

# Instead of an Editorial

Johannes Salim Ismaiel-Wendt and Andi Schoon

Dear Andi,

The academic ritual certainly expects that we precede the anthology with something like an editorial. It is also one of those rituals, in which the editors of anthologies try to talk their way around the fact that the book's contributions are so diverse that there is hardly any common thread to be found, and they proceed to editorialise, using the argument that they wanted to show how broad the spectrum is, which is, in fact, united by the book's title. Should we try this trick too?

Honestly, either way, I think I have to try to use something equally ambivalent because even at the beginning, I was very unsure about the subtitle we articulated in the *Call for Contributions*. »Auditory Culture between Signification and the New Ontology« – I saw the subtitle as a kind of a trick. With the word »between«, the subtitle suggests indecisiveness, yet I actually understand it as a »no« statement. Whether ›Old‹ or ›New‹ – is it even possible, in just a little bit of ›ontology‹? A little bit of ›non-ontology‹ would have actually been a clear concession to ›Signification‹, wouldn't it? I read and hear this as I do theses on ›genetic influences on socialisation‹.

When I look at the names of the contributors and read what they have written, it becomes clear that we have not really invited positions that are interested in engaging in academia-centred scribbles, which struggle between ›New Ontology‹ and ›Signification‹. In my opinion, these are contributions that deal with questions of oscillating situatedness in postcolonial entanglements. Do we want to disclose something like this in the »editorial«?

Cheers,  
Johannes

**Dear Johannes,**

»Oscillating situatedness in post-colonial entanglements« describes it pretty well, I think. I would be in favour of using something like it for the subtitle – because then we wouldn't have to pretend that the volume was planned exactly as it has turned out to be. I don't think we owe anything to the Call for Contributions – it was just a means to inspire submissions. But you are right, of course: the ontological position does not tolerate any kind of »between« within itself, and accordingly, it is rarely found in the contributions. In the call, we also referred to approaches for emancipatory forms of ontological listening: Those, who renounce their sovereign self, might be better able to perceive non-human voices. I would have been interested to receive further contemplations on this topic. However, I can understand that most of the authors are currently more concerned with oscillating situatedness. I am too. By the way, we have deliberately decided against aligning certain spellings (such as 'decolonised' and 'decolonized'). They stand side by side without comment.

It seems to me that this volume is a collective conversation. In any case, it cannot be more than an intermediate state. This is why we are not simulating a unified voice in this editorial. And we will not set a full stop at the end of it.

Warmly,  
Andi

**Dear Andi,**

These emancipatory forms of listening, which are capable of perceiving something in a breadth, which was unimaginable until now, is something I read in Gilles Aubry's contribution in particular: »*Salam Godzilla*. Unsounding the 1960 Agadir Earthquake«. It is Gilles Aubry's text that leads me to identify the contributions under the heading »oscillating situatedness in postcolonial entanglements«. I also interpret an emancipation from established research approaches in the following sentence by Gilles Aubry: »I return to the 1960 Agadir earthquake in order to study the multiple sonic dimensions of this event and its aftermaths, as part of my research project on sound and listening histories in Morocco« [...]. In such a sentence, there is a refusal of unambiguous linear temporal processes – in this contribution, Aubry makes non-human voices audible, listens to human voices that have long been condensing and poeticising sound, and interweaves continuums and vibrations with various »actors« to create a new »heterochronicity«,<sup>1</sup> an interaction at eye level.

