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"Civilizing" Noise: An Introduction to the Special Issue on Sound, Colonialism, and Power

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At the start of Ernst Karel and Veronika Kusumaryati's augmented sound film *Expedition Content* (2020), the photojournalist Eliot Elisofon talks about sunrise. He and an American crew—filmmaker Robert Gardner and recent Harvard graduates Sam Putnam and Michael C. Rockefeller—are preparing to document the Hubula people of Netherlands New Guinea (now West Papua) for the 1961 Harvard Peabody Expedition, an anthropological survey funded in part by the Dutch colonial government. Sharing a photograph with the members of his party as part of a demonstration of documentary techniques, he notes a peculiar optical phenomenon present in the image: the saturated blue of a pre-dawn sky, picked up by the sensitive lens of a camera but invisible to the human eye.

This crepuscular light—latent, diffuse, and technologically-mediated—provides an apt metaphor for the colonial power relations entrapped by the expedition's recording media. True, the reel-to-reel tape recorders, 16mm film cameras, still cameras, and note-taking supplies wielded by the crew document amicable conversations with Hubula people, elements of the Papuan sonic environment, and narrative accounts of tribal culture. But they also capture a series of uncomfortable encounters, laced with racist aggressions and tacit assumptions about the Hubula's behavior. Collected under the pretense of research and cultural preservation, the

sonic documents on which *Expedition Content* is based (thirty-seven hours of audio tape recorded by Rockefeller) register overt as well as inherent tensions between the Western, white, colonial officers and their non-Western, Black, Indigenous, colonized subjects. Sound technologies like audio tape were frequently weaponized by ethnographers as tools for extracting Indigenous speech or song, often without consent, a transgressive act that Stó:lō music scholar Dylan Robinson has likened to "'pinning down' that which is alive, like the wings of butterflies" (149). This violent metaphor recalls the physical brutality regularly perpetrated against peoples on colonized lands, and specifically in West Papua: assaults extended to acts of aural plunder. After all, a common device used for ethnographic field recording is the "shotgun" microphone.

This special issue of *MAST: The Journal of Media Art Study and Theory* focuses on sound as a vector of colonial power. It explores listening as a form of witness or surveillance to sonic cultures, especially through the fields of ethnography and acoustic ecology, which studies the mediated sonic relationship between humans and their environment. Listening as a method of appropriation, rather than observation, is a central concern; Robinson has recently called this "hungry listening" in specific reference to settler colonial forms of perception that seek to "civilize" or "settle" Indigenous sounds (38–40). The journal issue also considers the role of sound technologies and creative practices in perpetuating and reproducing colonial power relations. Recording media, including reel-to-reel tape recorders and storage devices such as shellac discs, are investigated as colonial documents, while creative techniques such as field recording and sound mapping are examined as both preservative of the soundscapes they catalogue and at the same potentially aimed toward a colonialist extraction or salvage of sonic material.

In its concentration on "auditory significance," to use Ronald Radano and Tejumola Olaniyan's term for sound's ability to produce social and political meaning, this issue engages with media history and theory through a field that might be broadly termed sound studies, a capacious and interdisciplinary realm of study that analyzes sonic practices, institutions, technologies, and discourses (2).[1] At the risk of seeming overly expansive, it takes a syncretic approach to epistemological inquiry, unifying the theoretical silos of art history, art practice, ethnomusicology, and media history through this shared intellectual frame. It is guided by the important work of Robinson, whose book *Hungry Listening* significantly expands the field of Indigenous sound studies, and Gustavus Stadler, whose iconoclastic article "On Whiteness and Sound Studies" calls out the foundational and dominant whiteness of the field, both historically, in terms of the key figures celebrated as part of its canon, and intellectually, given the relative paucity of published writings on race, gender, and difference.

