human agency within environmental management practices – not only how we (as biological and geological agents) manipulate environments, but how our construction of non-biological systems (and their associated sociocultural structures) are also complicit in, and subject to, seemingly ecological decisions. In order to navigate these spaces, I rely on the concepts of novel and hybrid ecosystems, and use them to frame my research on quarantine clapping in New York City.

Novel Sounds

Whether the percussive rhythms of musically organised “*clap-clapclap-clap-clapclap*”; the humanly-inaudible “contralateral wing interaction (clap and fling)” of airborne insects; the silent koanic reflection of a one-handed clap; or the ironic and satirical “slow-clap,” the act of clapping is anything but novel [Lehmann and Pick 2007]. Within the vast gestural pluralities of clapping, quarantine clapping is best understood as applause, ovation or large-scale populous sounding (note 5). Many associate this kind of mass-clapping with the lineages of Western theatre culture in signalling approval or disapproval of a performance by an audience [Stevens 2013]. Scenes of performers and their applauding audience are also present during political addresses or public declarations, when clapping is not only expected but strategically “trapped” by speech writers [Montgomery 2020, 743]. And, potentially in acts against such political renditions, congregational clapping can also be recruited for unanimous acts of protest and revolt (note 7). So, what makes the collective applause of quarantine clapping novel?

Determining and measuring any kind of novelty necessitates a comparative approach. A novel thing is not simply new, but exists distinctively within and against normative structures. Normalcy defines novelty. In terms of ecosystem management, “normal” refers to a specific historical baseline or ecosystem state, whereas “novel” refers to biotic/abiotic interactions that characterise an ecosystem’s transition. Novel interactions are moments of exchange that have heretofore never existed. They influence species interactions and composition. This includes the trajectory of the abiotic SARS-CoV-2 – its original zoonotic conversion (from animal to human host); its formation of COVID-19 in *Homo sapiens*; its lab manipulations during vaccine trials, and its mutation over time. While SARS-CoV-2 is not an organic or biotic entity, it does impact the composition of human and nonhuman species. On a microbial level, these novel interactions include

exchanges between a virus, cell and bacterium within an organism's microbiome [Yong 2020]. On a social level, this novel composition reshapes seemingly normative functions (i.e. changes with rigorous hand-washing, wearing a mask, social distancing, self-isolating, remote working, etc.).

Although these novel states of interaction formed the impetus for quarantine clapping in New York City, mass clapping for essential workers was a sonic novelty at the time. Establishing a historical baseline that accounts for New York City's pre-COVID-19 soundscape is a difficult task. But to imagine the soundtrack of modern technologies and contemporary lifestyles without daily mass-clapping is one place to start. Moreover, the novelty of quarantine clapping is not necessarily present within or against a particular soundscape, but rather, manifests in other facets of these applauding events (note 8).

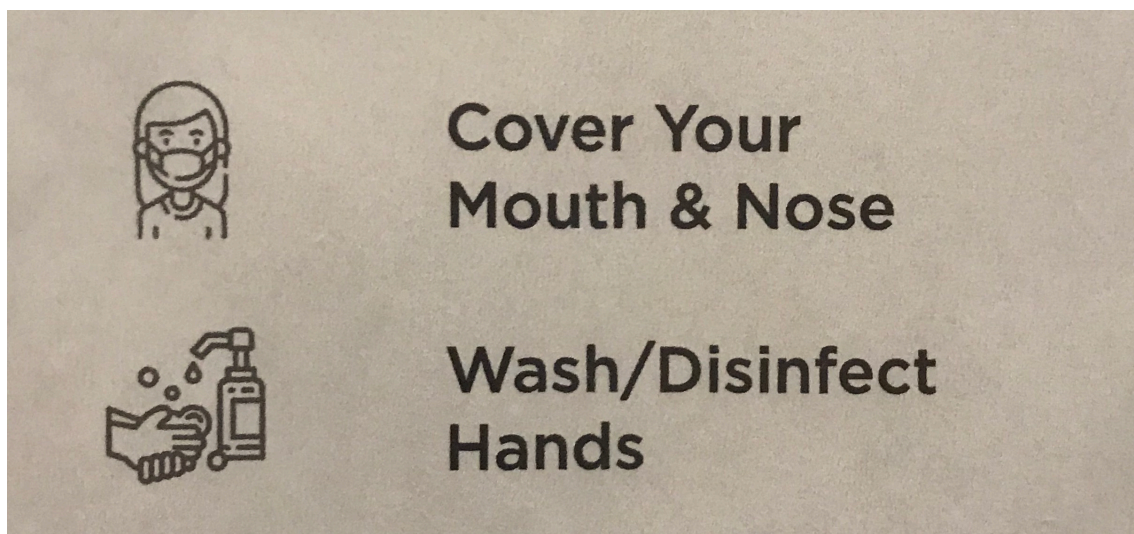


Figure 2: Elevator poster depicting hands and vocal apparatuses as vehicles for virus transmission. Photographed by author on 25 November 2020.