1 Pelleter 2018, 149.

It is this other knowledge, or more precisely: auditory knowledge, marginalised in the Playback Mode of Academia, that we wanted to promote with our call. Later, I will write something about the obstacles that we were not able to overcome, but first: a few sentences about Birgit Abels' contribution to the anthology. Birgit Abels is perhaps the author, who responded most directly to the subtitle that was formulated in the call. And then, at a certain point, she simply leaves our provocation on the sidelines, as it were, writing: ›Signification‹, yes; ›New Ontology‹, yes – could be anything, but she is interested in the »Ontogenetic« in the sense of something becoming. Like Aubry, Birgit Abels questions *how* sound is known, but her style of doing so is quite different. I read Abel's text as being even more strongly connected with a subject from within an academic discipline – or as working on and working off of something like a Euro-centric music ethnology. She presents us with a plurality of epistemologies: »Sound knowledge thus gives rise to an ecological and ethical understanding that everyone and everything is connected, an insight that deeply resonates with Pacific Islander notions« [...]. Without wanting to up- or downgrade the one or the other, an additional dimension of Postcolonial Repercussions lies, for me, in the juxtaposition and the connecting of the various ways of speaking and writing – in their style and attitude – which is worth perceiving and which lies in the texts themselves, even beyond the content conveyed.

I am glad that the contributions are heterogeneous. But at the same time, I see no reason for us to pat ourselves on the back just because we have found a way to include diverse perspectives. Somehow, I had the naive fantasy of using the call to facilitate a collaboration between researchers and activists, who are perhaps otherwise not closely connected to *Sound Studies*, Musicology, etc., and I was honestly quite unreflectingly greedy for any other form of knowledge that might have come along in any other kind of format. But the one, who proclaims, »We're making a book!«, should not be surprised that in the end, words land on the page.

As busy as the contributors were with their articles, we were just as busy working on contributions that ultimately did not make it into the anthology. I would like to remind you of a few events that took place while planning in Autumn 2018: We were asking ourselves, who should contribute and who shouldn't? We were hoping for a contribution from Dylan Robinson and were communicating with him about an advanced publication of a chapter from his book *Hungry Listening. Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (the book was published in 2020 and thus ultimately before this anthology). It was very interesting to observe how voracious academics, including myself, tried to incorporate this position of »Writing Indigenous Space«. Even before the book was published, Dylan Robinson was absorbed with presenting his work – preparing and presenting talks, lectures, article requests, seminars, festivals. I think that Dylan Robinson resists exactly this kind of voraciousness in his decision to write a chapter »exclusively for Indigenous readers« in his book.

We were (and still are) also in contact with a (let's call it for the moment) (queer) feminist collective that is doing great activist work – among other things by creating

space for really quite heterogeneous music practices. The collective arduously worked out a dialogical contribution for this anthology and collected samples of various voices, even marginalised ones. In the end, however, the members withdrew their contribution because the structure and imprecision of a written text does not sufficiently capture the processual spirit of the work, and the understanding of concerns and demands could not be opened in the way the collective wanted. But the exchange with the (queer)feminist collective also triggered new thoughts in us, as so-called editors, about how we can try to offer the space, which is given to us relatively easily due to various privileges, to heterogeneous positions from different parts of the world. At the same time, we are trying to avoid an identitarian policy of testimony, which functions as a form of tokenism. I would like to take the opportunity to thank these people for the exchange (you know who you are).

Warmest regards,  
Johannes

**Dear Johannes,**

We have now referred to the call a few times. Perhaps we have to re-call it – at least in part – for illustration:

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. 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*. She proposes that his construction of a neutral, discourse-free stance is »predicated upon a [...] »white aurality«.<sup>2</sup> By refusing to problematise the sub-

2 Cf. Thompson 2017.

ject, 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,<sup>3</sup> while in her opinion sound studies adhere to an ontological perspective. [...]

It is primarily the field of Anthropology that offers possibilities for emancipatory forms of ontological hearing. Following on from Bruno Latour, for example, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro suggests that dividing up cultural constructions, including critical self-reflection, essentially remains rooted in Western thinking.<sup>4</sup> Lisa Stevenson and Eduardo Kohn argue that »letting go of our sovereign self« can help us open ourselves up to perceiving hitherto unheard voices, including those of non-human entities.<sup>5</sup> The sound artist Gilles Aubry sees an opportunity for a »decolonized listening« here that might enable new relations between voices of very different origins.<sup>6</sup> 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 decolonised in context, in order to determine possible (sound) strategies by reconciling them. Or would that just be a fantasy of a quick solution in the sense of neo-colonial »hungry listening«?<sup>7</sup>

