Sonic Romanticism

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Abstract

Refusing a conception of the sonic as a category that is fixed, this thesis aims to elaborate the discursive formation of sound, and the deployment of this formation in contemporary theory in a mode that is identified as "sonic romanticism." Emerging as a response to alienation under capitalism, sonic romanticism represents an attempt to recover an inclusive, immersive relational experience lost in the unfolding of Western subjectivity by turning towards the sonic. This research draws parallels between theoretical turns toward sound, and the ways in which poets of the Romantic era reacted to the effects of the expansion of the British empire. Framed as a means of undoing or overcoming alienation, turns to the sonic in this thesis are identified as replicating the same relations of power that they claim to move beyond. Sonic romanticism is described as it manifests in three areas of contemporary theory: the "orality turn" of media studies, in vibratory new materialist ontologies, and in the "ontological turn" of sound studies. This work challenges notions of the sonic as a fixed category, and the idea that sound can counteract or cure the effects of capitalist Western culture on subjectivity. Instead, it calls for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the role of sound within the broader cultural and theoretical landscape.

Introduction

Sound, and more generally the sonic, is a field that is under construction: the sound of today is not the same as the sound of yesterday, or of a thousand years ago. Sound traverses many planes: it is a frequency-based vibration with a place on the energy spectrum, an input into the human sensorium, the carrier of voice, and an art form in Western culture since sometime in the last century.[1] Sound is situated in a temporally curious position: it is both something that in recent materialist philosophy is said to point towards a future that is non-hierarchical, a coming together of human and non-human, yet at the same time also harks back to a time before writing, lost cultures of orality, and an innocent past. In this way sound is both ancient and hyper-modern, futuristic and strangely quaint. The fields of the sonic arts and sound studies are relatively young and exploratory, while practices of sounding have existed as long as human civilisation itself. Jacques Attali proposed a turn to the sonic as a way of dealing with the growing uncertainty and ambiguity of the symbolic realm, which he characterised as causing the breakdown of western theory, and proving to be inadequate in capturing the nature of capitalism.[2] This represents a call to turn toward the future by going back to a sonic past, and indeed is a call that appears in varying forms across Western theory, beginning in earnest in the post-war period and coinciding with the solidifying of a global system of capitalism that continues to serve primarily Western interests. Parallels can be drawn between this desire to return to sonicity and the dynamics that shaped the poetry of the "Romantic" era —in essence a response to the overwhelming expansion of the British Empire, and the technological and economic modernisation that arrived along with it, revealing the desire to leave the symbolic world behind. Most pertinently, writings of the Romantic time were able to articulate a kind of discomfort with all kinds of social and cultural upheaval that came with colonial expansion, yet were not fully able to grasp the totality of this expansion: it was tangible only through its material effects, the whole picture never wholly visible at one time.[3] This mirrors a dynamic at play in the current day, with a capitalist system that is all-encompassing, yet only accessible tangentially. In this surrounding context, sound gets put

[1] Accounts vary as to when was the beginning of "sound art". Some scholars like Christoph Cox say it was in the 1960s, while others such as Seth Kim-Cohen maintain it emerged in the 1980s.
[2] Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1985), 4.
[3] Saree Makdisi, *Romantic Imperialism: Universal Empire and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 6.

forward as both a response to and a means of exit from this system: I call this tendency "sonic romanticism."

In the chapters that follow, I will trace the ongoing construction the sonic as a discursive category, firstly in relation to the visual realm, and then as a response to the more fluid sonic categories of noise and silence. I will illustrate how the projection of reified qualities onto the category of the sonic is a practice that has been commonplace in Western theory. Following on from this, I will examine three manifestations of sonic romanticism in contemporary theory. Looking firstly at the "orality turn" of media studies, seen in the writings of the Toronto school of media theorists, I show how human entry into literacy became framed as a process of alienation, characterised by Marshall McLuhan as "detribalization."[4] A next step in human evolution is claimed by McLuhan as a side-effect of the workings of electromagnetic technology, holding the promise of a return to a tribal society and a new culture of orality. However, this return to orality is more complicated than it sounds on the surface, and is inextricably bound up in relations of race and power. I then turn to recent developments in materialist philosophy, examining specifically different forms of new materialist thinking, many of which are built upon descriptions of interactions of vibrating particles and waves: in essence metaphors for sonic propagation. I examine the connection between new materialism and vitalism as first proposed by Henri Bergson, and then focus particularly on Robin James's characterisation of new materialism as performing a specific function inside neoliberalism. Finally I look into two attempts at creating sonic ontologies in the field of sound studies, by scholars Steve Goodman and Christoph Cox, the first representing a kind of cosmic ontology propelled by the Big Bang and continued in militarised Western culture, and the other an attempt to claim the territory of the "auditory real," which precedes representation and symbolism.[5] What these manifestations of sonic romanticism share is a tendency to lessen the importance of the discursive, symbolic and literary, and instead focus on a kind of over-generalising and all-encompassing sonic field which can precede meaning and sit underneath all experience. The equating of sound with the ontological calls into question the discursive function of the sonic at a time when various previously marginalised

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[4] Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962).

[5] Christoph Cox, "Beyond Representation and Signification: Toward a Sonic Materialism," *Journal of Visual Culture* 10, no. 2 (August 2011): 145–61; doi:10.1177/1470412911402880.

voices were beginning to be incorporated more into contemporary theory, only to be in some ways swept to the side amidst renewed interest in questions of ontology and materiality. The weight of sonic romanticism rests on a particular conception of sound as possessing specific qualities that can provide an exit the alienation that comes with Western capitalist culture.[6] It is this tendency that I will in this thesis call into question.

[6] Todd McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire: The Psychic Cost of Free Markets* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 23. The enclosing chapter, "The Subject of Desire and the Subject of Capitalism" is a good account of the interaction between capitalism and subjectivity.

1 — Forming the Sonic

As well as being a physical vibration that propagates as an acoustic wave, sound can be thought of as a discursive construction: it is something people write about, talk about, and sing about. In this process, sound is put into discursive interaction with other entities, a process which at turns defines and diffuses the borders of the sonic, some of which I will now discuss. Firstly there is a long-standing comparison and competition with the visual realm, which has come to be of huge importance in how sound is composed and theorised. The shadow of vision has influenced both foundational and innovative approaches in both the sonic arts and sound studies, and often manifests as a desire to move past sight, and to stake out ground for what sound is on its own terms. Also of great importance in the discursive construction of sound have been ideas of silence and of noise, two sonic categories which both reinforce and stand in contrast to sound: this trio, sound, silence, and noise, exist in a triadic relationship, a triple helix. Sound represents the positive aspect of the equation, with noise as an indeterminate and chaotic Other, and finally silence completing the trinity as a way of giving rhythm and negation to both of these former modalities. These interactions play out in both the field of the sonic arts and also academic discipline of sound studies.

Paths into Sonic Thinking

An oft-repeated thought in sound studies is that culture has become overwhelmingly weighted in favour of the eye, this world is an ocularcentric one, and the hierarchy of the senses has in the most recent centuries been dominated by vision. Sound studies scholar Jonathan Sterne cites the method of comparing sight to hearing as the most commonly-tread path into thinking with sound: sound in this case takes up a position where its parameters and possibilities are already defined by the enclosure of the visual.[7] Architect Juhani Pallasmaa wrote in his influential architecture text *The Eyes of the Skin* that the "the hegemonic eye seeks domination over all fields of cultural production, and it seems to weaken our capacity for empathy, compassion and participation with the world."[8] Pallasmaa neglects to describe how this occurs, but this perhaps is irrelevant: the narrative is already in place, and the role of sound in liberating the subject from the confines of visuality is in the air. Another way into

[7] Jonathan Sterne, "Sonic Imaginations," in *The Sound Studies Reader*, ed. Jonathan Sterne (New York: Routledge, 2012), 7.
[8] Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin*, 3rd ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 24.

thinking with sound that Sterne identifies, centres on accepting the materiality of sound, and trying to evaluate its effect in the world: this path is supposedly a way of avoiding the trap of having to think of sound as existing only in relation to the visual realm.[9] The materialist philosophy of sound put forward by scholar Christoph Cox in 2011 aims to do just that: by tapping in to the constant and immanent material flow and flux of the sonic, one can elide questions of signification and representation, and so deal with sound on its own terms, and allow sound to generate its own forms of knowledge.[10] Cox deems this a necessary step for theories of the sonic to be elevated to the level of the literary and visual arts. I will address more deeply Cox's materialist philosophy later; for now it is enough to recognise that even the sonic materialist path also exists in relation to the visual realm, even only as a medium to either emulate or compete with. This way of thinking is apparent when he describes how sonic thinking can also pose new ways of working with visual material, writing "we might ask of an image or a text not what it *means* or *represents*, but what it *does*, how it *operates*, what changes it effectuates."[11] That visual culture already has a language for these processes in for example the concept of "operational images" put forward by Harun Farocki in the early 2000s, is not acknowledged by Cox.[12] One could also ask what sound has more to do with "doing" and "operation" than vision—Cox has no answer to this question, or indeed an account as to how the linguistic questioning of how something operates, is a sonic process. It appears that he is still trapped inside the visual and linguistic domain, even in the very moment he claims to have transitioned over to sonic thinking. These two paths show a sound that strains to get away from vision, a sound that wishes to be untethered from the visual, but cannot in any case escape.

Film studies can be considered an early precursor to sound studies, because film, as it were, was one of the only places sound in media was discussed theoretically in the post-war period.[13] Film studies scholar Rick Altman questions in "Four and a Half Film Fallacies" the

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[9] Sterne, "Sonic Imaginations," 7.
[10] Cox, "Beyond Representation and Signification."
[11] Cox, "Beyond Representation and Signification," 157.
[12] Harun Farocki, "Eye / Machine," accessed May 20, 2024. https://www.harunfarocki.de/installations/2000s/2000/eye-machine.html; see also Trevor Paglen, "Operational Images," *e-flux journal*, no. 59 (October 2014) for more on this subject.
[13] Michele Hilmes, "Is There a Field Called Sound Culture Studies? And Does It Matter?" *American Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (March 2005): 249-259; Michele Hilmes, "Foregrounding Sound: New (And Old) Directions in Sound Studies," *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 1 (Fall 2008): 115-117.

mistaken yet widely-accepted narrative of how sound came to be united rather late with vision in the cinema, and was an unwelcome addition that was widely protested: "on one side an ethereal cinema of silence, punctuated only be carefully chosen music; on the other side, the talkies, with their incessant, anti-poetic dialogue."[14] In reality the choice was never so binary, as attested by the many performers singing behind silent cinema screens during the early decade of film: the integration of sound into cinema was simply the next step for the medium as a whole. In the sonic arts, Pierre Schaeffer in the middle of the last century conceptually severed the tie between sound and its visual sources by reviving the concept of "acousmatic" sound in his *Traité des Objets Musicaux*, published in 1966.[15] "Acousmatic" was a term used previously to describe how the disciples of Pythagoras heard him speak from behind a screen, lest his physical appearance prove to be a distraction: a pure, disembodied, non-visual sound. Similarly by focusing only on the sonic qualities of a sound, through a process called "reduced listening," Schaeffer maintained that one may come into contact with the "sound object," with the intention then that these sound objects be used in musical composition.[16] According to film theorist and scholar Michel Chion, this way of listening places all sounds on the same plane, freed from their natural or cultural aspects.[17] Aside from the claim that listening can take sound out of both nature and culture, in this imaginary, sound emerges as the method by which one can escape the hierarchies supposedly imposed by visuality. Chion describes how this way of listening resembles a mode of sensing that has long been available in the visual realm, since "with regard to every visual object—no matter its kind, use, size, 'natural' or 'manmade' character—we are capable of having an apprehension of its form."[18] Describing sound as something that needs to be separated from vision, so as to give it a comparable conceptual weight to that of vision, is a recurring pattern in the sonic arts: sound must be liberated from vision, so that it can in turn liberate the world from visual hegemony, often through the use of methods employed by visuality.