On the one hand, the adjective “quarantine” accentuates novelty as a moniker. The quarantine of clapping implies how clapping, vocality and other means of noise-making can assume many roles under such restrictive circumstances. Most recognise quarantine clapping as support for essential workers or, as composer Frank London described in an interview, a kind of “public music and community spectacle” [London 2020]. But it is also a medium through which healing occurs. It is a way to cope with challenging times – a form of empowerment and connectivity, and a “unifying and positive act”. Additionally, quarantine clapping casts the corporeality of the hands and voice into question, where such limbs serve as both sound-making tools and vehicles through which a virus can spread (Figure 2). As a result, the social-distancing of human bodies through isolation and masking, influences quotidian gestures like vocal greetings or handshakes. Lastly, if extending the seemingly liminal spaces of quarantine clapping (doorways, windows, balconies, etc.) to online platforms, in a more tangential sense, quarantine clapping can also be understood as virtual praise (Figure 3).

On the other hand, perhaps the term “clapping” reveals a kind of novelty in and of itself.

For one, clapping within large-group applause is simultaneously an individual and collective act. It is a sonorous commingling and knotting of lived experiences [Ingold 2011]. But it is also aurally anonymous to most listeners and performers alike [Scribano and De Sena 2020, 283]. The poignancy of this anonymous interchange is incredibly moving. Clapping signals not just the anonymity of the clapper, but also of the clapped: the sanitation worker clearing your trash; the grocery store clerk whose name-tag you, in your masked, hurried, must-stay-six-feet-apart stressed mindset, fail to notice; the industrial worker that packages and processes some item that you don't really need, but just can't survive without; the medical staff that holds a phone to the ear of a loved one as they laboriously breathe through a respirator.



Figure 3: Screenshot of author and Zoom platform clapping emoji. Photographed by author on 20 November 2020.

Based on these considerations, the novelty of quarantine clapping emerged through novel interactions of biotic/abiotic entities and their resultant societal changes, but also within new forms of social expression and sociality. While we might consider how quarantine clapping serves as “a material form of ecological information to investigate the ecology of populations, communities and landscapes”, the societal implications latent to quarantine clapping are perhaps more interesting facets when debating novelty and normalcy [Suer & Farina 2015]. Quarantine clapping is explicitly in support of essential workers, while implicitly challenging the essential qualifier. It is a performance of privilege and socio-economic status, while also a performance of solidarity and care. It is a political stance and an ethical act. It is a noisy, annoying sound, and a beautiful piece of music. It articulates ecological nuances and socio-cultural dynamics.

Nevertheless, whether thought of as an affective trait or baseline data within this case study, novelty only exists temporarily. Eventually the delineations between normal, novel

and unprecedented are blurred. In terms of ecosystem management, these intersections are measured by thresholds and their propensity to self-sustain.

Thresholds and Sustainability

The performance of quarantine clapping in New York City follows an interesting trajectory – its strangely corporate inception and original sounding; its sustained grassroots adoption and daily performance; its blending into the compositional fabric of *For Our Courageous Workers*; and, finally, its gradual attenuation and projected end. Planned and prompted by the branding agency Karla Otto, the first official clapping event in New York City occurred on March 27, 2020 at seven o'clock in the evening. Inspired by similar activations in Europe, representatives from Karla Otto hoped to “come together to clap and celebrate” essential workers throughout the city [Carlson 2020]. Following a successful initial performance, clapping events were tentatively planned as a weekly occurrence. But something unexpected happened. People began to clap daily (see [video](#)). And from late March through May 2020, quarantine clapping was performed every evening (with “a really big clap each Friday”) [Weaver 2020]. The unexpected adoption of quarantine clapping, as a daily rather than weekly event, partly reflects the pressures of burgeoning infection rates in New York City. On March 27 (the exact date of the first planned clapping event), a *New York Times* article confirmed 23,112 positive cases of COVID-19 and 365 related deaths – the beginning of a startling increase in number and location throughout the city [Bromwich et al. 2020].