It also acknowledges the critical influence of those considered to be among the discipline's founders while recognizing the ideological critiques leveled against them. For example, the late composer and sound theorist R. Murray Schafer (1933–2021) of the World Soundscape Project produced an undeniably significant body of work, establishing the field of acoustic ecology and publishing numerous treatises such as *The Tuning of the* World (1977) that remain standard texts, but he has also been subject to scrutiny for his mixed relationship to Indigenous Canadians both in his writings and compositions. Robinson calls attention to the "racist timbre" of Schafer's 1961 essay "On the Limitations of Nationalism in Canadian Music," in which he writes about the "Eskimos"—using a now outdated and derogatory term—

[1] For more on sound studies, see Sterne, *The Sound Studies Reader*.

as "an astonishingly unmusical race" (1). Mitchell Akiyama, in an online series devoted to "Unsettling the World Soundscape Project," revisits *Soundscapes of Canada* (1974), a sweeping series of ten hour-long programs broadcast on the national radio network and produced in part by Schafer that excluded the rich sonic cultures of Canada's First Nations communities. The composer's attitudes and commitments seem to have evolved in later anti-colonialist texts that explicitly call for the inclusion of First Nations communities and Indigenous perspectives within considerations of Canadian musical culture.[2] Yet whether these earlier slights were intentional or the result of ignorance, it is important to recognize the marginalizing impact of Schafer's comments and projects in setting the tone for acoustic ecology and the writing of sonic art history, just as it is critical to examine, question, and critique the texts, theories, and voices upon which any discipline is founded.

This special issue on "Sound, Colonialism, and Power" holds these points in tension, bracketing the foundational authors of sound studies in order to take up Stadler's appeal to examine race and difference in the context of the discipline. It presents a collection of scholarly essays and artists' perspectives on Blackness, Indigeneity, disability, and otherness as they relate to broader issues around aurality, imperial authority, and (anti)colonialism. It is important to acknowledge the limits of this project's scope. The editor invited scholars, curators, artists, and practitioner-researchers to contribute art-based research, reflecting on the issue's theme through essays that center on a specific media artwork, whether modern or contemporary. This focus on media art necessarily delimited the range of perspectives and subjects proposed for the journal, precluding strictly historical investigations. As a single

[2] The editor thanks Eric Leonardson for a productive dialogue on Schafer's legacy, and for sharing Schafer's 1983 lecture "Canadian Culture: Colonial Culture" as one example of the composer's potentially redemptive texts.

special issue, this volume cannot claim to attempt a decolonization of sound studies or to redress the critical perspectives it has historically lacked. Rather, it counts as one in a growing constellation of texts pushing forward this important work. Aside from those mentioned above, these include Stadler's special issue of *Social Text* on "The Politics of Recorded Sound," which explores the networks of power that shape sound reproduction; Jennifer Stoever-Ackerman's theorization of the "sonic color-line" or the ways in which race is registered in and through diverse listening practices; the edited volume *Audible Empire: Music, Global Politics, Critique*, which examines European imperialism's effect on the auditory, including sound, music, and modes of hearing; and *Remapping Sound Studies*, edited by Gavin Steingo and Jim Sykes, which reorients the field away from the North to examine sound in and through the Global South. The epistemological stakes of this journal issue are humble: not to decolonize media history and sound studies, but to agitate or "unsettle" these disciplines by examining blind spots, challenging assumptions, and confronting legacies of white supremacy and colonialism within the histories and theories of sonic cultures.

To this end, the editor invited potential authors to consider a series of questions related to the issue's theme. To what extent is media history and sound studies in particular shaped by Western ideals of empiricism and knowing? In what ways do sonic practices and methods of recording participate in colonial systems of oppression and domination? How should artists and scholars grapple with the whiteness of sound studies? What sounds have been left out of media history?

Contributing authors address these concerns through a wide range of topics, including Indigenous sound and listening, manifestations of settler colonialism in the built environment, museum collections, sound recordings in South Asia, Deafness and hearing culture, modernist

"primitivism," sound mapping, speech recognition efforts, and ethnographic field recording. Common threads of inquiry emerge in the selected writings. Some attend to Indigeneity, specifically to the legibility of Indigenous sounds to settler audiences. Others deal broadly with sound and site, examining the ways that sound constructs knowledge about architectural environments and the objects housed within them. Several engage with race and difference, especially the appropriation or plunder of sounds from colonial and diasporic communities. While some authors have an academic background in fields such as anthropology, art history, communications, and sound studies, others are artists, composers, filmmakers, and musicians, and some work fluidly between these disciplines.