Energies scholar Douglas Kahn in *Noise, Water, Meat* cautions against the cleaving of sound

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[14] Rick Altman, "Four and a Half Film Fallacies," in *Sound Theory/Sound Practice*, ed. Rick Altman (New York: Routledge, 1992), 36.
[15] Pierre Schaeffer, *Traité des objets musicaux* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966).
[16] Brian Kane, *Sound Unseen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 16.
[17] Michel Chion, "Reflections on the Sound Object and Reduced Listening," in *Sound Objects*, ed. James A. Steintrager and Rey Chow (Duke University Press, 2018), 31.
[18] Chion, "Reflections on the Sound Object and Reduced Listening," 28.

from vision, either retrospectively or in the now, instead encouraging thinking through sound as part of an overall sensing apparatus: "blind hearing, even for the blind, is a difficult proposition to sustain in a society that so thoroughly internalizes vision into every aspect of its being and in other ways integrates aspects of the sensorium with one another. Obviously, the same would apply to deaf seeing."[19] Kahn points towards the deeply entangled nature of the senses, and of sound with vision: they are not so easily separated, and it is unclear what purpose doing so serves. He also usefully rejects the notion that the visual arts have historically been purely visual and completely silent.[20] In academia, the field of sound studies has gained much from the use of visual metaphors applied to sound: Seth Kim-Cohen in *In the Blink of an Ear* follows up a claim that the sonic arts have somehow missed the conceptual turn taken by the visual arts, by calling for the instatement for the sonic equivalent of a Duchampian non-retinal art, which he calls a "non-cochlear sound art."[21] By taking the turn towards the conceptual, he claims, it will be possible to redraw the boundaries of the sonic, and open sound up to change and redefinition.[22] Both Kahn and Kim-Cohen in their writing propose processes of rehearing and re-listening to the sonic and visual arts of the last century as a way of entering their respective arguments, with both focusing overwhelmingly on art made by white western male artists. It could be said that in attempting to bring sound out from the shadow of the visual, a blind eye was turned to the workings of power within the sonic field itself, and one could add that sound studies lacks a comprehensive vocabulary for describing these workings. A step towards remedying this was taken in 2017, when scholar Marie Thompson put forward the notion of "white aurality" as a way of beginning to describe the conditions under which whiteness becomes the default listening space, while simultaneously making itself invisible.[23] This important term, which I will return to later, is itself an extension of Nikki Sullivan's theory of "white optics,"[24] and is I believe an important new tool in the conceptualisation of sound as an entity that is implicated in systems of power.

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[19] Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001), 4.
[20] Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat*, 2.
[21] Seth Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Group, 2009), xx.
[22] Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear*, xx.
[23] Marie Thompson, "Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies," *Parallax* 23, no. 3 (July 3, 2017): 266–82. https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2017.1339967.
[24] Nikki Sullivan, "The Somatechnics of Perception and the Matter of the Non/Human: A Critical Response to the New Materialism," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 19, no. 3 (2012): 299–313.

The Audio-Visual Litany

A conceptual tool which presents a valuable way of understanding the relationship between the sonic and the visual, is a rhetorical device first put forward by Jonathan Sterne called the "audio-visual litany."[25] First introduced in *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, the now oft-cited litany describes how both sound and vision are discursively assigned innate properties that renders both ahistorical and unchanging. The properties assigned to sound compare favourably to those assigned to vision: sound is immersive, concerned with speech, interiors and affect, bringing us into the world. Vision on the other hand is concerned with the written word, surfaces, is distancing, concerned with intellect, and removes us from our surroundings.[26] Sound in this configuration is positioned as a way of overcoming the problems that vision imposes. However, adhering to such a litany then necessitates a turning away from allowing that properties assigned to the senses are historical, culturally constructed, contingent and ever-changing. According to Sterne, the litany is itself a descendent of the dogma of Christian spiritualism, where sound is connected to the life-giving spirit, and vision to the dead, inert letter.[27] Sound is a way of getting closer to the divine, after being distanced from it by the visual realm. In the introduction to *The Auditory Culture Reader*, theorists Michael Bull and Les Back provide a useful example of the unintentional adherence to the litany. Their reader was published in 2003, a time when sound studies, a field still in its infancy, existed also in the form of "auditory culture studies."[28] In order to describe their idea of the potential of sound, they first put forward a negative conception of the visual, even though they claim that this is not their aim: they write that vision is the most "distancing" of the senses, and that implicit in the visual regarding of the world, is the desire to control that world.[29] Sound however, with its supposedly innate, engulfing immersive qualities, then provides a way of rethinking the relation between the subject and the world, and by extension a way of regarding, or being in the world, without having to harbour the urge to control it.[30] For Back and Bull, sound is a path back to a kind of innocence, where desires to dominate and exert power do not emerge from the individual

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[25] Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).
[26] Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 16.
[27] Sterne, *The Audible Past,* 16.
[28] For more on the formation of the field of sound studies, refer to Hilmes, "Is There a Field Called Sound Culture Studies? And Does It Matter?" *American Quarterly* 57, (2005).
[29] Michael Bull and Les Back, eds., *The Auditory Culture Reader* (London: Berg Publishers, 2003), 4-5.
[30] Bull and Back, eds., *The Auditory Culture Reader*, 5.

subject, because those impulses are associated with visuality. Yet their turn toward the sonic does not undo the power dynamics supposedly put in place by the visual: later in the same introduction they discuss racism, writing that it is "a discourse of power that thinks with its eyes. The idea of race, itself a product of history rather than nature, is a categorical mode of thinking that anchors human difference in The Visible . . . You can't hear race in the same way that you see it. Sound may offer many confusions."[31] They then offer an example of not being able to tell the colour of a person's skin while speaking on the telephone as an example of such confusion. While racist ideology may stem from the categorisation of visual differences between people, in making the visual realm responsible for how racism "thinks," it becomes very easy to overlook the role of sound as co-constituent in these systems of power. Instead, sound is assigned a kind of redemptive potential, that can point to a more inclusive and multiculturally harmonious future.[32] Stuart Hall in 1997 spoke about race being the "floating signifier", a symbolic system that holds meanings that change and shift over time, and where these meanings then become inscribed in modes of organisation and power relations between groups of people.[33] In adhering to the litany, Bull and Back assign static sensory qualities to both vision and sound, apply this understanding to systems of racial discrimination, and promote sound is a way of working against this system instead of recognising how sound is potentially implicated in it. In this way, sound is placed in a position where it is put forward as a way of solving issues with supposed roots in visuality. In order to accomplish this, the sonic must remain pure: it would be counter-productive to question how the sonic is entangled in systems of racism and domination, so this question is not addressed, or considered.

Sound, Noise and Silence

Aside from being thought and constructed in a relationship with the visual regime, sound is often defined and redefined in a more fluid way in relation to the sonic entities of noise and silence. Here the lines are less clear-cut, the borders less defined, in terms of both temporality and causality. Sound is defined at turns in agreement and contrast with noise and silence, which on the surface are opposites of each other, but on second glance both more similar and

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[31] Bull and Back, eds., *The Auditory Culture Reader*, 14.
[32] Bull and Back, eds., *The Auditory Culture Reader*, 15.
[33] Stuart Hall and Henry Louis Gates, *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation*, ed. Kobena Mercer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 47. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvqht03.

dissimilar than that. One can at different times become the pre-condition for the other, the cure for the other, and even the same as each other. Noise and silence are both negative figures in different ways, through whose workings one can begin to feel the edges of sound. Noise is integral to the origin story of the sonic arts, a tale that is repeated many times: sound art began when Italian Futurist Luigi Russolo broke the preceding silence with the noises of machines, modern industry and war in 1913's *Art of Noises*. In this work he introduced his "intonarumori", an orchestra of mechanical noise-making machines that later performed in various spaces across Europe.[34] This narrative is repeated in almost every history of the sonic arts, mentioned at least in passing, often uncritically. Salomé Voegelin writes that "Luigi Russolo celebrated noise. He heard in the machine the sounds of progress, liberation and advancement of a people towards a better life that had overcome the imperfection of the menial and manual in the perfection of the machine."[35] This way of describing the beginning of the sonic arts is at best an exercise in wishful thinking: separating the aesthetic qualities of an artistic movement from its political grounding in Italian nationalist fascism. Instead, one can see it as existing in direct lineage to dynamics of power in Western imperialism, with Tara Rodgers writing that "themes in Futurist writing seem to flow naturally into the colonialist discourses articulated to electronic sounds in Cold War popular culture, the sexist imagery that has characterized many electronic music album covers and advertisements, and the militaristic language that inflects contemporary music-production terminology."[36]

The political dimension of Futurist thought is often discounted in retellings of this origin story, in favour of highlighting the aesthetic principles they upheld, which is at odds with how the Futurists themselves saw the relationship between art and politics. According to Anne Bowler, the Futurists sought "not merely the *negation* of traditional aesthetic forms of the past, but rather the *sublation* of art into a new revolutionary praxis that would transform the organizational fabric of everyday life."[37] Inaugurated by the publication of "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism" by Marinetti in *La Figaro* in 1909, Futurism claimed at

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[34] Luigi Russolo, *The Art of Noises*, trans. Barclay Brown (New York: Pendragon Press, 1986).
[35] Salomé Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 43.
[36] Tara Rodgers, *Pink Noises: Women on Electronic Music and Sound* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 6.
[37] Anne Bowler, "Politics as Art: Italian Futurism and Fascism," *Theory and Society* 20, no. 6 (Dec. 1991): 765; http://www.jstor.org/stable/657603.

the time that their philosophy represented a radical break with the past.[38] However, it was in fact constructing itself upon and harnessing political, cultural and philosophical currents in Italy at the time. Bowler writes that "among the most important of these was the vestige of the incomplete project of Risorgimento, which having failed by 1870 to establish real national unity left an Italy inwardly divided on political as well as economic grounds."[39] While many writers on the sonic arts share a tendency to refer to Russolo's *Art of Noises* purely on sonic terms, the breaking of silence with industrial noise, the nature of the project takes on another aspect when the political dimension is not so quickly discounted. What instead comes to the fore is the potential of sound to serve as a kind of organising logic: of separating peoples and cultures into the industrialised and the non-industrialised, the modern and the primitive, based on their capacity to generate noise. The noises of Russolo's intonarumori can be seen on the surface as a celebration of the mechanical and industrial. However when placed alongside Marinetti's claim in his 1909 manifesto that war is "the sole cleanser of the world," it is difficult to countenance a purely aesthetic interpretation of these sounds, this noise.[40] The birthing event of the sonic arts is not merely a celebration of industrialisation: it is a celebration of military conquest and destruction, and a tacit justification for the potential conquest of peoples that are not sufficiently modern. Martha Rosler has written about how visual regimes have been integral in the construction of a temporalised idea of space: the use of perspective in Renaissance paintings and the deployment of photography as framing how land can be captured and enclosed.[41] Sound can also be thought of as part of these organising principles, with the ability to create certain sounds seen as signifying one's temporality in global space, and therefore one's right to space at all.

Futurism exhibits in the writings of Marinetti a curious relationship between technology and the body, long before ideas of transhumanism became mainstream in other theoretical contexts. Marinetti's idea of mechanical beauty comes from the impulse to separate beauty from the category of woman, asking in "Extended Man and the Kingdom of the Machine" if

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[38] Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "Le Futurisme," *Le Figaro*, February 20, 1909, no. 51, Gallica, Bibliothèque nationale de France.
[39] Bowler, "Politics as Art," 766-7.
[40] Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "The Futurist Manifesto," in *Critical Writings*, ed. Günter Berghaus (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 26.
[41] Martha Rosler, "Culture Class: Art, Creativity, Urbanism, Part 1," *e-flux Journal*, no. 21 (December 2010), 1.

you have "ever watched an engine driver lovingly washing the great powerful body of his engine? He uses the same little acts of tenderness and familiarity as the lover when caressing his beloved."[42] In this deeply misogynist configuration the female is rendered redundant, replaced by the mechanical, which in turn becomes incorporated into the male body, a "mechanical species of extended man."[43] In this way the male becomes the site of all reproductive potential and power, the female debased and cast aside. This transformation is also marked by a purging of love and sentimentality from the male body, through the "eradication of their emotions and seeking endless sexual amusement in rapid, casual encounters with women."[44] These extended bodies could then engage in what Marinetti calls "Futurist dance"—in the essay of the same name, he writes that "we should imitate the movements of machines; we should pay very close attention to the steering wheel, to wheels, to pistons, and thus prepare the way for the fusion of men and machines, arriving at the metallic character of Futurist dance."[45] For Marinetti, this new dance was a way of showcasing the capabilities of these mechanised bodies, representing a sharp break with existing dance traditions. These dances would be deployed in order to depict scenes of war and glorify the war hero, showcasing their mastery over ballistic war machines with some of Marinetti's suggestions being "Dance of the Shrapnel" and "Dance of the Machine Gun."[46] Deeming music as being unable to adequately accompany this new evolved dance form, instead he turns to noise: "noise is the language of the new mechanical-human life. Futurist dance will therefore be accompanied by *ordered noises* and by the orchestra of noise instruments invented by Luigi Russolo."[47]