We had given particular emphasis to Marie Thompson's position and, in doing so, also reduced it, which she rightly drew our attention to. I liked the fact that her reaction was not to simply repeat her arguments as a contribution to our book, but rather to discuss them in a collective piece. With Peggy Kyoungwon Lee, Pedro Oliveira and Shanti Suki Osman, there are even correlations to activism, such as the *Sonic Cyberfeminisms* project. The discussion seems to me to be how a document of activism should be: rich in consulted sources, with a clear stance but also full of cultivated doubt about its own blind spots. The »*impossibility of decolonized listening*« is repeatedly mentioned in the discussion. But this supposed impossibility nevertheless offers suggestions and perspectives. They agree that attention to nuances and relations is necessary in order to overcome *Othering*. The bottom line stands as a plea for *speculative listening, critical fabulation and a practice of care*.

I was glad to read their discussion because I was concerned at one point that a serious clarification of the conditions for the possibility of speaking for oneself could lead to silence or being silenced. You also alluded to this. There are, however, further attempts in the book not to simply fall back on established ways of speaking, but to (forcedly)

3 Cf. Sterne 2003.

4 Cf. Viveiros de Castro 2014 / Rocha de Souza Lima 2018.

5 Cf. Kohn / Stevenson 2015.

6 Cf. Aubry 2017.

7 Cf. Robinson 2020.

invent them to some extent. Bhavisha Panchia avoids all too general considerations in her article by speaking from her own practice as a sound curator. And you too, Johannes, wring numerous words out of the almost inexpressible in your contribution.

Would you like to comment on it yourself?

Sincerely,  
Andi

**Dear Andi,**

I don't think I'm really wringing words out of »the almost inexpressible« in my text. Rather, I think it is the opposite: I try to resist clichéd criticism, which all too easily makes it possible for ›Brave New Words‹ to proliferate. Along the lines of Popular Music, I question the inflationary use of the concept of ›decolonisation‹ in *white*-dominated institutions and especially in academia. I am somewhat astonished at how easily recent calls such as the one to »Decolonize!« graced the lips of even the largest German cultural and educational institutions and exporters while barely anything was changed about the institution's own programme (in a broader sense). The institutions that were conceived for epistemic colonisation are now offering themselves as space-providers and mediators in the context of discussions on restitution and for trainings in Critical Whiteness.

This brings me back to the aforementioned (queer)feminist collective and your concern that reflection on one's own speaking position may lead to silence. I understand the collective's reaction more as a not wanting to be yet another group of *white* people, generating capital by representing the critical positions that have for the most part been developed by activist People of Color. We are walking a very fine line between ›generating vocal heterogeneity‹, ›creating other spaces‹ and ›paternalism‹ – something that I experience again and again within the university setting, for example, which often surprises me: Is anything really changed when you read the self-flagellating and self-labelling of students' theses or research such as »I, as a *white*, cis-male or cis-woman«?

Yes, and my reputation as an academic will probably be enhanced by anthologies like this one. That is important to me. Even more important to me, however, is to take advantage of the privileges that are now relatively easily granted to me in the sense of making it easier to find interesting work, even in various aesthetic formats, in as many places as possible.

I got to know Bhavisha Panchia, a sound curator from South Africa, at an event of a large German foundation that was strange in the sense outlined above. I learned from Bhavisha Panchia that she had just completed an exhibition and vinyl record project

with contributions from John Akomfrah and Trevor Mathison, Tony Cokes, DJ/rupture (Jace Clayton), Em'kal Eyongakpa, Lamin Fofana and Val Jeanty, which »brought together audio works of various modalities of Black sonic and cultural formations from within the contemporary African diaspora« [...]. We met as she was curating an exhibition, titled *Buried in the Mix* (2017), at the MEWO Kunsthalle in Memmingen, Germany. It is a gift that these curatorial works are once again reflected in this anthology in an overview by Bhavisha Panchia. For me, the contribution also stands for a deconstruction of the idea of the »Academic« and of a conservative understanding of research. Not that I want to discredit academic work; on the contrary, I would like to point out that the perspectives and sounds of Bhavisha Panchia's work can be understood as an alternative and peculiar way of generating knowledge.