For many, the daily clapping event provided a necessitous affective outlet – a feeling of catharsis and social connection. “People were, and still are, feeling isolated in the midst of all this,” artist Frank London explained, “and so it [quarantine clapping] was something that we could do from an enclosed space, as a response to the isolation of being indoors” [London 2020]. Motivated by this “power of collective sounding,” London set a new project in motion. London, working in collaboration with Hajnal Pivnick and Dorian Wallace – musicians, composers, and founders of the artist collective *Tenth Intervention* – conceived a citywide symphonic fanfare entitled *For Our Courageous Workers*.

Wednesday, April 29 at 7pm

For Our Courageous Workers

a city-wide symphonic fanfare

conceived by Frank London, Hajnal Pivnick, Dorian Wallace (2020)

To be played as loud as possible for all to hear, from rooftops, out windows, doorways, etc.
If you film yourself/post photos on social media, please use the hashtag #playbecausewecare
Use a clock & follow the instructions below

7pm | Cheering

Everyone: Clap, cheer, bang on pots, and pans!
Wind players: Play the notes of a concert Bb major chord (Bb-D-F) triumphantly
String players: Freely play open A and D strings
Low Instruments: Play a low concert Bb
Keyboard players: Arpeggiate Bb major 7 chord as fast as possible (Bb-D-F-A)
Percussion and drums: Cymbals rolls (no drums)

7:03 | Reflecting

Everyone: Breathe, listen, and reflect
Wind and string players: Long notes in concert D natural minor scale (D-E-F-G-A-Bb-C-D)
Low Instruments: Slow pulsing on D and A
Keyboard players: Slow D natural minor chords and scales (D-E-F-G-A-Bb-C-D)
Percussion and drums: Play drums slowly, no cymbals. Quarter note pulse = 60 bpm

7:06 | Catharsis

All: PLAY ANYTHING! A full-blown glorious, jubilant, ecstatic, cacophonic, sonic catharsis

7:09 | Gratitude

Everyone: Sing "Ah" on any note of your choice
Instruments: Play unison concert Bb

7:11 | End

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Figure 4: *For Our Courageous Workers* printable score.

The composition is divided into three, three minute movements, with a two minute coda section. The text-based score includes instructions for musicians of all instrumental types, as well as titles that serve as affective guides. The four movements are titled (in order) "Cheering," "Reflecting," "Catharsis," "Gratitude" and "End," with performance instructions ranging from "sing 'Ah' on any note of your choice" to "PLAY ANYTHING!"

(Figure 4) In brainstorming these choices, London, Pivnick, and Wallace were guided by participant inclusion and logistical convenience. From the rhetoric of the poster and score (“use a clock” rather than “use a phone”; listing all major instrument types; “Calling All Musicians! Calling All New Yorkers!”) to the free distribution of online and printable versions of performance instructions, it is clear that accessibility was an important aspect of the project (Figure 5). With these concerns in mind, the composers attempted to create a piece where “a fifth grader that just started playing in band” and veteran musician were able to meaningfully participate together [Wallace 2020]. Building from a similar ethos of collectivity, the performance was eventually supported and co-sponsored by a myriad of organisations, institutions, press outlets, radio stations and businesses (note 9). And on Wednesday, April 29, 2020, *For Our Courageous Workers* was performed synchronously with the daily quarantine clapping. Individuals who recorded their performance to social media were encouraged to spread the word (and music) across social media platforms by using the hashtag #playbecausewecare and #clapbecausewecare. These recorded performances were later compiled by Wallace as a type of virtual showcase (see [video](#)).

Calling All Musicians! Calling All New Yorkers!



On Wednesday, April 29 at 7pm

YOU ARE INVITED TO JOIN IN A CITY-WIDE SYMPHONIC FANFARE

honoring our front-line workers

FOR OUR COURAGEOUS WORKERS

Conceived by Frank London, Hajnal Pivnick, Dorian Wallace (2020)

All are welcome to participate, musicians of every level:
voices, strings, brass, winds, keyboards, drums, pots and pans!
To be played as loud as possible for all to hear (from rooftops, out windows, doorways, etc.)
(Use a clock & follow the instructions below to be a part of the piece.)