Futurism emerged at a timely point in the history of continental Europe, if not foreseeing then at least conveniently foreshadowing the outbreak of the First World War: Marinetti in 1914 both campaigned for Italy to end its neutrality, and claimed that he had accurately predicted the war itself.[48] Indeed the War itself became characterised as both the realisation of the

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[42] Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "Extended Man and the Kingdom of the Machine," in *Critical Writings*, ed. Günter Berghaus (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 69.
[43] Marinetti, "Extended Man and the Kingdom of the Machine," 70.
[44] Marinetti, "Extended Man and the Kingdom of the Machine," 71.
[45] Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "Futurist Dance," in *Critical Writings*, ed. Günter Berghaus (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 145.
[46] Marinetti, "Futurist Dance", 146.
[47] Marinetti, "Futurist Dance," 145.
[48] Selena Daly, *Italian Futurism and the First World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 2016, 3.

desires of Futurism and, through the deaths in the war of Umberto Boccioni and Antonio Sant'Elia, two of the most influential proponents of Futurist thought in the fields of painting and architecture respectively, the ending of the initial phase of Futurism.[49] In "Total Mobilization", an essay by the German conservative writer Ernst Jünger published in 1932, the First World War is characterised as an exhaustion, a purification in the Futurist sense, writing that the "Kremlin's old chimes now play the Internationale. In Constantinople, schoolchildren use the Latin script instead of the Koran's old arabesques. In Naples and Palermo, Fascist police regulate the pace of southern life as if directing modern traffic."[50] Situated at sufficient distance from the end of the First World War to be able to gauge its enormity and world-changing effects, and also on the precipice of the coming to power of the Nazi party in Germany, Jünger describes war as a force of renewal, a way of bringing a new world into being, powered by the industrial furnaces of nation states. This world is one where there is no difference between the world of industrialisation and the world of war, the "total mobilization" described thus: "in addition to the armies that meet on the battlefields, originate the modern armies of commerce and transport, foodstuffs, the manufacture of armaments—the army of labor in general. In the final phase, which was already hinted at toward the end of the last war, there is no longer any movement whatsoever—be it that of the homeworker at her sewing machine—without at least indirect use of the battlefield."[51] For Jünger, this mobilisation is total in every sense: it reaches down into the "deepest marrow, life's finest nerve": it redirects the energies of all bodies in service of the furnaces of industry, the foundries of war, with all bodies becoming part of the military-industrial complex, thirty years before Dwight Eisenhower first used the term.[52] In this configuration, there is no difference between the noise of industrialisation and the noise of war. It is precisely this blurring of boundaries that was the goal of the Futurist project from its outset: a way of dismantling the existing world—rejecting traditions, destroying existing forms, challenging all existing values—and constructing a new one in its place: the world of Futurist art, dance, and architecture, a world brought into being by warfare that exists to glorify warfare,

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[49] Daly, *Italian Futurism and the First World War*, 5.
[50] Ernst Jünger, "Total Mobilization," in *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Wolin (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998), 137.
[51] Jünger, "Total Mobilization," 126.
[52] Jünger, "Total Mobilization," 126; National Archives and Records Administration, "President Dwight D. Eisenhower's Farewell Address," accessed July 18, 2024. https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/president-dwight-d-eisenhowers-farewell-address.

marshalling all forms of expression to this end. It is this lineage that is put to one side through attempts to separate the aesthetic from the political in the case of noise, and its origins in Futurist thought.

Noise as a sonic category exists in binary relation to other categories, such as silence, signal and music, and is commonly narrated as a negative, the threat of indeterminacy or the unknown. For Jacques Attali, music is a way of understanding the world, making sense of the systems and networks that underpin its functioning, while noise is the innate potential for destruction contained in all things, a maximal intensity of possibility: "the absence of meaning is in this case the presence of all meanings, absolute ambiguity, a construction outside meaning. The presence of noise makes sense, makes meaning. It makes possible the creation of a new order on another level of organisation."[53] Philosopher Greg Hainge theorises noise in a similar way, comparing white noise to Deleuze's idea of the virtual: in his thinking, white noise is a maximal state from which all other states may be condensed, that is to say the traversal from the virtual to the actual may be made by subtracting information from the all-encompassing broad-band presence of white noise.[54] In both cases, noise is thought of something that is outside of the realm of meaning, but is essential to the possibility of the emergence of meaning—the presence of meaning is contingent on the presence of noise, and the implied ability to harness it, parse it, and make it make sense. This way of thinking also gains credence in light of more complex understandings of noise as part of information theory and physics, where noise represents uncertainty in a system. Cecile Malaspina discusses the status of noise in *An Epistemology of Noise*, writing that it "always appears to occupy the negative place of a dichotomy, be that of order and disorder, of physical work and the dispersion of energy in the state of entropy, or the norm and the abnormal. In other words, noise is as best associated with the absence of order, of work or of the norm – be it the statistical, moral or aesthetic norm – and at worst, noise is identified as a threat to the norm and subversive of work and order: a perturbation, a loss of energy available for work, a parasite."[55] Inigo Wilkins looks more critically at the way noise is theorised, writing that there is "an immediately political dimension to the existing literature on the concept of noise, where it is associated with the uncontrolled element or uncontrollable force

[53] Attali, *Noise*, 33.
[54] Greg Hainge, *Noise Matters: Towards an Ontology of Noise* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).
[55] Cecile Malaspina, *An Epistemology of Noise* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 3.

that leads to revolutionary transformation. Noise is frequently alluded to as the irrepressible chaos of the multitude, or of desire, against the forces of oppression and repression." He highlights and problematises how noise is often fetishised, and described as being beyond description, with noise-as-excess often positioned against capitalism and scientific reason. Thinking of noise in this way, he writes, fails "to recognize the multi-scale complexity of noise or its intrinsically functional relationship within biological, social political and economic systems."[56] Noise musician and writer Mattin describes how even noise music itself is not immune to noise, carrying within itself the seeds of its own destruction, when writing how "at a certain point it became clear to me that noise music had become a genre of music with specific tropes—loud volume, aggressive frequencies, total movement or total stasis etc—and that it was gradually turning into a parody of itself. I then became interested in a different approach to noise, one that has to do with silences—but silences that are full of expectation, because one does not know what might happen next."[57] In his case, the indeterminacy of noise ended up manifesting as predictability, and silence was then a way of breaking free from this. Noise contained a destructive potential, but instead of being a threat to the norm, became itself the norm. The way out of this quandary was for Mattin through the further negation of the negative: through the way of silence.

That silence should follow from noise in this way is perhaps not a surprise. Silence is in many imaginaries an idealised state, a peaceful one, away from the disturbance of noise. Sound studies writer Salomé Voegelin in *Listening to Noise and Silence* describes a scene of listening to the silence in a cabin in the Swiss Alps, which is "covered in a thick layer of snow, surrounded by snowed-in trees, feels dense and compact like a thick carpet. I am inside this carpet, listening. When there is nothing to hear, so much starts to sound. Silence is not the absence of sound but the beginning of listening."[58] For Voegelin silence is, like noise, a condition of possibility: it is the starting point of listening, the place where sonic subjectivity can emerge in what I now characterise as the figure of "the Listener". A Listener is a subject who has access to silence, who is able to separate themselves from noise for long enough to tune their ears and bodies to the world around them. This is a position of privilege, and one could say that it is dangerous to theorise generally about sound based on the personal

[56] Wilkins, "Irreversible Noise," 21.
[57] Mattin, *Social Dissonance* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2022), 7.
[58] Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence*, 83.

experience of having access to a cabin in the Swiss Alps. Such access was not afforded to writer Ralph Ellison in the 1950s, who begins the short essay "Living With Music," a description of his sonic home-life living underneath an enthusiastically singing neighbour with the proclamation "In those days it was either live with music or die with noise, and we chose rather desperately to live."[59] Silence wasn't even part of the equation for him: instead he enthusiastically doubles down on in his response to his neighbour, writing that "one desperate morning I decided that since I seemed doomed to live within shrieking chaos I might as well contribute my share; perhaps if I fought noise with noise I'd attain some small peace."[60] According to Ellison, noise plus noise can equal silence. His ongoing suffering finally reaches a point of resolution when he assembles a high-quality sound system, which which he can send sonic hints to his neighbour: eventually they build an understanding between them: when she sings too loudly for too long, all he needs to do is turn up the stereo for a minute, and she will lower her own volume. Such sonically negotiated resolution isn't available to Voegelin, who describes a similar situation with a loud neighbour in *Listening to Noise and Silence*: she turns her stereo up full, and ponders throwing eggs at their backyard. For her, noise is a social signifier, and a marker of taste: noise symbolises bad taste, and is the music of other people.[61]

Country singer Charley Pride approached the relationship from a different angle in his song "Silence":

> Silence is four walls that hold no laughter
> Silence is a phone that never rings
> Silence is a hall without her footsteps
> The Sound of Silence is destroying me.
>
> Turn the Jukebox up loud, let there be laughter
> Talk to me no matter what you say
> Help me drown out the sound of silence

[59] Ralph Ellison, *Living with Music: Ralph Ellison's Jazz Writings*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 3.
[60] Ellison, *Living with Music*, 10.
[61] Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence*, 44.

The sound of silence that's destroying me.[62]

For Pride, noise was the promise of escape, the escape from a silent reality. Everything that could sound, the walls, phone and hall, which yet remained still, was a source of pain for him, neither a comfort nor the birthing place of a state of contemplative listening. Silence for him was a signifier of loss, and there was solace and distraction in noise. Silence calls for noise, and noise calls for silence.[63]

John Cage famously brought silence into the concert hall in 1952 with the piece *4'33*, first performed at Maverick Concert Hall, New York by pianist David Tudor: where the environmental sounds of the concert hall became the composition, as Tudor sat by the piano for three movements, not playing it. 1952 was the year when, through the use of silence, sound was folded into music. In the same stroke, silence became a privileged category in the sonic arts and western art music. Douglas Kahn characterises the Cagean incorporation of sound into music as closing the circle that was opened by the Futurists, writing that "Russolo initiated the strategy whereby extramusical sounds were incorporated rhetorically or in fact into music in order to reinvigorate it. Cage exhausted this strategy by extending the process of incorporation to a point to every audible, potentially audible and mythically audible sounds, where consequently there existed no more sounds to incorporate music."[64] Kahn goes on to say that while Cage, like the Futurists, brought noise into music, he was also heavily invested in processes of noise abatement, that is, silencing the kind of noises he found personally to be distasteful.[65] Noise for Cage had an element of unruliness and indeterminacy that represented something to be controlled and curated, even as he simultaneously put forward compositional methods based on randomness, supposedly with the desire of removing the composer from the act of composition, practices born from his long-standing interest in Eastern cultures. In *4'33*, by removing the composer almost completely from the picture, by not composing one note in the traditional sense, Cage paradoxically secured for

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[62] Charley Pride, "Silence," *Pride of Country Music*, RCA Victor, 1967.

[63] Pride is also incidentally the singer discussed by Back and Bull in *The Auditory Culture Reader* as an example of the potential of sound to confuse the visual realm. This is according to them because Pride, a black country western singer, sang in the style of a white man, his identity not clearly accessible from just listening to his voice.

[64] Douglas Kahn, "John Cage: Silence and Silencing," *The Musical Quarterly* 81, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 558; http://www.jstor.org/stable/742286.