Karel and Kusumaryati open the issue with an essay on their recent sound film *Expedition Content*, which revisits the 1961 Harvard Peabody Expedition to document the Hubula peoples of West Papua and draws primarily on audio tape recorded by Rockefeller during the five-month trip. (Rockefeller would famously disappear later that year on another visit to the region). Led by American filmmaker Robert Gardner, and funded in part by the Dutch colonial government, the expedition was billed as a civilizing mission to demonstrate the "backwardness" of the Hubula peoples to Dutch publics. The authors outline the funding sources for the journey, introduce the expedition's personnel, and explain the socio-political context of the venture, which occurred almost simultaneously with the seizure of West Papua from Dutch control by Indonesia (working with the support of the United States). Focusing on Rockefeller's audio tapes, they argue for the microphone as a mediating device that provoked a "sonic encounter" between the Hubula and the expedition team, revealing the colonial relationships that governed the terms of their meeting. Ultimately, the authors interrogate the

use of audiovisual technology in anthropological research and investigate the role that sound recording plays in perpetuating colonial power structures.

Christopher T. Green continues this investigation of Indigenous sounds in his essay "Sonic Refusal: Indigenous Belongings without Soundtrack," which closely examines the multimedia installation *Fair Warning: A Sacred Place* (2019) by Tlingit/Unangax̂ artist Nicholas Galanin. The work consists of photographs documenting empty display cases typically housing Northwest Coast objects in the American Museum of Natural History in New York, accompanied by an audio recording of a Native American Art sale at a major auction house. The unsettling juxtaposition between the visual absence of Indigenous material culture and the audible presence of their participation in a capitalist market is at the center of Green's investigation. This becomes a lens through which to consider the multifaceted Indigenous strategy of "refusal," a defiant withholding of cultural forms and knowledge and a method for rejecting participation in settler structures. The author also levels a critique against museums, which render silent and static Indigenous artworks and belongings that must often be activated through sound or movement. Through his analysis, Green questions both the utility of these cultural spaces for Indigenous objects and the cycles of colonial consumption in which they participate.

Sadie Couture and Russell Gendron then introduce their anti-colonial cartography project titled the Mayne Island Soundmap, a digital chart devoted to the sounds, songs, and stories of a small community off the coast of British Columbia, Canada. Recordings captured for the map aim to document the cycle of Indigenous inhabitants, European settlers, and immigrant communities that have lived on the island and to challenge the notion of a geographic "home" on land that was forcibly taken. Acknowledging the map itself as a

colonial construct intended to survey, name, and ultimately claim territory, the authors address the limits of their project as well as their aim to subvert "settler perceptual orders." Through the Mayne Island Soundmap, they explore the role of sound recording in preserving Indigenous sovereignty.

In "Nothing to Hear, So to Speak: Spaces of Sound and Listening at 100 McCaul Street," Angus Tarnawsky explores "the audible traces of colonization" in the buildings of The Ontario College of Art and Design University, a campus situated on the ancestral and traditional territories of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Haudenosaunee, the Anishinaabe, and the Huron-Wendat. Through a site-specific sound installation in the university's main building, Tarnawsky calls attention to both the intentional and incidental noises produced everyday within the university's halls, as well as the inescapable din of the built environment, and invites listeners to consider its *absent* sounds, which are often ignored. The author uses Robinson's theory of "listening otherwise" to understand the existence of perceptual biases and to encourage auditors to reconfigure their subjective positions in order to adopt a "decolonial sensibility."

Bhavisha Panchia provides an interpretative framework for another media artwork, her audio collage *Imagine you are in a museum: What do you hear?*, commissioned for the 2020 contemporary art biennale Manifesta 13. Addressing the colonialist origins of museums, she condemns the "extraction and silencing" of Indigenous art and ethnographic artifacts, displaced from their original contexts as part of imperial conquests and then collected and displayed by Western institutions. This practice extended, Panchia argues, to colonial expositions, which frequently presented recordings and performances of music from various territories. Through her audio work, Panchia invites listeners to consider the sounds of museum

objects and to attune to "systems of colonial modernity and its extractive and accumulative logic."