<p>7:00 <i>cheering</i></p> <p>Everyone: Clap, cheer, bang on pots, and pans! Wind players: Play the notes of a concert Bb major chord (Bb-D-F) triumphantly String players: Freely play open A and D strings Low Instruments: Play a low concert Bb Keyboard players: Arpeggiate Bb major 7 chord as fast as possible (Bb-D-F-A) Percussion and drums: Cymbals rolls (no drums)</p>	<p>7:03 <i>reflecting</i></p> <p>Everyone: Breathe, listen, and reflect Wind and string players: Long notes in concert D natural minor scale (D-E-F-G-A-Bb-C-D) Low Instruments: Slow pulsing on D and A Keyboard players: Slow D natural minor chords and scales (D-E-F-G-A-Bb-C-D) Percussion and drums: Play drums slowly, no cymbals. Quarter note pulse = 60 bpm</p>
<p>7:06 <i>catharsis</i></p> <p>All: PLAY ANYTHING! A full-blown glorious, jubilant, ecstatic, cacophonous, sonic catharsis</p>	<p>7:09 <i>gratitude</i></p> <p>Everyone: Sing "Ah" on any note of your choice Instruments: Play unison concert Bb</p>
<p>7:11 <i>end</i></p>	

#playbecausewecare #clapbecausewecare

Co-sponsors: Make Music New York, Brooklyn Conservatory of Music, City Winery, Kaufman Music Center, Local 802, Jazz at Lincoln Center, Joe's Pub, Greenwich House Music School, HONK NYC, Sing in Solidarity, Tenth Intervention, WBGO, Arts for Art, Experiments in Opera, Guitar Mash, Musicians For Musicians, Seth Rogovoy Productions, GalinskyCoaching.com, Tilted Axes: Music for Mobile Electric Guitars, GOH Productions, DROM NYC, Jazz Promo Services/Jim Elgo, Slavic Soul Party!, CTMD Center for Traditional Music and Dance, YNY Yiddish New York, Afro-Latin Jazz Orchestra, The Workers Circle, Aleba & Co, FONT Festival of New Trumpets, CMS Creative Music Studios

tenthintervention.com/workers

Figure 5: *For Our Courageous Workers* promotional poster.

By mid-May, COVID-19 related deaths were lessening across New York City and would eventually plateau near the end of June. Perceptions began to shift toward lessening pressures for essential workers, consistently declining death rates, and possibly, the return to seemingly normal circumstances, the daily performance of quarantine clapping began to dwindle [Taylor 2020]. Currently, quarantine clapping no longer takes place

daily at seven o' clock in the evening. By this measure, it has stopped sounding.

The lifecycle of quarantine clapping involves a number of temporally significant changes. From its initiation and emergence as a series of self-sustaining events, to the performance of *For Our Courageous Workers* (and that piece's incorporation into the ritual), to its asymptotic decline over the course of the summer, quarantine clapping paralleled the trajectory of COVID-19 related case counts and death tolls that characterised the city-space as an emerging U.S. hot-spot throughout March, April, and May 2020. Each of these moments can be defined by the crossing of a threshold.

The parameters of a threshold within ecosystem classification relies upon "a measurable difference... between the ecosystem's previous and current state," and can include the "distribution of a particular habitat element, either biotic or abiotic, in the ecosystem" [Morse et al. 2014]. Here, an argument could be made that quarantine clapping is profusely ecological. Whether biotic, as sonorous utterances of living organisms and the inextricable exhalation of bacteria, or abiotic, as sound waves and atmospheric CO² expulsions, quarantine clapping could be conceptualised as part of an ecosystem. This idea is not abstract for Dorian Wallace, who describes the fundamental pitch (B-flat) of *For Our Courageous Workers* as "a tonal centre that's vibrating with the city" and harmonising with the citywide hum of alternating currents [Wallace 2020].

However, the arguments of this article do not centre on whether quarantine clapping is a biotic or an abiotic element (and to make such a claim is beyond the scope of this writing). Instead, I engage with these terms in order to frame quarantine clapping within an urban ecosystem and to argue how music mediates change within said ecosystem. More specifically, I find these vocabularies useful when examining human performance and humanistic material alongside the proliferation of nonhuman entities and forces. And, as a phenomenon that followed the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in New York City, quarantine clapping is certainly one way to account for measurable differences over time and if these differences became sustainable.

Differences, as I refer to them here, foreground changes of sociality. Threshold-crossings (in relation to quarantine clapping) primarily served as moments in time when social experience shifted. Applause and music became ways for people to connect across space, and a way to extend one's voice beyond social-boundaries. And so, my interrogation of thresholds and sustainability is less concerned with if the performance of quarantine clapping has become sustainable, and more concerned about the sustainability of sociality – the turn to novel means of connection through quarantine clapping.