[65] Kahn, "John Cage: Silence and Silencing," 578.

himself the status as the greatest American post-war composer. One story of how this came to be was after Cage saw the white paintings of Robert Rauschenberg, the almost-blank canvases provoking him to write "His white paintings . . . When I saw those, I said 'Oh yes, I must; otherwise I'm lagging, otherwise music is lagging'."[66] Note the correlation between his use of "I" and "music". His compulsion towards abstraction, to foreground the sonic background, ensured that he himself was to become the background to Western art music, a totemic figure. Tara Rodgers writes that "Cage's body of work was innovative in the context of Eurological compositional traditions, but it has been taken up by some academics and journalists to define what constitutes 'experimental' music in the broadest sense. This has worked to deny the influence of comparably innovative music practices by women and people of color."[67] This reading of Cage is part of a wider reappraisal of his work and legacy in recent times, which has gone in step with an increased tendency in the field of sound studies to be critical towards the giants of the sonic arts. Indeed the work of Cage is itself directly connected to the recent turn in sound studies towards questions of materiality and ontology by Marie Thompson, who draws attention to the work of Cage as being "marked by notions of a real, universal and immanent nature, the prioritization of materiality as distinct from sociality and culture, as well as the evident Cagean desire to 'go cosmic' through panaurality and the sonification of all objects."[68] For Thompson, the uncritical acceptance of the conceptual propositions put forward by artists such as Cage, and the reading of their work by sound studies theorists interested in materiality as somehow being able to reveal or disclose something about the nature of sound, contributes to a climate where the white, Western way of listening is the default position, and such a position is invisibilised as the standard and only position. The Cagean tendency towards silence was remarked upon by the artistic grouping the Situationists, who framed this tendency as the exhaustion existing aesthetic categories: "some reach the point of making themselves known simply by signing a blank, which is the perfect result of the Dadaist 'readymade'."[69] It is no coincidence that this statement seems to mark an ending of something, as Cagean silence often seems to be

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[66] John Cage, Roger Shattuck, and Alan Gillmor, "Erik Satie: A Conversation," *Contact*, no. 25 (Autumn 1982): 22.
[67] Rodgers, *Pink Noises*, 10.
[68] Marie Thompson, "Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies," *Parallax* 23, no. 3 (July 3, 2017): 271; https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2017.1339967.
[69] Guy Debord and the Internationale Situationniste, "Editorial Notes: Absence and Its Costumers," *October* 79 (1997): 98; http://www.jstor.org/stable/778845.

positioned: thought of as the perfect evolution of Duchampian non-retinal art, a concept that at once appears to contain everything and simultaneously nothing. Seth Kim-Cohen previously referred to the readymade as an example of what the sonic arts were missing compared to the visual: the situationists already in 1958 characterised the form as being exhausted by the work of Cage. Frederic Jameson characterises this exhausting of existing categories, and the figuring out of what might follow as marking the transition between modernism and post-modernism. He writes that "abstract expressionism in painting, existentialism in philosophy, the final forms of representation in the novel, the films of the great auteurs, or the modernist school of poetry . . . all these are now seen as the final, extraordinary flowering of a high modernist impulse which is spent and exhausted with them."[70] This gives the impression that what is left is a kind of vacuum that needs to be filled: yet in the case of sound, the influence of Cagean silence has gone on to set the terms of the sonic for the rest of the 20th century and beyond.

Martha Rosler, who in her essay series "Art, Creativity, Urbanism" drew connections between the simultaneously unfolding processes of economic, urban architectural and aesthetic development in the post-war period in the West, wrote of an urban equivalent of this vacuum, saying that cities devastated by bombing represented a "blank canvas", much like the white paintings of Rauschenberg that so inspired John Cage. Cities were built and remade, becoming "concentrations, real and symbolic, of state and corporate administration. The theoretical underpinning for a renovated cityscape came primarily from the earlier, utopian 'millennial' and interwar designs of forward-looking, albeit totalizing, plans for remaking the built environment. It was not lost on the city poor that so-called urban renewal projects targeted their neighborhoods and the cultural traditions that enlivened them."[71] The filling in of urban space in the postwar period also coincided with the beginning of the Cold War, during which time "rhetorics of artistic autonomy, in the US at least, reassured the knowing public that formalism, and, all the more so, abstraction, would constitute a bulwark against totalitarian leanings. This tacit understanding had been especially persuasive in keeping prudent artists away from political engagement."[72] If abstraction in the arts is to be

[70] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 1.
[71] Rosler, "Culture Class: Art, Creativity, Urbanism, Part 1," 3.
[72] Rosler, "Culture Class: Art, Creativity, Urbanism, Part 1," 10.

understood this way, then so should the universalising leanings of Cage and the associated tendency towards silence be understood as a product of a political climate that rewarded those who didn't criticise Western imperialism and power relations in the post-war period, most notably through initiatives supported by the Congress for Cultural Freedom. The work of Cage is highly foundational and influential in sonic artistic and theoretical practices, the sonic field still delineated in a fundamental way by his thinking and the tendency toward abstraction, whereas in the visual arts, abstraction has largely been supplanted by other tendencies. To return briefly to the Situationists, they write that abstraction's "empty exercises seldom escape the temptation to rely on some kind of external justification, thereby to illustrate and serve a reactionary conception of the world . . . We know, alas, that John Cage participates in that Californian thought where the mental infirmity of American capitalist culture has enrolled in the school of Zen Buddhism."[73] The insidious aspect of Cagean panaurality is not in that it has a standpoint of "don't mention the war": it is instead that it trades on the promise of the peaceful meeting of East and West, an inclusive and all-encompassing sonic field that can hold diverse cultures and viewpoints, but also conveniently looks the other way when it comes to American imperialism. Indeed it was American imperialism itself that facilitated the rise of abstract impressionism, of which Cage's work is the sonic exemplar of, and was positioned as the heir to Parisian modernism while the French capital was still in disarray in the aftermath of the Second World War.[74]

[73] Guy Debord and the Internationale Situationniste, "Absence and Its Costumers," 99.
[74] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 382.

2 — Sonic Romanticism

In tracing the formation of the sonic in relation to other categories such as vision, noise and silence, a picture of the sonic begins to emerge. This picture is changing and contingent, yet paradoxically, is often formed by assigning unchangeable and reified qualities to the sonic. Sound is part of a larger discourse, where it is defined, redefined and instrumentalised to accomplish certain discursive functions, with one important example being how the sonic is put forward as a way of undoing the alienation of modernity, visuality, and capitalist culture. Sound contains the promise of direct access to unmediated experience, an immersive and inclusive sonic field, a flat hierarchy, and of participation: some of the things that have been lost in the unfolding of Western subjectivity under capitalism. The desire to turn back the clock to a time of inclusive sonicity is seen in three strands of contemporary theory, which I will discuss in this chapter: firstly in the "orality turn" of media studies, then in various vibratory ontologies of new materialist philosophy, and finally in the "ontological turn" of sound studies. What characterises the emergence of these turns is a turning away the discursive, symbolic, and the literary, and instead placing a generalised deeper, more "real" layer underneath, which underpins it and precedes it: ontology and vibration comes before discursivity. This tendency can be thought of as neo-Romantic in nature, mirroring the ways writers in the Romanic era of the so-called "long 19th century" responded to the unfolding processes of modernisation that occurred hand-in-hand with British colonial expansion across the Global South. Saree Makdisi writes in *Romantic Imperialism* that "a certain fascination or even obsession with the pre- or anti-modern (Nature, the colonial realm, the Orient) occupied the very center of the British romantic critique of modernization."[75] Mirroring this fascination of the Romantic era, the tendency in contemporary theory to turn towards the sonic, and the sonic forms of the oral and the vibratory, can be thought of as a response to the unfolding Western subjectivity under capitalism. That sound becomes thought as a way out of this quandary is to minimise or ignore how it is also very much a part of the formation of subjectivity, and is formed according to the same relations of power as the visual. Because of this, the emancipatory potential of sound is limited, and only extended to certain subjects in Western power structures. Indeed instead of representing a break from those structures,

[75] Makdisi, *Romantic Imperialism*, 10.

turning to sound serves only to reinforce them under a different guise.[76]

Jerome McGann in *The Romantic Ideology* characterises the poetry of the Romantic era as operating from a desire to leave the symbolic world behind. For him, the "idea that poetry, or even consciousness, can set one free of the ruins of history and culture is the grand illusion of every Romantic poet."[77] He goes on to identify in Romantic poetry various processes of idealisation, displacement, evasion and erasure, as ways of overcoming culture.[78] The effect of this is that the "actual human issues," that is the effects of colonialism and modernisation of the time, are "resituated and deflected in various ways."[79] In a reading of William Wordsworth's "The Ruined Cottage," McGann describes how this process takes place. Set in 1793, the poem concerns a couple, Margaret and Robert, whose fortunes veer close to the poverty line due to a depressed weaving industry threatened by bad harvests and war. With no word, Robert abandons Margaret to go war in a misguided attempt to improve his family's fortunes, and so the cottage becomes gradually neglected, overgrown, invaded by Nature. However Wordsworth chooses to focus on these overgrowings, and characterise them as permanent "forms of beauty" that underlie human contradiction and strife, and reveal the "life of things," something McGann characterises as penetrating "the surface of a landscape to reach its indestructible heart and meaning."[80] In this poem, the natural world quite literally overgrows the cultural, in a way that functions as a kind of anaesthetic, a false reassurance, a state that McGann more generally goes on to characterise in Marxist terms as productive of a "false consciousness." The effect of such a consciousness according to McGann is that it "helps to maintain the status quo and to conceal the truth about social relations: that the rich and the ruling classes dominate the poor and the exploited."[81] It will become evident over the coming chapter how this process is analogous to the function of the sonic in contemporary discourse: the sonic is put forward as a kind of natural truth that lies underneath the discursive and symbolic realm, and a way of undoing and escaping the alienation of

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[76] There is an argument to be made that that which the sonic claims to recover, for example immersion and relationality, is simply a reflection of what the capitalist system itself offers: it is already that which all subjects are immersed in, and which mediates most relations. Sound is merely substituted in place of that.
[77] Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 137.
[78] See also Marjorie Levinson's *Thinking Through Poetry: Field Reports on Romantic Lyric*.
[79] McGann, *The Romantic Ideology*, 138.
[80] McGann, *The Romantic Ideology*, 86.
[81] McGann, *The Romantic Ideology*, 8.

capitalism. Constructed in this manner, sound becomes an entity that precedes discourse and meaning, even as it overgrows both: a means of replacing discourse with a kind of anonymous sonic flux. Characterised as a medium that foregrounds relationality between entities, it can be said that the sonic deployed in this Romantic manner also serves to occlude other conceptions of relationality, contained within relations of power and domination. As with the Romanticism of the 19th century, one can think of sonic romanticism as a heterogenous stream of engagements with the totality of Western capitalism, and not easily groupable under one stylistic banner. Rather what I describe here is a selection of those engagements, which have been a part of constituting not only Western subjectivity, but also the category of the sonic.

The Orality Turn in Media Studies

In the second half of the last century, scholars of the Toronto school of media studies such as Marshall McLuhan, Eric Havelock and Walter Ong wrote about a turn to orality as a way of narrating the apparent shifts introduced by new media technologies on modes of human communication and social organisation. Orality was characterised as something that was once a part of human culture, and still present in so-called "primitive" cultures, but had been lost along the way in the West, only to be re-introduced as a side-effect of technological progress in the latter half of the 20th century. In *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan traces the loss of orality as a physical matter, opposing the visual and aural, writing that "civilization gives the barbarian or tribal man an eye for an ear" and characterises the gaining of literacy as contingent upon a consequent loss of orality.[82] It is a garden of Eden moment, a loss of innocence. He narrates this shift as having taken place most potently in ancient Greece, and the loss of orality as a loss of "the total interdependence and interrelation that is the auditory network."[83] Note here how already the sonic becomes associated with systems of interdependence in a way the visual realm is not, and associated without any real justification or explanation. The losses accumulated as a result of entry into literacy and modernity are framed as losses of sonicity. According to McLuhan, the Greeks could do more with writing than other civilisations by virtue of the lack of a controlling priest class, but they nevertheless slipped quickly enough into "a cliched pattern of repetitive thought,"[84] which is the trap of

[82] McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 26.
[83] McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy,* 23.
[84] McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy,* 26.

the symbolic. For him, writing and literacy bears with it the threat of compartmentalisation and alienation, from other people and from immersion in the world. It is apparently sound and aural environments that can deliver connectedness, yet he declines to explain how this might be the case, instead offering a vague kind of fetishism of the aural at the expense of the visual, writing that "'civilization' must now be used technically to mean detribalized man for whom the visual values have priority in organization of thought and action . . . It is quite obvious that most civilized people are crude and numb in their perceptions, compared with the hyperesthesia of oral and auditory cultures. For the eye has none of the delicacy of the ear."[85] For McLuhan, the step of "detribalization" is akin to the splintering of personality: "literate man, when we meet him in the Greek world, is a split man, a schizophrenic, as all literate men have been since the invention of the phonetic alphabet."[86] The literary and discursive alters the subject, separating them from the world and from other subjects, and splitting them even mentally: it is a mode that brings with it rupture and alienation, even from themselves.