In "*Bamboula!*: Dada Performance as Sonic Blackface," Hilary Whitham Sánchez analyzes the simultaneous Dada poem "L'Amiral cherche un maison à louer (The Admiral is Searching for a House to Rent)," written and performed in 1916 by Marcel Janco, Richard Hulsenbeck, and Tristan Tzara at Zurich's Cabaret Voltaire. Tzara retrospectively described the performance as a *bamboula*, using a Bantu word that refers to both a small African drum and the dance performed to its rhythms. His equation of the poetry recitation with *musique nègre*, Sánchez argues, instantiates the "central paradox of Dada performance," specifically its appropriation and subsequent mistranslation of cultural forms from sub-Saharan Africa and the Pacific Islands. In her essay, Sánchez reconsiders Dada sound and performance practices through an anticolonial lens.

The British colonial plunder of South Asian songs and musical performances in the early twentieth century and the politics of ethnographic field recording are the subjects of Budhaditya Chattopadhyay's essay "Uncolonizing Early Sound Recordings." The author examines the commercial exploitation of Hindustani classical music by the London Gramophone and Typewriter Company—which sought to permanently fix and ultimately sell South Asian musical recordings to Western audiences—and details the resistance of singers and musicians to being "captured" on recording media. Technologies such as shellac discs are investigated as tools of colonial invasion and as inadequate methods for recording the improvisational, open-ended, and live sound practices of South Asia. Chattopadhyay questions whether such musical forms can, or should, be preserved.

Pedro J S Vieira de Oliveira details the present use of "accent recognition software" by the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees to assess an immigrant's country of origin and charts the fascinating history of its origins in Prussian prisoner-of-war camps. Within these paradigms of "colonial listening," government officers aimed to evaluate a person's "home" for the purposes of research or asylum processing, using only the character and cadence of the voice, as well as speech content, as evidence. Instead, the author argues, these language assessment programs "complicate the boundaries between body, accent, citizenship, and belonging." This is both the subject and object of interrogation in the author's performance and radio art piece *A Series of Gaps Rather Than a Presence* (2019). Oliveira's media artwork explores the narrative elicitation of "home" through modes of speech and questions whether listening is a neutral act after all.

Finally, in their essay "A Map of a Sound as a Space: Christine Sun Kim's *(LISTEN)*," Charles Eppley revisits an East Village sound walk led in American Sign Language by artist Christine Sun Kim. While sound walks typically invite hearing participants to experience the acoustical environment of a particular place, Kim asked attendees to concentrate on "non-aural encounters with sound and listening through affect, memory, and other non-acoustical modes of perception like touch, taste, and smell." This project, Eppley explains, demonstrates Deaf culture's rich engagement with epistemologies of listening and highlights the audist and ableist roots of sonic art. Rejecting the perceived limitations of sound and listening, Eppley argues for the decolonization of sound studies to incorporate the listening practices of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, offering a potent condemnation of the social and intellectual power structures that create systemic inequities and barriers to inclusion.

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(2016), as well as large-scale programs devoted to John Giorno's Dial-a-Poem (Red Bull Arts, 2017), Albert Savinio's 1914 noise opera *Les chants de la mi-mort* (Issue Project Room, 2018), and the 50th anniversary of Experiments in Art and Technology (Issue Project Room, 2016). She has published articles in books, exhibition catalogues, journals, and online on the relation of modern and contemporary art to sound, performance, media, science, and technology. She is also co-editor of *Alternative Histories: New York Art Spaces, 1960-2010* with Mary Anne Staniszewski (The MIT Press, 2012). Rosati has lectured, organized conferences, and taught internationally on art, media, curatorial practice, and performance. She holds a Ph.D. in Art History from the City University of New York, Graduate Center, where she completed a dissertation on sound technologies and the interwar avant-garde.

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