Some biologists argue how stability and sustainability must be judged by "timescales relevant to the dominant biota and management practices of a given ecosystem," and further assert how "managers must choose a timescale by which to judge whether an ecosystem is novel" [Morse et al. 2014]. While these shifting-baseline techniques allow measurement of change overtime, where does an initial baseline begin? If systems are managed and measured toward specific outcomes the line between pragmatic and idealised can become dangerously obscure [Campbell et al. 2009]. Concerns about timescales and baselines certainly relate to quarantine clapping, where notions of novelty and normalcy are predicated by a specific or an intended historical baseline. In this context, applause as a way that normalcy and novelty are managed and sustained for

posterity. Recognition of this stewardship is a recognition of human agency.

Human Agencies

A novel ecosystem can only exist as “a direct result of intentional or unintentional alteration by humans” [Morse et al. 2014]. By this account, to utilise the concept of novel ecosystems in order to frame a musical performance (as an anthropocentric enterprise) partly obfuscates its original use, development and intention, where a defined site or plot within a specific environment becomes the basis for measuring ecosystem change and anthropogenic influence [Thompson 2017]. And yet, to expand and extend the concept of novel ecosystems provides a more realistic reading of human agency across various scales. In recognition of the climate crisis and the realities of a pandemic, how we imagine human agency in relation to ecosystems and ecosystem maintenance begins to feel like unpacking a never-ending-set of environmental matryoshka dolls – humans as planetary agents, as geological agents, as regional or provincial agents, as agents subject to individual microbiomes, the list goes on. Moreover, the argument that no environment or ecosystem currently exists without traces of anthropogenic influence is one reason why the concept of novel ecosystems was developed in the first place [Campbell et al. 2009; Morse et al. 2014].

These aspects related to scale are not without critique as they note the inequities implicit to specific epistemologies. For example, the corpus of literature on the Anthropocene has continued to grapple with the unilateral authority enacted by valuing certain temporalities and environmental states. As a result, numerous entities, beings, histories and worlds (human and non-human alike) become marginalised, devalued, erased, silenced, or destroyed – “a billion missing articulations of *geologic* events” [Yusoff 2018, xiii, my emphasis]. The epistemes that solidify through such violence shape understandings of environments, ecosystems and their associated management practices, which are often “mediated by privilege (both intellectual and material, influenced by race, gender, class, and other aspects of difference that can determine one’s ability to access spaces of power and decision making), and informed by resistance to and/or acceptance of the dominant narrative” [Finney 2014, 3; Taylor 2016; Robinson 2020]. This not only has ramifications for ecological campaigns and their justifications, but also impacts a plethora of constituencies including popular and common place environmental sentiments.

To understand ecosystems as intimately tied to human activity, and to embrace human actors as egalitarian figures within them (rather than solely as authorities of management and manipulation), might seem too far a stretch for many. This might stem from the common interchangeability between the terms nature, environment, and ecosystem throughout everyday vernaculars; the pervading idea of the natural world as explicitly non-human; or, the fact that expansive greenery and seemingly natural spaces are just so distinct from urban environments. In the opening of her book, *The Rambunctious Garden: Saving Nature in a Post-Wild World*, Emma Marris boldly claims that we have “lost nature” as an untouched object or space free from human involvement [2011, 1]. Advocates of a lost nature tend to embrace “everything actual and possible, including human beings and their activity, [as] part of nature,” but there are limits with this idea as well [DesRoches 2020]. In his critique of environmental sonic artists, Eric DeLuca importantly asserts how

nature is “both a material object and a socially constructed metaphor that is infinitely interpretable and ideologically malleable” [DeLuca 2018, 71]. This accounts for the pluralities of world-making processes, and asserts all ways of knowing and being as equally and vitally significant (and often, sovereign), and how the differences between them are not “a lack that needs to be remedied but merely an incommensurability that needs to be recognized” [Robinsonn2020, 53]. For me, the concept of novel ecosystems works in service of this pluralism. It challenges a human/nature duality (and related spatial bifurcation) and attempts to account for the role of human agencies as intrinsic “forces of nature” [Chakrabarty 2009, 207; Hobbs et al. 2013].