It is at this point that McLuhan narrates a reunification of subject with subject and subject with the world, through the power of new technologies, writing that "electro-magnetic discoveries have recreated the simultaneous 'field' in all human affairs so that the human family now exists under conditions of a 'global village.' We live in a single constricted space resonant with tribal drums."[87] This is accomplished through the effect that technology has on the body, externalising the senses, and allowing the expansion of the body across the world, resulting in the superimposition of all worldly bodies over each other. It is a new kind of tribe that is created in this manner, a tribe of electromagnetism, and such tribality is the side-effect of the Western recovery of a "unity of sensibility and of thought and feeling."[88] The world thus becomes a new kind of acoustic space, with electromagnetism powering a kind of neo-tribal drumming, present always in the noosphere, a word he borrows from the Romantic biologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin to characterise the "technological brain for the world."[89] The narration of technological development in the West along terms of tribality, and

[85] McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy,* 27.
[86] McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy,* 22.
[87] McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy,* 31.
[88] McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy,* 32.
[89] McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy,* 32.

technology as a means of entering into or leaving a primitive state, shows how certain media forms become racially coded, and indeed how McLuhan's entire media philosophy assumes a theory of race. Armond Towns writes that "McLuhan's concept of a media function presumed a social evolutionary theory of the world, whereby Western media are disproportionately seen as representative of stages of human evolution."[90] In *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan cites heavily the work of the infamous British colonial psychiatrist J. C. Carothers, who labelled African tribal cultures as "savage" and "backward". Towns writes that "for Carothers, detribal man was contractually bonded via his media, always over and against the tribal."[91] A subject existing in a visual culture is "detribalised," and only brought into the state of *new* tribalism by virtue of electromagnetic technology. However the return to tribalism cannot be really thought of as a real and inclusive return to a previous temporality, and more as a step away from alienation. Indeed McLuhan's deployment of sound can quite easily be compared to the Italian futurists, showing the same kind of fetishism of sound as harbinger of a new kind of futurity, and as enabling further evolution of the human form. In a 1934 letter to the University of Manitoba's newspaper, The Manitoban, McLuhan responded to a book by Alfred Jones entitled *Is Fascism the Answer?*. In it, McLuhan praises the "unselfishness, honor, and efficiency" of the Italian dictatorship, and indeed goes on to praise the orientation of what he calls the "corporate state" towards the future.[92] He goes on to write that "the Italians may have 'gone native' as it is said, but they have incorporated in their government all that is valuable in the spirit of 19th century liberalism and all that is valuable in fanatical materialism."[93] The process of "going native" McLuhan describes is a derogatory term meant to describe the abandoning of one's own values and customs to adopt those of the place where one is living, and sits uncomfortably next to his characterisations of tribality.

That fascism is a dark possibility of a return to orality is something explored by Eric Havelock in *The Muse Learns to Write.* He describes how radio is the means through which the global village is embodied: by carrying voices on radio waves, over great distances. Indeed Havelock equates the radio with an actual voice, which exerts an influence on bodies

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[90] Armond R. Towns, "Toward a Black media philosophy," *Cultural Studies*, (2020): 6; https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2020.1792524.
[91] Towns, "Toward a Black media philosophy," 8.
[92] Marshall McLuhan, "Is Fascism the Answer?," *The Manitoban*, January 30, 1934.
[93] McLuhan, "Is Fascism the Answer?"

through a force of incessant persuasion. He describes the new oratory that is made possible by such an expansion of the human body and the human voice: "the limits of the powers of the human voice from time immemorial had been set by the size of an audience physically present. These were now simply removed. A single voice addressing a single audience on a single occasion could at least theoretically address the entire population of the earth. The potential of the oral spell had been reasserted after a long sleep."[94] Havelock recounts then a personal anecdote set in October 1939, describing going out onto a Toronto street to hear an open-air radio address: it was the voice of Adolf Hitler, exhorting Canada to not challenge German supremacy. He describes the physical effect of such a sonic experience: "the strident, vehement, staccato sentences clanged out and reverberated and chased each other along, series after series, flooding over us, battering us, half drowning us, and yet kept us rooted there listening to a foreign tongue which we somehow could nevertheless imagine that we understood. This oral spell had been transmitted in the twinkling of an eye, across thousands of miles, had been automatically picked up and amplified and poured over us."[95] Radio technology became the carrier by which one body could affect others, at great distance, and moreover, was the means through which popular sentiment, the enthusiasm of the German masses could be carried across the Atlantic Ocean, across language barriers, directly into the bodies of the listeners. He alludes to the hypnotic abilities of the oratorial voice carried on the radio—this is not a disembodied voice, but a voice in a kind of early cyborg or posthuman form, being transmitted directly from one body to another. In addition to this, there is a connection to be drawn between radio as a way of expanding the oratorial voice, and the supplementation of Fascism with religious under- and overtones: the expanded radio voice is endowed with God-like powers, can directly affect bodies and influence minds. Havelock's characterisation of being "battered" by the words of Hitler draws attention to the sonic qualities of his voice, yet these qualities cannot be separated from the event's historical and political context, where the voice of the Nazi leader was somehow instantly recognisable. As one urges caution before splitting sound from vision, so should one think twice before assuming that the kinds of transmission facilitated by electromagnetic power enable a kind of pure sonic experience that is devoid of symbolism or subtext.

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[94] Eric A. Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1986), 31.
[95] Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write*, 32.

The connection between orality and the religious is explored by the sound studies scholar Jonathan Sterne in his critique of work of the media theorist Walter Ong, whose 1982 book *Orality and Literacy* theorises consciousness and culture through a set of oppositions between seeing and hearing. Indeed it is this critique that underpins Sterne's previously-discussed audio-visual litany, whereby reified qualities are assigned to both sight and hearing, and then put in a hierarchical relationship with each other. Picking up on the Romanticist overtones of the orality turn, Sterne characterises Ong as wishing "to inject some mystery and transcendence back into a world of thought he considered too concerned with order and reason," and designating his writing as not only being neo-Romantic in nature, but also anti-modernist.[96] Ong is the theorist responsible for coining the term "secondary orality," that is to say the spoken word that bears with it also the written word as a layer underneath.[97] It is this orality that Havelock experienced in his encounter with Hitler, whose voice powerfully delivered a speech that had first of all been written down: it was not improvised in the moment. Sterne posits that Ong's idea of secondary orality "was precisely intended to denote the paradoxical condition of a world that had some of the immediacy and collectivity that he attributed to oral cultures, but at the same time carried with it the baggage of literacy and the culture of the eye. Ong's hope for secondary orality had to do with its possibilities for once again preparing the subject to receive the word of God."[98] It is the sonic aspect of secondary orality that for Ong raised the possibility for people to once more become closer to the divine, as he imagined was the case in pre-literate cultures. Sterne goes on to question why secular cultural theorists still refer to this model of the development of culture, narrated as the turn to orality, if indeed it sprang up as a form of religious project. He writes that now "is time we left aside antiquated notions of sensation and cultural difference and built a global history and anthropology of communication without a psychosocial, developmental concept such as orality. We must construct new studies of early media and new ethnographies that do not posit the ascendancy of the White, Christian West as the meaning of history."[99] Rethinking history without orality, as Sterne is suggesting, would then also free up the sonic field from its historical and projected role in providing an alternative to the visual and to modernity.

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[96] Jonathan Sterne, "The Theology of Sound: A Critique of Orality," *Canadian Journal of Communication*, no. 36 (2011): 213.
[97] Walter J. Ong, "The Literate Orality of Popular Culture," in *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology: Studies in the Interaction of Expression and Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971.
[98] Sterne, "The Theology of Sound," 218.
[99] Sterne, "The Theology of Sound," 222.

McLuhan and Ong vary in what they imagine is the promise of the sonic, but both agree in the sense that the sonic exists as a category that provides teleological development upon and opposition to the world of the visual.

Vibratory New Materialisms

New materialism is an umbrella term that is used to describe a diverse range of philosophical viewpoints that have emerged since the 1990s, primarily to describe material and ontological probings that attempt to rethink the dominant Western classification of matter as something that is inert and passive. It has since coalesced into a philosophical movement on its own terms, all collected under the banner of new materialism, with the work of scholars such as Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, Manuel DeLanda, Rosi Braidotti and Quentin Meillassoux being leading exemplars of this field. New materialist scholarship, in addition to questioning prevalent constructivist and anthropocentric viewpoints, largely shares an approach to matter as not something inert, but as something that is active, has a form of agency, and is alive and vibrant. Scholars Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin in their anthology *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* claim that this emergent discipline is itself a "new metaphysics" and also a "new tradition," which rewrites the past, present and the future, and additionally "traverses and thereby rewrites thinking *as a whole*, leaving nothing untouched, redirecting every idea according to its new sense of orientation."[100] Once brought into existence, new materialism touches and influences everything, and all of a sudden is in everything, and indeed every temporal orientation. The emerging field is positioned by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman in the widely-cited reader *Material Feminisms* as a way forward for theory that has been trapped in stasis as a result of the linguistic turn in feminist thought. While recognising that this linguistic turn has been productive, allowing for the delineation of the connections between power, knowledge, subjectivity and language, they claim it also represents something of a dead-end, calling attention to how this mode of thinking has a tendency to separate the discursive from the material, and so allows feminist discourse to only function on that discursive and linguistic plane.[101] They cite Judith Butler as a contemporary theorist who has apparently retreated from the material in their books *Gender*

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[100] Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2012), 13.

[101] Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, "Emerging Models of Materiality in Feminist Theory," in *Material Feminisms*, eds. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 6.

Trouble and *Bodies That Matter*, and instead put forward feminist new materialism as "a deconstruction of the material/discursive dichotomy that retains both elements without privileging either" in order to "revise the paradigms of poststructuralism, postmodernism, and cultural studies in ways that can more productively account for the agency, semiotic force, and dynamics of bodies and natures."[102]

How different new materialist thinkers theoretically address matter and material varies widely. In an attempt to account for this variance, scholars Gamble, Hanan and Nail have gathered new materialist thought in three separate strands: vitalist, negative, and performative.[103] According to them, it is only performative materialism that does not enact a state of human exceptionalism on all levels. They identify vitalist materialism as by far the most common form of new materialist thought, with Jane Bennett's "vibrant matter" the most well known example of this type. In this form, there is an excess force that animates all matter, and this force takes many names, from "vibrant matter," "pre-accelerations," "virtual forces" and "affects."[104] Rooted in Henri Bergson's idea of *élan vital*, the emergence of a force that animates matter, these ontologies traverse the chasm between the atomic and the cosmic. This tendency also has roots in Bergsonian thought, as seen in *Creative Evolution*: "As the smallest grain of dust is bound up with our entire solar system, drawn along with it in that undivided movement of descent that is materiality itself, so all organized beings, from the humblest to the highest, from the first origins of life to the time in which we are, and in all places as in all times, do but evidence a single impulsion, the inverse of the movement of matter, and in itself indivisible. All the living hold together, all yield to the same tremendous push."[105] Gamble, Hanan and Nail problematise this way of thinking of matter, writing that this vitalism "risks 'flattening' the multiplicity into a vague flat ontology of force *in general*" and additionally that this vitalism values "only the historically dominant side of the life/death binary . . . If death, passivity, and receptivity literally have no being and no place in the 'flat ontology' of life, this has dangerous conceptual and political consequences."[106] What they

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[102] Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, "Emerging Models of Materiality in Feminist Theory," 6.
[103] Christopher N. Gamble, Joshua S. Hanan, and Thomas Nail, "WHAT IS NEW MATERIALISM?," *Angelaki*, 24:6 (2019): 111-134; https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2019.1684704.
[104] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), xii; Erin Manning, *Relationscapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2012).
[105] Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Random House, 1944), 295.
[106] Gamble, Hanan and Nail, "WHAT IS NEW MATERIALISM?," 120.

identify as "negative new materialism" encompasses Quentin Meillassoux's speculative realism and Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology, with both characterised by an apparent discontinuity between thought and matter, where thinking is only something that can be done by humans, and is itself immaterial. Because of this, the writers cast doubt on the claim of either strain of thought to be truly materialist in nature. The materialism they place most hope in is performative materialism, which is exemplified in the "agential realism" theory of Karen Barad. Like all new materialisms, this approach is also characterised by a movement from epistemology toward ontology. However, unlike non-performative theories, it does not separate the two, instead putting forward a model whereby epistemology and ontology help to form each other, in a way that is also not restricted to only humans.[107] Gamble et al maintain that this approach avoids the flat ontological pitfalls of vitalist materialism, where the animating force is unchanged across all states of matter. Instead, "agency and vitality, rather, simply do not exist apart from particular intra-active performances. A given plant, for example, performs – and thus constitutes – agency differently from a particular rock or human."[108]

What many new materialist philosophies share, regardless of the strand they belong to, is the use of metaphors of acoustic resonance. The way in which matter moves, is animated, and inter or intra-acts closely follows the patterning of sound waves as they move through air and material, and they ways in which these waves interact with each other. Scholar Robin James, in her book *The Sonic Episteme*, argues that acoustic resonance—rhythmic patterns of sound waves that interact with each other—is a qualitative counterpart of the quantitative statistics that underpin the functioning of neoliberal power structures. "Sonic episteme" is the Foucaultian term James adapts to describe this qualitative function of acoustic resonance in 21st century neoliberalism. An episteme is Foucault's term for the total set of relations within a particular historical period that tie together and determine how knowledge is made, both publicly and behind-the-scenes.[109] James claims that various fields use concepts of acoustic resonance "to create qualitative versions of the same updated relations of domination and subordination, and the same mechanisms for policing them, that neoliberalism and biopolitics

[107] Gamble, Hanan and Nail, "WHAT IS NEW MATERIALISM?," 122.
[108] Gamble, Hanan and Nail, "WHAT IS NEW MATERIALISM?," 123.
[109] Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970). Originally published in 1966.

use probabilistic statistics to make and monitor. In the sonic episteme, those upgrades appear not as the shift from juridical to calculative rationality but as a shift from verbal or visual representation to sound and resonance."[110] This shift mirrors the turn from literacy to orality that was narrated by the Toronto school—but additionally connects it to more recent developments inside the neoliberal state, and the so-called "Big Data" boom that occurred since the turn of the last century. It shows that the desire to undo the alienation brought on by modernism, capitalism and literacy, the desire to move to orality, sound and music, is still present in the neoliberal system. However, moving towards the sonic is not emancipatory: instead, the capitalist neoliberal system simply extends to encompass that desire, shapeshifting into a sonic form to give the impression of progress, while largely remaining the same. What is missing, however, from James's characterisation of acoustic resonance as being implicated in neoliberalism is a more thorough explanation of neoliberalism itself: perhaps it is reductive to condense it into a vibratory schema, without also accounting for other forms and functions this system takes.