This is also the way that I read Pedro Oliveira's contribution for the anthology, which was originally conceived as a sound performance lecture on speech recognition software. Of course, the sound work loses a lot of its expressiveness when it is clamped between two book covers. However, in the written form, it also takes up the more permanent space which is otherwise reserved for the hard and soft sciences, beyond the sometimes tokenised placement at singular events. The sound performance lecture is a profound study and it is – I will deliberately use a term here, which is all too often only associated with *white* artists – avant-garde. Even the voices that Pedro Oliveira compiles are avant-garde in their neo-colonialist criticism.

All the best,  
Johannes

**Dear Johannes,**

I hope that in my own contribution I do not engage in »clichéd criticism«, which – I agree with you on that part – we currently encounter in the most astonishing places. In fact, self-incrimination often seems to be associated with the hope of returning to everyday business. However, in this half-researched, half-invented short story, I am interacting with a discussion about »troubled whiteness« (as Gilles Aubry calls it in his forthcoming dissertation). It is the investigation of an experience, which must be accounted for on an individual level, because no one else can take responsibility for it. It is perhaps curious that the writer Paul Bowles appears in it, whose *whiteness* was not particularly troubled, but I found him quite suitable as an object of investigation (and to a certain extent also as a character and foil of a short story).

Fiction as a means of choice is also present in Nadine Schildhauer's contribution, but on a musical level: Schildhauer describes *Deconstructed Club Music* from the musical, material point of view as a design that breaks through closed musical narratives. The genre is situated in a complicated way: transnational, decentralised, often based on di-

asporic experiences. Here, the track becomes a *fictional space* that enables movement instead of administering claims; a disruptive entity that is capable of dissolving binary structures. The routes or exhausting ›treks‹, to use your term, of slavery and migration are reflected in the ›track‹.

Cheers,  
Andi

**Dear Andi,**

Michael Fuhr and Matthias Lewy submitted their contribution a few days ago and I was finally able to read it yesterday. We requested a text from the two of them very late in the process of creating this anthology – after they had given a lecture on »Indigenous sound ontologies, repatriation and the ethics of curating ethnographic sounds« at the symposium *Ethics of Curating* in February 2020 in Hildesheim. In this anthology, I would like to place their contribution before your story »In search for authenticity«. Your more or less fictitious writing about the character, Dieter Ganske, who wants to expose the fact that Paul Bowles did not proceed cleanly in his research, compilations and publications of Moroccan music, can also be found in the examples that Fuhr and Lewy present in relation to perhaps well-intentioned archive compilations about the »music« of the Selk'nam and Yagán as well as the Pemón and the circum-Roraima people. Fuhr and Lewy point out how incorrect and insufficient information can be supplied to CD compilations of old recordings of the songs of communities from Tierra del Fuego or Venezuela/Brazil.

What they essentially deal with in their contribution, however, is, in my understanding, not only the issue of non-authentic representation or appropriation by *white* researchers, but the massive violence of representation in general. This does not mean anything general, abstract or postmodern such as »the crisis of representation«, which concerns the hundred-year-old phonograph recordings of a German ethnologist. It is about violence against family members, for example, whose wishes have been manipulated or who were even not informed of the European archives that make the voices of their grandparents accessible worldwide. Fuhr and Lewy name these phonogram archives and museums »Colonial Graveyards«. After reading the article, I wondered whose cemetery culture should now be entrusted with the care of such graves, so that the colonial matrix does not copy itself endlessly. Actually, no, I am not really wondering. In their text, Fuhr and Lewy describe the locking ritual performed in a Berlin ethnographic museum as Balbina Lambos, a Pemón indigenous researcher, finds out about a *pakara* bag with a stone inside it, and decides to bury the powerful »object« inside the museum's archives. And still, the act is not about authentic burial rituals of the Pemón people, but about the invention of an own ritual. Decolonisation seems to me to have



a lot to do with »Invention of Tradition« – but this time it will have to be shaped by forces other than European (neo-)colonialism.