Moreover, and more particular to quarantine clapping, to understand human agency within an ecosystem is to realise how environmental and socio-cultural concerns are ultimately inextricable. Experientially, quarantine clapping emerged as a result of social distancing and quarantining of human bodies. It was also conceived, sounded, adapted and sustained by and for human actors, within and across explicitly human-constructed spaces. Thinking about these experiences (and participating in them myself) are what first led me to develop this article – the feeling that the pandemic has reconstituted the seemingly normative ways that humans exist in the world and imagine their relationships to their ecosystems; the way scholars claim transcendence from the man-made boundaries between society, culture, and nature; and to what extent friction, difference and violence seem novel or normal (and by extension, justified) throughout history and in everyday life [Haraway 2016; DeLuca 2018; Taylor 2016].

An examination of quarantine clapping certainly doesn’t resolve these issues, but the performance of quarantine clapping does become a form of mediation on multiple registers. In this way, sound, noise, and music can “amplify critical aspects of social and cultural life”; for “sounds that penetrate windows and cross transoms, echo or otherwise refuse to stay in their ‘natural sockets’ create productive tensions between the sound, the context and the listener that are inherent to the negotiation of meaning” [Kelman 2010, 230]. When examining the act of quarantine clapping, then, it’s important to recognise what exactly is being amplified and negotiated. Black and other ethnic minority communities were disproportionately impacted during the height of the pandemic [NIH 2021]. Additionally, the working class of these ethnicities formed a majority of the essential worker demographic [McNicholas and Poydock 2020]. Does quarantine clapping give voice to these individuals? Change a system? Or is it simply performative? At the very least, quarantine clapping forces us to face the relationships between clappers and clapees, and ask, what is considered normal? Why does something feel novel? And how do we create sustainable changes? These questions describe the concept of hybrid ecosystems.

Hybrid Ecosystems

The concept of hybrid ecosystems, while connected to that of novel ecosystems, remains distinct. “Hybrid” not only refers to empirical qualities of an ecosystem, which contains a blend of novel and historical elements, but also stands as a moment when an ecosystem can either return to an established baseline or transition to a novel ecosystem. Therefore, a hybrid ecosystem precedes a point-of-no-return – a temporal and spatial state of in

betweenness before the final threshold crossing to a novel category. But “most tend to ignore this [hybrid ecosystem] aspect of the framework completely,” and instead favour novel ecosystems and their more clarifying stature [Miller and Bestelmeyer 2016, 579]. This lacuna represents a wider valuation of ecosystem management, where the conceptual truncation and designation of ecosystems through clear labels and categories make environments seemingly easier to manage, control and manipulate.

However, outside of environmental site-specific boundaries, the concept of hybrid ecosystem may be more significant than the self-sustaining novel ecosystem. For one, the fluidity and conglomerative qualities of hybrid ecosystems are better suited to any type of system-thinking. In the most expansive sense, systems are usually hybrid in the sense that they often encompass continuous processes of malleability and change. The ever-present actions of becoming/unbecoming, making/unmaking, transformation, continuity and fluctuation are hybrid features that imbue almost every entity, force and relationship of a system with hybrid energies. Hybridness not only pervades ecosystems (systems of biotic/abiotic interactions), but sociocultural systems as well. And in this way, hybrid ecosystems encompass broader applications, where biological and sociocultural contexts are synonymous.

Over the period that I wrote these words, the ecosystems described herein underwent rapid change. The pandemic as experienced in the United States stressed a tripartite attention to a deadly virus, the anxieties and uncertainties of social injustice and climate catastrophe. These remain connected in various ways. Just as streets became seemingly abandoned throughout New York in late March, headlines describing the “rewilding” of city spaces began to blanket media outlets [Macdonald 2020]. In the trough of the first COVID-19 wave, George Floyd Jr. was murdered. Wildfires plagued the West. The Black Lives Matter movement surged around the world. Hurricanes battered the Southeast. Legislation surfaced to defund police authorities. The Biden-Harris ticket was sworn into office. Voters approved the reintroduction of wolves to the Colorado Rockies [Main 2020]. And in New York City, amidst and alongside these happenings, quarantine clapping sounded.

While conducting my interviews, I noticed that my colleagues were also aware of, and concerned about, these social and environmental happenings. When asked what the daily quarantine clapping meant to him, Dorian Wallace began his reply in an unexpected way. Rather than describe, what I assumed would be an uplifting and communal music-as-saviour response, Wallace lamented:

We live in a very unequal society. This pandemic has at its best opened up a lot of the holes within our system – housing issues for homeless, no social safety-net for people living on bottom-line poverty, racism and racism denial – and this pandemic shined a light on all of *this* [Wallace 2020, my emphasis].