The way in which the sonic episteme accomplishes the move from visuality to sound mirrors the functioning of Jonathan Sterne's audio-visual litany: "the sonic episteme claims sound embodies *material* immediacy and the metaphysics of a probabilistic universe, which modernity's commitments to representationalist abstraction and certainty supposedly occlude."[111] James maintains that the "new" in new materialisms is a way of abstracting away from ongoing relations of domination, while pretending that this domination is something new materialism leaves behind.[112] Taking the vitalist ontologies of Jane Bennett and Elizabeth Grosz as exemplary of new materialist philosophy, James shows how this is accomplished, writing that "although new materialism is supposedly better than representationalism because it prizes diversity over purity and includes what gets excluded by representationalist hierarchies . . . the vibratory materialisms I study in this chapter mark a break in this continuity that creates an exceptional class or population. Grosz and Bennett explicitly identify classes of unhealthy and dysgenic resonance."[113] Forms of resonance,

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[110] Robin James, *The Sonic Episteme: Acoustic Resonance, Neoliberalism, and Biopolitics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 3. doi:10.1215/9781478007371.
[111] James, *The Sonic Episteme*, 3-4.
[112] James, *The Sonic Episteme*, 89.
[113] James, *The Sonic Episteme*, 89.

healthy and unhealthy, can be classified and attached to population groups: this is something James explores by referring to the writing of Lester Spence on "politics of exception." In this configuration, the exceptional group in a non-hierarchical, diverse population mix are those who are excluded on the basis of being beyond reform, or unwilling to adapt, and are thus marked as pathological.[114] James writes that "new materialism marks as exception work in black studies and Africana philosophy that theorizes about and through various ideas of resonance and vibration, often in explicitly nonideal ways. Because these theoretical practices don't present themselves as having overcome Western post/modern visual representationalism, they don't exhibit the adaptive overcoming that the politics of exception demands of its constituents."[115] Thus it can perhaps become clear how new materialist philosophy can be said to work in a way which supports the ongoing functioning of white supremacy inside the academy—creating a kind of walled garden that only white scholarship may enter. Karen Barad's theory of diffraction escapes the accusation of enacting a politics of exception, but instead is designated as a form of modelling of probabilistic math, the kind of math that is used in neoliberal biopolitics, and altering modes of humanistic inquiry to utilise these mathematical methods over others. James also notes that this turn away from the discursive and representational and towards the so-called "hard sciences" occurred at a time when the humanities were beginning to incorporate diverse voices in feminist, queer and critical race theory, and also underlines that "this turn toward hard science for inspiration is a turn *away* from a long tradition of scholarship by black intellectuals that already addresses many of new materialism's concerns."[116]

James goes on to discuss ontologies of vibration that do not attempt to be all-encompassing and idealising in nature, a layer that sits underneath discursivity, but instead are a part of discursive processes, and are non-ideal in the sense that they do not imagine a perfect world, sterile in the same way an experimental laboratory is. The examples she takes are Christina Sharpe's theory of "wake," and Ashon Crawley's "choreosonics."[117] Sharpe's theory of wake in particular mirrors the kind of diffractive wave interaction that is described by Barad at a

[114] Lester K. Spence, *Stare in the Darkness: The Limits of Hip-hop and Black Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).
[115] James, *The Sonic Episteme*, 104.
[116] James, *The Sonic Episteme*, 105.
[117] James, *The Sonic Episteme*, 110-120.

quantum level, but instead works from a description of historical processes of colonialism and imperialism, namely the transatlantic slave trade across the Middle Passage. Vibration used discursively is not the problem in itself: it is more a question of whether or not it can account for systems of power and domination. It is perhaps all to easy to dismiss all vibratory ontologies as being Romantic in nature—promising to undo alienation, yet just maintaining it in a sonic form—the work of Sharpe shows that it is more complicated than that, and highlights again the importance of the discursive and linguistic layer in understanding the workings of power, and also in giving meaning and weight to the vibratory. Sharpe's wake is not an abstract vibration that is built up from nothing, an imagining of particles meeting in a particle accelerator, but instead describes real historical processes and lived experiences. It is a concrete vibration, a historical vibration. She writes:

> A ship moving through water generates a particular pattern of waves; the bow wave is in front of the ship, and that wave then spreads out in the recognizable V pattern on either side of and then behind the ship. The size of the bow wave dictates how far out the wake starts. Waves that occur in the wake of the ship move at the same speed as the ship. From at least the sixteenth century onward, a major part of the ocean engineering of ships has been to minimize the bow wave and therefore to minimize the wake. But the effect of trauma is the opposite. It is to make maximal the wake.[118]

It is here that the contrast between kinds of vibration, and animated matter, becomes most palpable. If that which animates matter comes "up from below" as it were, a nondescript force that moves all material, then the vibration of a ship carrying captured slaves across the ocean simply vibrates as all other matter does: the possibility of this ontology to also account for Black experience is foreclosed. Tyrone S. Palmer in his Afropessimist critique of affect theory situates affect in a similar space of pre-discursive yet unbounded relationality, a relationality that both makes "the World" and structures experience within it. He highlights the incompatibility of Black affect with the constituents of affect theory thus far: Black affect desires and requires an ending of the world, and is a destructive and chaotic force, while

[118] Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 40.

affect originating in Western scholarship constructs and maintains the world. He writes that "the banishment of Blackness from the fold of relation(ality) is what allows its emergence. Blackness must be objectified and incessantly obliterated to yield transcendental relation, which in turn "helps to create and maintain the concept 'world'."[119] One can extend this conception of relationality to also include vibratory ontologies, which function in a way that is analogous to affect in their world-making role. What Sharpe's passage above accomplishes is describe interactions of complex wave patterns across a spectrum of registers, from the material, to the emotional, to the metaphorical, to the temporal, and not locate vibratory relationality solely in the ontological realm. The world this passage constructs, if indeed this is what it does, is not universalising and all-encompassing: it is particular, descriptive, emotional, and holds space for Black experience. It tells a story, rather then defining a field where only certain stories may be told. This is an example of what scholar Michael Lynch classifies as "ontography" as opposed to ontology: non-universalising and historically-based descriptions of the world.[120] Ontographical investigations for Lynch "no longer take themselves to be building or unearthing the rational foundations of justified true belief, the ontological grounds of objective reality, or the ethical basis of right conduct. Instead, capital 'K' Knowledge, capital 'N' Nature, capital 'E' Epistemology, and capital 'O' Ontology are demoted to lowercase, pluralized counterparts: knowledges, natures, epistemologies, and ontologies."[121] This deflationary move makes space theoretically for varying forms of knowledge, experience, and difference, and as such holds the ability to describe relations of power.

The Ontological Turn in Sound Studies

The ontological is also a main concern of the field of sound studies, taking in the 21st century its own ontological turn. This turn highlights similarly vibratory ideas of sound, and has been spearheaded by scholars such as Steve Goodman and Christoph Cox. The ontological turn in sound studies has been characterised by Brian Kane as a split in the fields of "sound studies" and "auditory culture," terms which have until recently been used almost interchangeably, but

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[119] Tyrone S. Palmer, "Otherwise than Blackness: Feeling, World, Sublimation," *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences*, no. 2 (December 2020): 249-250.
[120] Michael Lynch, "Ontography: Investigating the Production of Things, Deflating Ontology," *Social Studies of Science* 43, no. 3 (2013): 444-462.
[121] Lynch, "Ontography," 452.

with "auditory culture" having a more anthropological leaning in comparison to "sound studies" reliance on media and art history.[122] Kane highlights the problem such a split poses, writing that the ontological turn "directly challenges the relevance of research into auditory culture, audile techniques, and the technological mediation of sound in favor of universals concerning the nature of sound, the body, and media."[123] At the heart of this conflict is the level at which ontological theories stake their ground: as something that can underpin discursive, descriptive methods of working with sound. They have an implicit claim to deeper truth, and deeper meaning. The challenge of working up from a vibratory level, rather than down from a descriptive and discursive level, is a political one: can a theory of ontological vibration adequately describe workings of power? Can an ontological theory of silence sufficiently capture processes of silencing? If so, what benefit does this give over and above doing the above in a descriptive manner? Reminiscent of John Cage's tendency to "go cosmic," the universality proposed by sonic ontology threatens to abstract away the political weight of sound, or indeed invisibilises the workings of power that suffuse the sonic field.

In his 2010 book *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear*, Goodman outlined his ontological commitments in a chapter called "The Ontology of Vibrational Force" which was also included in the *Sound Studies Reader* edited by Jonathan Sterne, a volume which became an essential digest in solidifying the emergent field of sound studies, which at the time was gaining credence as an academic field. In short time, Goodman moves from the cosmic to the cellular, as is also the case in many vibrant new materialist ontologies. The chapter begins with Goodman exclaiming that "that humming background sound is ancient—the ringing of a huge bell. Exploding into a mass of intensely hot matter, pulsing out vast sound waves, contracting and expanding the matter, heating where compressed, cooling where it was less dense. This descending tone parallels the heat death of the universe, connecting all the discrete atoms into a vibrational wave. This cosmic background radiation is the echo of the big bang."[124] This kind of statement is what Douglas Kahn characterises as a "cosmograph", similar to a Renaissance drawing of the cosmos, but shown in the form of a

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[122] Brian Kane, "Sound Studies without Auditory Culture," *Sound Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 3; https://doi.org/10.1080/20551940.2015.1079063.
[123] Kane, "Sound Studies without Auditory Culture," 3.
[124] Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect and the Ecology of Fear* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2010), 81.

paragraph of text: a grand claim and attempt at universe-building, of setting the terms of the discussion right from the beginning of time.[125] Goodman's vibrational ontology possesses the capacity for inter- and perhaps intra-action in the Baradian sense, but is encased in a kind of militaristic and dystopian shell, in stark contrast to the majority of new materialist scholarship. Claiming that an "ontology of vibrational force delved below a philosophy of sound and the physics of acoustics toward the basic processes of entities affecting other entities," he describes this relationality of vibrations by projecting onto them signifiers of warfare. Characterising the ability of one entity to work on another over a distance as affect, he then describes the field of interaction as being populated by "affectiles (affect + projectile)."[126] Any body present then in this field of interactions is likened to being caught in the crossfire of an ongoing war. He goes on to say that "as an initiation of a politics of frequency, it resonates with the ballistics of the battlefield as acoustic force field described by the futurists."[127] This invocation reminds again of how the work of the Italian futurists is consistently used as a way of narrating the beginning of the sonic arts, in effect perpetuating the idea that the sonic arts were born from the sounds of war. Goodman at this juncture simply repeats this move, except under cover of the vibratory, to make his own ontological claims, in effect deploying one origin myth to construct another. Resorting largely to negative definitions, something he acknowledges in the text, Goodman writes that "the linguistic imperialism that subordinates the sonic to semiotic registers is rejected for forcing sonic media to merely communicate meaning, losing sights of the more fundamental expressions of their material potential as vibrational surfaces, or oscillators."[128] While the orality turn in media studies was narrated as something that occurred as a byproduct of technological innovation, Goodman frames his turn away from the linguistic as a matter of both choice and necessity in the hope of uncovering sonic forms that are unburdened by meaning. This turn away from meaning is then framed as a liberatory move, a flipping of the script. Sound assumes the upper hand over language, and places "theory under the dominion of sonic affect . . . Sound comes to the rescue of thought, rather than the inverse, forcing it to vibrate, loosening up its organized or petrified body."[129] Framing thought as a kind of zombie that

[125] Douglas Kahn, "On vibrations: cosmographs," *Sound Studies* 6, no. 1 (2020): 14-28.
[126] Goodman, *Sonic Warfare,* 83.
[127] Goodman, *Sonic Warfare,* 83.
[128] Goodman, *Sonic Warfare,* 82.
[129] Goodman, *Sonic Warfare,* 82.

requires re-animation, and positioning sound as the means by which to do that, is in essence resorting to a form of vitalism with sound as *élan vital*. Unlike most vitalist ontologies, however, Goodman's wears its power relations on its sleeve: sound is there to dominate linguistics and thought. At best, it could be considered as an invitation to begin "thinking sonically," yet Goodman furthers no explanation on how this might be accomplished. This text can be read in varying ways: either taking Goodman at his word, or as an ironic and dystopian commentary on how Western militarism structures all forms of knowledge: the author's position is unclear. This becomes an issue when the language of militarism is replicated, and then becomes a part of the "canon" of knowledge on the nature of sound. At the very least, one may recognise that Goodman does not turn away from the category of the sonic as being rooted in militarism—yet one might also question whether he veers too close to revelling in that heritage.

