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Postcolonial Repercussions:

Auditory Culture between Signification and the New Ontology

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An academic debate is taking place in the slipstream of musicology – one that has not emerged directly from the discipline itself, but is demonstrably having an impact on it. The discourse in question does not happen merely in an ivory tower, but is part of a real, existing cultural landscape.

The object of this debate is the renaissance of ontology and its quest for the basic structures of reality. What began in speculative realism has recently also reached the world of sound: the practice of thinking beyond the imperfection of creation. The “sonic flux” concept of the East-Coast philosopher Christopher Cox, for example, states that sound-in-itself is sufficient (see Cox 2011). It needs no subject, no meaning and no discourse. Within this paradigm, the strongest positions in the sonic arts refer not to an author, but to the sounding essence.

By contrast, others shift their focus to take issues of identity politics into account, such as the English media theorist Marie Thompson, who has engaged critically with the work of Christopher Cox in a recent article in the journal *Parallax* (Thompson 2017). She proposes that his construction of a neutral, discourse-free stance is “predicated upon a ... ‘white aurality’”. By refusing to problematize the subject, she believes he is ignoring the constraints and obstacles to which the “non-white” subject is beholden. Thompson’s dialectical approach situates her within an auditory culture that is keen to embed sonic phenomena in media history (following Jonathan Sterne, see Sterne 2003), while in her opinion sound studies adhere to an ontological perspective.

It is not certain whether or not this nomenclatorial partitioning of the research landscape will be successful. Jennifer Lynn Stoeve, the editor-in-chief of the blog *Sounding Out!*, is also concerned with signification. She recently investigated the auditive implications of W.E.B. Du Bois’s ideas in order to thematise colonialist tendencies by means of historical sonic phenomena. Her core idea is that music and sound should not be considered independently of the historical and social circumstances of their recipients (see Stoeve 2016 and Weheliye 2005, Ochao Gautier 2014, Chude-Sokei 2016).

It is primarily the field of anthropology that offers possibilities for emancipatory forms of ontological hearing. Following on from Bruno Latour (see Latour 2004), for example, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro suggests that dividing up cultural constructions, including critical self-reflection, essentially remains rooted in Western thinking (see Viveiros de Castro 2014 or Rocha de Souza Lima 2018). Lisa Stevenson and Eduardo Kohn argue that “letting go of our sovereign self” can help us open up to perceiving hitherto unheard voices, including those of non-human entities (see Stevenson and Kohn 2015). The sound artist Gilles Aubry here sees an opportunity for a “decolonized listening” that might enable new relations between voices of very different origins (see Aubry 2017).

Our anthology aims to encompass potentially conflicting positions in sound studies, between signification and the new ontology, and to situate these in relation to each other. Our goal is furthermore to observe contemporary approaches to the postcolonial and the decolonized in context, in order to determine possible (sound) strategies by reconciling them. Or would that be a fantasy of quick solution in the sense of neo-colonial “hungry listening”? (Dylan Robinson, forthcoming).

Sections:

1. Sonic Flux: Sound without subject?
2. Sound under postcolonial condition
3. Decolonized listening: opportunities and perspectives

Aubry, Gilles (2017). "Towards decolonized listening", paper in the Proceedings of the Sonologia International Conference on Sound Studies, São Paulo.

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Latour, Bruno (2004). "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern", in: *Critical Inquiry*, 30: 225–248.

Ochoa Gautier, Ana Maria (2014). *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia*. Durham: Duke UP.

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Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo, translated by Peter Skafish (2014). *Cannibal Metaphysics*. Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing.

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