Wallace concludes his answer by stating how quarantine clapping is “a way to produce a sense of healing for individuals, while also producing a sense of community: ‘I’m not in *this* alone. And you’re not in *this* alone. We’re not in *this* alone. We’re in *this* together” [Wallace 2020, my emphasis]. The “this” to which Wallace refers extends beyond an all-encompassing pandemic experience. “This” is not situated as a novel period in contrast to normal circumstances. For him, the contextual implications of quarantine and

the seemingly positive value of clapping serve as a simultaneous reckoning-with the biotic/abiotic troubles of a pandemic and the inequities of the social systems in which they are embedded (note 10).

In response to a similar question about the significance of quarantine clapping, the director of communications for the New York City Sanitation Department, Belinda Mager, provided this statement:

The daily evening clapping was a nice way for everyday New Yorkers to get involved and show their support to Sanitation Workers and all front-line workers providing essential services that, pandemic or not, needed to continue. Our Workers are thankful to all who recognize the importance of the work, no matter if it's continuing to collect trash and recycling during a pandemic, cleaning snow and ice from streets during a blizzard, or removing debris from the City following Superstorm Sandy [Mager, 2020].

Mager not only describes sanitation workers' appreciation of clapping, but also claims how the workforce will continue to maintain system functioning (and how they have always done so) in the face of viral endangerment and climate uncertainty. The comments from both Wallace and Mager are telling (note 11). They suggest how human agencies straddle the divide between biological and social systems, while also giving pause to re-question why clapping sounded out in the first place, what it currently represents, if it is still ongoing, and if it has manifested elsewhere.

This article has examined quarantine clapping in New York City and the ways that these musical performances frame ideas about normalcy during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. I have used the concept of novel ecosystems as a way to experiment with cross-disciplinary research, attempt to bridge several contextual divisions (society, culture, and nature) and interrogate notions of universality, permanence, and change that manifest during a musical performance. In thinking about novelty and the inevitable thresholds to come, maintaining a specious separation between discourse on ecosystems, the climate crisis, social justice, and a deadly virus may be untenable. And I'm sure the corpus of scholarship specifically centered on COVID-19, systemic inequality and environmental degradation will be expansive. While this work contributes to this oeuvre in some ways, it has also served as a way to cope with the stresses, traumas, anxieties, healing, growth and care that I experienced during quarantine. Research and writing became a welcoming space – a safe space – and I'm grateful to be able to share these ideas with you here.

So, finally, where does this project leave quarantine clapping? Has it ended or taken a new form? While daily performances no longer occur, remnants from the spring 2020 iterations still surface. For example, when media outlets began to announce the 2020 United States presidential election results, clapping, yelling, and pots-pans-banging emanated from the doors and windows of my apartment complex (see [video](#)). Surely, this is a performance of some kind of quarantine clapping in celebration of some kind of essential work. Maybe the act of clapping is a display of both novelty and normalcy. Maybe the act of clapping creates a hybrid space – one that remains hybrid in order to mirror precedential (and presidential) changes. Maybe the act of clapping is both an expression of values and an opportunity to reflect on those values. Or maybe the act of

clapping is violent – a self-inflicted brutality intended to shock us; to wake us up to the systems we choose to perpetuate or change. Maybe the section titles from *For Our Courageous Workers* foreshadow an applause-led, environmentally apocalyptic trajectory – “Cheering,” “Reflecting,” “Catharsis,” “Gratitude,” “End.” Maybe clapping is a way to reckon with the *humilbristic* tendencies of human agents [Daughtry 2020, 28]. Or perhaps, following Megan Garber, what is most crucial is realising that we are all, essentially, always clapping – always caught circulating in the arrows above the ambit line; always applauding, accepting, and justifying what matters most to us individually and collectively [Garber 2013] (Figure 1).

On one hand, a historically normative state. On the other hand, the novel awaits. What happens when they are slapped together?

Hands clap.