Douglas Kahn addresses the cosmic claims of this vibratory ontology from his perspective as an energies scholar, and situates Goodman's theory in a lineage of artists who have attempted "milking music from matter."[130] Unsurprisingly this lineage goes back to the work of John Cage, who suggested placing an ashtray into a small anechoic chamber, the quietest possible room, where minuscule sounds may be detected, and listening to said ashtray. This would be a way of "proving" the vibratory lives of objects, and furthermore deriving the meaning of nature through the vibrations of objects.[131] It would also appear to confirm the utility of sound as the material that legitimises a vitalist understanding of reality. The appeal to the cosmic as a way of telling the truth of the molecular, and inverse, is indebted to old ideas, namely the resilient Pythagorean concept of the "music of the spheres," a myth that Kahn maintains "has an amazing longevity, dying a slow, proportional death . . . that would have been pronounced truly dead were it not for scientistic resuscitations claiming it was the modelling capacity of mathematics all along. Theoretical vibrations have stepped into this voice to perform music qua music's swan song."[132] Kahn questions the adequacy of vibrations as a kind of totalising descriptive force, both in light of the USA dropping atomic

[130] Kahn, "On vibrations: cosmographs," 21.
[131] One can also draw a quite straight line here between this investigation of Cage, and the Romantic tendency to look past material strife and instead at the underlying "life of things," as discussed earlier with Wordsworth's "The Ruined Cottage."
[132] Kahn, "On vibrations: cosmographs," 17.

bombs on the populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and since then in the slow planetary annihilation of global warming. He also draws attention to the discontinuity in the vibratory that has been introduced by the modification of the planetary climate through human activity: the cycling of the seasons has broken away from the spinning of the earth, the seasonal untethered from the circadian. Any vibrations that occurs on the atomic space cannot simply propagate upwards into the cosmic register, because that pathway has been destroyed by the effects of capitalist industrial expansion.[133] The manufacture of a cosmic ontology with vibratory origin can be thought of as as both constituting a desire towards a continuity that has been lost under Western capitalism, and as confirming the cosmic plane as the object of future-oriented desire. Outer space is the next outward site of expansion of the human race, led by Western governments and private companies, a process of colonisation that is made all the more urgent by the palpable destruction capitalism has wreaked on Earth's ecosystems.

Christoph Cox, briefly discussed previously, followed on from Goodman in 2011, introducing his materialist philosophy of sound in the article "Beyond Signification and Representation: Toward a Sonic Materialism." Cox's philosophy emerges from the idea that existing paradigms of representation and signification cannot adequately capture the nature of the sonic, which has led to an under-theorisation of the sonic arts, and also is the reason why the sonic arts have hitherto failed to generate a compelling critical literature.[134] Cox desires to elevate discourse surrounding sonic art to the same level as that of the visual arts, and for sound to be able to generate its own forms of knowledge, akin to Goodman's idea of sound coming to the rescue of thought, creating the ability to "think sonically." He also seeks to aid in the revival of realist philosophy which entails direct access to reality, which is what he claims contemporary cultural theory, heavily focused as it is on symbolic systems, denies.[135] His hope is that his materialist philosophy can not only account for and adequately describe the sonic arts, but all arts, and claims that "a rigorous critique of representation would altogether eliminate the dual planes of culture/nature, human/non-human, sign/world, text/matter."[136] Committing to the Deleuzean idea of a distinction between the "actual" and the "virtual," Cox's philosophy designates this difference as "the difference, within the flux of

[133] Kahn, "On vibrations: cosmographs," 15.
[134] Cox, "Beyond Representation and Signification," 145.
[135] Cox, "Beyond Representation and Signification," 146.
[136] Cox, "Beyond Representation and Signification," 148.

nature, between empirical individuals and the forces, powers, differences, and intensities that give rise to them."[137] Brian Kane characterises Cox's distinction thus: "the 'actual' is the name for those ostensibly fixed, empirical things. The 'virtual' is the name for the welter of perpetually differing forces that brings the actual into being."[138] For Cox, music and sound are prime examples of this virtual layer, which exists beneath that of representation and signification: "representing and symbolizing nothing, it presents a play of sonic forces and intensities."[139] He calls this virtual sonic flux the "auditory real," and is indebted to the ideas of John Cage, who he maintains thought of this sonic flux "as a ceaseless production of heterogenous sonic matter . . . This flux precedes and exceeds individual listeners and, indeed, composers, whom Cage came to conceive less as *creators* than as *curators* of this sonic flux."[140] This approach of self-abegnation of the composer is characterised by Marie Thompson as Cage recapitulating "the self-invisibilization of the white, masculinist and Eurocentric standpoint, enabling himself to become the auditory observer of sound's nature."[141] The racialised side of the self-erasure of the white composer is also seen in Cage's well-known dislike of jazz music, because of its undue maintenance of personality, and lack of abandonment of the self.[142]

As a way of bolstering his claim of the importance of a materialist sonic ontology, Cox turns to an array of sound artists, including Alvin Lucier, Christina Kubisch, Max Neuhaus and Carsten Nicolai. Characterising their work as the most significant sound art in the last half-century, he goes on to claim that what they all share is their commitment to exploring the materiality of sound: "it's texture and temporal flow, its palpable effect on, and affection by the materials through and against which it is transmitted."[143] He expands on this idea in his 2018 book *Sonic Flux*, and takes the work *Wind (Patagonia)* by Francisco Lopez as exemplary in disclosing the auditory real. This work is a recording of wind, made in Patagonia, and according to Cox is "immersive, sensually complex, and conceptually

[137] Cox, "Beyond Representation and Signification," 152.
[138] Kane, "Sound Studies without Auditory Culture," 4.
[139] Cox, "Beyond Representation and Signification," 153.
[140] Cox, "Beyond Representation and Signification," 155.
[141] Marie Thompson, "Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies," 271.
[142] Marie Thompson, "Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies," 271.
[143] Cox, "Beyond Representation and Signification," 148-149.

revealing."[144] For Cox, to focus on wind is to "transcend the limits of our ordinary ontology, composed as it is of relatively stable objects: for wind is invisible but intensely powerful: pure becoming, pure flow."[145] Lopez's recording of the Patagonian wind is unedited and unprocessed: it is akin to just being in the right place in the right time, and listening. Yet as with Cage's idea of composers being curators of sound, so it is with presenting this recording of wind as disclosing the nature of the auditory real: it is a curated slice of the sonic field that supposedly gives access to the materialist flow of sound. This move has the effect of cordoning off definitions of what an auditory real might be: for Cox, it appears as if it is not for other people to decide: rather it can best be accessed through the pre-curated work of other sound artists, which are exemplary of the form. Indeed it is precisely exemplification that Brain Kane takes issue with, when presenting his critique of Cox's ontology. Coining the term "onto-aesthetics," the idea that works of art can disclose the ontological condition of their medium, Kane goes on to claim that theorists who rely on onto-aesthetics in their thinking, are making a category mistake: confusing *embodiment* with *exemplification*.[146] Ontology, being embodied, is all or nothing, it either is or it isn't. Exemplification, however, can come in degrees. Kane shows this by deploying Nelson Goodman's example of the tailors swatch: "the pattern on the swatch exemplifies the pattern on the entire bolt of fabric . . . a square swatch of fabric, cut from a bolt of cloth into a shape that shows the basic pattern, exemplifies that pattern better than a long, thin swatch that shows only part of the pattern. Neither swatch exemplifies the bolt's shape, even though both swatches are shaped."[147] Translating this into a critique of Cox's philosophy, Kane states: "A work of sound art may *sound* more sonic (that is, may draw your attention to its 'sonicity' more) than another, but no work of sound art *is* more sonic than another."[148] In positing Francisco Lopez's wind recording as being exemplary of sonic flux, material flow and the auditory real, Cox takes a work that is already bound up in systems of symbolism and representation and attempts to make it say something about ontology. This is a feat that cannot be accomplished, because a work made in this way cannot be simply removed from its context, out of the systems of representation that were the pre-conditions for its creation. This move also begs the question

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[144] Christoph Cox, *Sonic Flux: Sound, Art, and Metaphysics* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 130.
[145] Cox, *Sonic Flux*, 130.
[146] Kane, "Sound Studies without Auditory Culture," 11.
[147] Kane, "Sound Studies without Auditory Culture," 12.
[148] Kane, "Sound Studies without Auditory Culture," 13.

as to why only certain significant works are deemed suitable to disclose the nature of sound: by doing so, a kind of walled garden is created, where only works that already subscribe to certain pre-existing, Western ideas of sonicity can be considered as disclosing the material nature of sound. This process is part of the establishment of what Marie Thompson calls "white aurality."

Thompson in her essay "Whiteness and the ontological turn in sound studies" characterises Cox's sonic ontology as presenting itself as impartial and universal, while in reality being anything but. On the contrary, it is "indebted to a particular European philosophical lineage (Leibniz, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Deleuze), coupled with a Eurological and patrilineal 'dotted line' of sonic experimentation that stems from the 'greatest forefather' [sic.] of sound art, John Cage."[149] She builds up an understanding of white aurality though the development on sonic terms of Nikki Sullivan's idea of "white optics," which is a racialised yet naturalised mode of perception that foregrounds the importance of matter by turning away from both the human, and culture.[150] White aurality, the conditions for perception and listening that are proposed as universal yet are themselves racialised, are characterised by Thompson as relying on the establishment of a series of dualisms: white aurality "amplifies the materiality of 'sound itself' while muffling its sociality; amplifies Eurological sound art and, in the process, muffles other sonic practices; amplifies dualisms of nature/culture, matter/meaning, real/representation sound art/music and muffles boundary work; all the while invizibilizing its own constitutive presence in hearing the ontological conditions of sound-itself."[151] Thompson emphasises how white aurality supports the claims of materialist sonic ontology as preceding the workings of sound in discursive, social, symbolic and power-related contexts, while also drawing attention to how only some sound art is deemed to reveal something about the nature of sound. This is done via a sleight of hand whereby the word "is" gets substituted for "heard as": "sound art *is* revealing of sound's ontological specificities versus sound art is *heard as* revealing sound's ontological specificities."[152] One is ontological reality, the other reveals the inherent biases of hearing and listening in Western culture. The self-reinforcing process whereby only Eurological sound art is deemed to reveal the flux and flow of sound, which

[149] Marie Thompson, "Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies," 271.
[150] Sullivan, "The Somatechnics of Perception and the Matter of the Non/Human," 299–313.
[151] Thompson, "Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies," 272.
[152] Thompson, "Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies," 273.

then goes on to delineate the borders of what sound is, is reminiscent of Robin James's description of black scholarship being marked as "exception" in relation to new materialist scholarship. Both processes can be viewed as a reactionary attempt to control epistemological flow, and to be able to keep white Western scholarship at the centre of knowledge generation. The move by scholars such as Cox to undermine the utility of sound as a carrier of discursive, linguistic and symbolic meaning, all the while presenting his notion the sonic as something that may give as close to an unmediated experience of the real as possible, only functions to cordon off the "auditory real" as an exclusively white space. It is worth noting at this point that Cox's ontology of sonic flux and flow can never really be apprehended directly: it functions only through intermediaries, such as certain works of sound art, or certain sonic experiences. So while this ontology makes bold claims to the materiality of sound, it is all the time removed from that materiality, and can only be described linguistically, the mode that it attempts to move beyond.