Notes

1. Throughout this article, any use of the term “hybrid” refers to hybrid ecosystems – a concept specific to the fields of conservation biology and restoration ecology. Although the writings on musical hybridity are expansive, I instead use discourse surrounding novel and hybrid ecosystems to frame my study on quarantine clapping. Additionally, while not referenced, anthropological research centered on “liminality” and “liminal spaces” also seems applicable to a project concerned with hybrid processes, in-betweenness, and precipitous thresholds.
2. *Natureculture* (as Haraway’s synthesis of nature and culture) challenges the biophysical and sociocultural dualism between human and non-human relations. For Haraway, the “biological and cultural determinism” embedded within the nature and culture division also represents a “misplaced concreteness” – a consequence of prehension and universalisation [Haraway 2003, 6]. For these reasons, natureculture is not only productive in thinking about human and non-human relations, but also illustrates the various agencies that human subjects can assume (biological, geological and sociocultural).
3. Unless indicated otherwise, my use of “quarantine clapping” colloquially throughout this project refers to the daily clapping, cheering, yelling, pots-and-pans-banging, singing, noise-making-applause in New York City, as well as the instrumental sounds and performance of *For Our Courageous Workers*.
4. By biotic/abiotic, I mean the entities and forces of an ecosystem. Biotic refers to organic life, whereas abiotic refers to environmental conditions (such as temperature and humidity) and chemical composition. Both biotic/abiotic factors contribute to the measurement, management, classification and functioning of ecosystems.
5. Novel ecosystems often emerge in abandoned spaces that were previously shaped or inhabited by human agents. This circumstance partly inspired the formation of this project, as early quarantine measures saw a radical shift across urban spaces. Streets and areas that were once heavily populated with human bodies became seemingly abandoned [Kimmelman 2020]. Quarantine clapping sounds within and across these unoccupied spaces as a novel phenomenon.
6. The name quarantine clapping is a bit misleading. Hand-to-hand collision is certainly not the only timbre employed during a clapping event. Yelling, shouting, whistling and other vocalisations, combined with the percussive-banging of household items and the instrumental tones of *For Our Courageous Workers* all constitute quarantine clapping.
7. I find Benjamin Tausig’s use of *sonic niches* helpful when discussing mass-clapping in the context of protest – especially as a force that sounds out political divisions and change. Tausig suggests how niches are “not permanent containers,” and that they “change with time and circumstance.” They often fluctuate in “ecotonal zones,” where multiple sounds, forces, sentiments, borders and entities entangle [Tausig 2019, 1].

8. While the concept of soundscape is not a primary focus of this article, wording around soundscapes and sonic environments are present throughout this text. I find Emily Thompson's work on noise abatement and the development of modern soundscapes in early 20th-century New York City generative to how I frame the soundscape of quarantine clapping. Thompson states, "a soundscape, like a landscape, ultimately has more to do with civilisation than with nature, and as such, it is constantly under construction and always undergoing change" [2002, 2]. Thompson is challenging the environmental sentiments of R. Murray Schafer's first coinage, which is helpful to my advocacy of urban ecosystems in this article. Additionally, the idea that soundscapes are always undergoing change also enhances the concept of hybrid ecosystems, as well as the temporally-fleeting states between novelty and normalcy.
9. Co-sponsors include: Make Music New York, Brooklyn Conservatory of Music, City Winery, Kaufman Music Center, Local 802, Jazz at Lincoln Center, Joe's Pub, Greenwich House Music School, HONK NYC, Sing in Solidarity, Tenth Intervention, WBGO, Arts for Art, Experiments in Opera, Guitar Mash, Musicians For Musicians, Seth Rogovoy Productions, GalinskyCoaching.com, Titled Axes: Music for Mobile Electronic Guitars, GOH Productions, DROM NYC, Jazz Promo Services/Jim Eigo, Slavic Soul Party!, CTMD Center for Traditional Music and Dance, YNY Yiddish New York, Afro-Latin Jazz Orchestra, The Workers Circle, Aleba & Co, FONT Festival of New Trumpets, CMS Creative Music Studios. This list was accumulated from a condensed press release featured [here](#).
10. Donna Haraway situates *trouble* as both a task and a state of experience. We (in the most expansive and inclusive sense) are constantly knotted with trouble as a universal "thick present," rather than a momentary glance of "awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures" [2016, 1]. I find Haraway's work surrounding the Chthulucene useful to think about ecosystems as a similar process of making-with. A troubled-present recognises how "nature has erupted into ordinary human affairs, and vice versa, in such a way and with such permanence as to change fundamentally means and prospects for going on, including going on at all" [39-40].
11. In writing about similar quarantine clapping events in Argentina, Adrian Scribano and Angélica De Sena frame the celebratory applause as a hero-building journey for medical workers and staff. They are "the new heroes" that emerge from the changing "health policies and politics of sensibilities" [2020, 284-5]. But, as Wallace and Mager suggest, does this process extend to the ecosystem of New York City? Are essential workers heroes? Or victims? Both? Do they need applause, or do they need safety, rest, sustenance, sustainable wages, equal benefits and care? Does quarantine clapping become hypocritical if you applaud essential workers, but then ignore safety guidelines [Hess 2020]?

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