Although Christoph Cox grounds his sonic ontology in an interpretation of Deleuzean virtuality, his pursuit of the "auditory real" aligns him with Lacan's idea of the real, which sits in constant relation to the symbolic and imaginary realms in his psychoanalytic theory. It can in simple terms be thought of as the state of nature from which the entry into language has removed us, and so is difficult to apprehend linguistically, and can instead be thought of as an absence, a lack, or something that may only be apprehended by sensing its edges. It is nature that exists beyond the boundaries of culture.[153] Slavoj Žižek has cited a literary example of the real as existing in the deep jungle of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, an unknowable abyss that is primordial in nature.[154] In Sheldon George's analysis of Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, an account of a case of haunting that emerged from a subjective experience of overwhelming violence and trauma, he characterises the context of slavery in the USA as occurring inside the real, inside the "prehistoric Other that is impossible to forget, or to remember."[155] Scholar Friedrich Kittler on the other hand locates the real not in literature, but in the audio technology of phonography, which was pioneered by Thomas

[153] Michael Lewis, "1 Lacan: The name-of-the-father and the phallus," in *Derrida and Lacan: Another Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 20008): 16-79.
[154] Slavoj Žižek, *Disparities* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 345.
[155] Sheldon George, "Approaching the Thing of Slavery: A Lacanian Analysis of Toni Morrison's Beloved," *African American Review* 45, no. 1-2 (Spring/Summer 2012): 115-130.

Edison in the late 19th century. In *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, he situates the Lacanian realms of the real, the imaginary and the symbolic as being respectively exemplified and produced by these technologies.[156] He ties the phonograph to the real because it is the only technology that "can record all the noise produced by the larynx prior to any semiotic order and meaning . . . Thus, the real—especially in the talking cure known as psychoanalysis—has the status of phonography."[157] This is also because the phonograph is an instrument that is both capable of reading (playback) and writing (recording), with Kittler maintaining that it is the technology which most closely mirrors the activity of the human brain. Referring to the futurist writings of Marinetti, particularly a claim that "crowds of massed molecules and whirling electrons are more exciting than the smiles or tears of a woman,"[158] Kittler suggests the sonic realm as being more suitable for accessing this move from "erotics to stochastics, from red lips to white noise", because noise can be heard on all channels of sonic media, and are less apparent or accessible to vision.[159] There is no further comment or critique on the misogynist futurist desire to do away with the female body: Kittler simply offers up sound as a way of accomplishing this aim.

The gramophone can also according to Kittler necessitate a reorganisation among the Lacanian categories. Western understandings of music and sound that is rooted in relationships between whole numbers, a Pythagorean "music of the spheres" were disrupted by Edison's invention, because it "recorded nothing but vibrations", and so ushered in an understanding of the sonic as frequency and vibration.[160] According to Kittler, the emergence of frequency as a concept invented a "physical time removed from the rhythms and meters of music. It quantifies movements that are too fast for the human eye, ranging from 20 to 16,000 vibrations per second. The real takes the place of the symbolic."[161] Acoustics has resulted in the displacement of the symbolic by the real, because it is a listening apparatus that does not discriminate between foreground and background noise: it records and reproduces what is there, and so means that sonic recording can replace writing as a way of authorising reality.

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[156] See also David Sigler, "Lacan's Romanticism," in *Knots: Post-Lacanian Psychoanalysis, Literature and Film*, edited by Jean-Michel Rabaté (New York: Routledge, 2020), 55-69.
[157] Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999), 16.
[158] Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 51.
[159] Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 51.
[160] Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 24.
[161] Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 24.

The substance of this claim rests on the existence of a gap between the symbolic and the real, and that the real is able to hold and show something that the symbolic cannot. Frederic Jameson describes the same gap in his essay "Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan" through describing the deficiency language has in capturing the wholeness and intensity of the experience of a dream. However for Jameson, this gap does not appear to be something to be bridged, it is somewhere to dwell, and is the place where "all works of literature and culture necessarily emerge."[162] Kittler's text relies on the idea that the sonic can disrupt writing, which is the realm of the symbolic and represented in the form of the typewriter. Even if one were to subscribe to this division, the idea that the interaction is one-sided is perhaps misguided: the symbolic can also encroach onto the sonic real, as described by Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter in their essay "Aural Architecture," where they outline their concept of "earcons." They ask us to "consider the enveloping reverberation of a grand cathederal, which acquires religious symbolism. Similarly, the unique acoustics of forests and mountains can become a symbol of nature; the hushed quiet of an elegant office can become a symbol of wealth; and the diffuse echoes of a vast office entry can become a symbol of power."[163] For Blesser and Salter, the symbolic layer is always at work: they accept that there is no privileged listening position that is outside that realm. Whatever the entanglement of the sonic, the symbolic and the real, the desire of Cox to access this "real" discloses a desire to leave the realm of the symbolic, the discursive, and enter an unmediated space, and return to a state of nature.

The overtaking of the symbolic by the real described by Kittler is exemplified in Alvin Lucier's canonical work of sound art *I Am Sitting In A Room*, which also serves to show the role phonography (that is, configurations of recording and playback) serves to accomplish this: a text is read into a space, recorded, and recursively played back again into the same space. Over time, the human voice is engulfed by the hitherto unheard but sequentially amplified "room tone", the voice morphing into metallic vocaloid scrapings, and further into a drone. Cox, in *Sonic Flux,* plays down the spatial importance of this work, instead emphasising the self-dissolution of the composer, writing that "what begins as first-person

[162] Frederic Jameson, "Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan: Marxism, Psychoanalytic Criticism, and the Problem of the Subject," *Yale French Studies*, no. 55/56 (1977): 339.
[163] Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter, "Aural Architecture," in *The Tuned City: Between Sound and Space Speculation*, ed. Doris Kleilein, Anne Kokelkorn, Gesine Pagels and Carsten Stabenow (Berlin: Kook Books, 2008), 115.

speech in a domestic setting gradually becomes anonymous sound that overwhelms and eradicates the performer's personality."[164] It is this characteristic that he deems both exemplary and constitutive of a work of sonic art. Indeed, to hammer the point home, he later elaborates "if music belongs to the symbolic, then sound belongs to the real . . . Sound art is the art of the auditory real."[165] A genre that surely not be counted as sound art by Cox is jazz, which was also as previously mentioned viewed unfavourably by John Cage, because of its propensity to maintain the personalities and identities of those playing it. While the jungle of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is characterised as emblematic of the Lacanian real, I turn finally to the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the jazz music that has emerged there in its postcolonial context. Scholar Achille Mbembe attempts to account for some of the sonic content of this music in his article "Variations of the Beautiful in the Congolese World of Sounds," yet unlike Cox does not seek to posit the sonic as overtaking the discursive, or indeed seek to elevate some music over another, as being more emblematic of the real.[166] Instead he describes how Congolese jazz has absorbed the abjection and ugliness of the colonial and postcolonial era: "In a demonic play, power entices its subjects to savour corruption, while at the same time making them suffer like beasts. In these spectral conditions, music has broken the limited circle of sounds on which it previously relied."[167] Under such conditions so emerged the figure of the scream, wordless, extra-literary, yet containing within it that abjection. Mbembe describes how "at times, the scream has morphed into a howl – the howl of meat, from the height of a cross, under the eye of a government transformed into a spirit-dog. Screaming, howling, throughout the last quarter of the 20th century and into the new millennium, part noise-sound, part musical scream, Congolese music has endeavoured to account for the terror, the cruelty and the dark abyss – for the ugly and the abject – that is its country."[168] Mbembe makes no claim to the territory of the "auditory real." Yet this description of the scream can make the Cox's claim as the blowing of the wind as revealing that "auditory real" seem trivial in comparison. Both are extra-lingual sound waves, propagating through the air, yet the wind does not carry within it the memories

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[164] Christoph Cox, *Sonic Flux*, 101.
[165] Christoph Cox, *Sonic Flux*, 102.
[166] I came across this article in the suggested reading list included in this text: Gavin Steingo and Jim Sykes, eds. *Remapping Sound Studies in the Global South* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).
[167] Achille Mbembe, "Variations on the Beautiful in the Congolese World of Sounds," *Politique Africaine*, no.100 (2005): 81.
[168] Mbembe, "Variations on the Beautiful in the Congolese World of Sounds," 81.

of colonial oppression and violence. The desire to listen to the wind, instead of the scream, is the choice that defines sonic romanticism at its core.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I outline some ways in which sound is formed as a discursive category, and how this formation becomes deployed in contemporary theory in a mode I characterise as "sonic romanticism." In the first chapter, I describe how the sonic is apprehended as a sense, in an overarching context where the senses have been traditionally divided and compared with each other. I discuss how sound is constructed in relation to the visual, which is itself an analogue of the symbolic realm, associated as it is with writing and literacy. I introduce the idea that certain reified qualities are routinely projected onto both the sonic and the visual realms, often without justification, and outlined Jonathan Sterne's "audio-visual litany," a rhetorical device which has been of singular importance in calling attention to these processes of reification. I then describe sound as a relational counterpart to the other sonic entities of noise and silence, and outline some ways in which these categories amplify, nullify, and construct each other in a complex interplay. I describe how noise is often described as birthing the sonic arts, and call into question the often uncritical acceptance of the legacy of the Italian futurists in sonic arts discourse. I also look critically at silence, tracing its role in the work of John Cage's tendency towards sonic abstraction, which marked the transition from modernism to post-modernism in the sonic arts, and also examine the deployment of silence in sound studies in the creation of a kind of sonic subjectivity personified in the form of the "Listener." I then describe how this constructed category of the sonic is deployed as a supposed means of undoing the alienation that comes with modernity, visuality, and capitalist culture, in the tendency that I call sonic romanticism. I then outline three important examples of sonic romanticism. Firstly I examine the orality turn of media studies as described by the Toronto school of media theorists, in particular Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong, who characterise human entry into literacy as a process of alienation, which recourse to the sonic can undo. I then look at the relationship between the sonic and materialism, beginning with Bergsonian vitalism and vibratory new materialist ontologies which have emerged more recently, many of which deploy metaphors of acoustic resonance to describe flattened ontological configurations. I introduce Robin James's critique of vibratory ontologies as performing specific functions inside neoliberalism. Finally I refer to the field of sound studies, and its own turn towards ontology, and examine the ontological offerings of Steve Goodman and Christoph Cox. I then connect the ground staked out by these ontologies to the

psychoanalysis of Lacan, and problematise the idea that an "auditory real" is something that can be apprehended or posited as ontological reality.

Under sonic romanticism, sound is put forward as a way of both undoing and escaping the alienation of the subject under Western capitalism, by either surpassing or escaping the symbolic, literary and discursive. However, the promise of the sonic is not universally accessible, because sound as a category does not exist outside of the context of Western power structures, and is itself structured according to those same lines of power. The romantic turn to ontology and the characterisation of the sonic as a kind of anonymous flux and flow at best represents a kind of wishful thinking that sound lies underneath culture, discourse and meaning, and at worst is an act of foreclosure that attempts to cordon off the sonic field under the terms of existing power relations, while on the surface promising access and participation for all. Sonic romanticism in contemporary theory is a response to all-encompassing global capitalism, which is so immersive in nature that it can only be accessed tangentially or through its effects, in the same way that the expansion of empire in the long 19th century showed itself to the poets of the period. Some parts of Western academia have become entranced by the supposed promise of the sonic, a way of facing the future that is uncertain, by going back to a sonic past. As colonialism and capitalism have restructured temporality also along spatial lines, so too does neo-Romantic fascination with pre-modernity, evidenced in a preoccupation with and desire towards the natural world, the colonised world and the Orient take on a geopolitical dimension. The promise of moving through modernity to reach this new phase is not accessible to all, because white Western culture requires at all times its constitutive Other, which is denied access to modernity. With such focus being placed upon the emancipatory potential of the sonic, it becomes apparent that there is not the same weight being placed on elucidating how the sonic is used discursively as a way of perpetuating existing power relations. Future research into this field should aim to develop conceptual and theoretical frameworks and vocabularies for adequately describing these processes. If not, the sonic will remain a reified and over-simplified category that can be called upon to maintain the status quo, under the cover of performing the work of de-alienation.

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