Warmly,  
Johannes

**Dear Johannes,**

The question of who invents or discursively controls something brings me back to Gilles Aubry, to whom we also owe the cover motif: his contribution deals with the severe earthquake in Agadir in 1960, in the wake of which seismic aurality became a battlefield of political negotiation. The experts of the former colonial administration forced a »technocratic listening« by means of technical measuring methods, which enabled the reconstruction of the city according to certain criteria. Aubry shows how in Ibn Ighil's sung poem »Tale of Agadir« a completely different recapitulation of events occurs – one that allows the listeners to experience and process them once again. Sound, and also »unsound«<sup>8</sup> in the sense of virtual or future sounds, can thus be colonised, and therefore reappropriated. Our cover shows a film still from Aubry's audio-visual essay *Salam Godzilla*: The record player isolates the sound in the Western sense, but the stomping of a Rwais dance disrupts the sound, forcing the record player's needle to skip.

Speaking of sound reproduction: Henrique Souza Lima has given us a very insightful view on the state of the »listening regime«<sup>9</sup> from a Global South perspective. The piece begins its analysis with advertising from the 1970s for record players, which was aimed at *white* men, to a recent case study in São Paulo, where *Spotify* advertised on certain underground lines; here, the streaming company becomes a symptom and expression of the »capitalocene«. Souza Lima writes: »The regime of listening produced by the streaming-based phonographic industry organises aurality so that the local soundscape is always in the deaf spot« [...]. The consumer is not supposed to listen to the acoustic environment when the money is flowing in another sphere. A decolonised listening practice would have to be situated in a specific context.

Best,  
Andi

8 Cf. Goodman 2010.

9 Cf. Szendy 2001.

Dear Andi,

Your reference to Henrique Souza Lima reminded me once more of the missing contribution of Dylan Robinson. In *Hungry Listening*, he explains how missionaries, for example, tried to control indigenous bodies and to ›fix‹ them not only to the country and to an exact location, but also by fixing attention and fixed listening.<sup>10</sup> Children were taken to schools and forced with bells into a rhythmic organisation according to the ideas of the colonial settlers – in this way, the children were also estranged from their family contexts in terms of sound and time.

In our last correspondence, and with the references to Michael Fuhr's and Matthias Lewy's contribution, I seemed to fall into the characteristic style of an editor. I certainly didn't want to try and offer something like a framing here to make all contributions legible according to a single pattern or perspective. Then you quickly wrote a few lines about the cover picture and responded to the contribution by Henrique Souza Lima, which had not been mentioned in our correspondence thus far. So, you acted like a typical editor, too...

It's difficult for me to end our dialogue because I feel that the ten contributions we are allowed to publish are like a drop in the ocean. This certainly has nothing to do with the solidity or soundness of the texts, which have inspired me deeply. The difficulty lies in the much too promising title of the book: »Postcolonial Repercussions« – that should actually – and unfortunately – be the title for an endlessly continuing book series. And at the same time, I would feel uneasy about wanting to uphold a culture of ›fixation‹. The sentiment might seem melodramatic, but I would like to take this opportunity to express the spirit of our preliminary conversations about this anthology, my situation and intention as a person in the »editor's« role of a volume in the *Sound Studies* series. In the words of Philip A. Ewell: »But I am now conflicted. For to feed, sustain, and promulgate a system based on racialized structures and institutions is unacceptable in 2020. The white frame was never the answer – it is simply more apparent now than ever. It is my intention to continue to move towards deframing and reframing the white racial frame, and it is my hope that I can convince others to join me.«<sup>11</sup>

@Philip A. Ewell, you can count us in.

Sincerely,  
Johannes

10 Robinson 2020, 54-57.

11 Ewell 2020, 22.

## Sources

- Aubry, Gilles (2017): Towards decolonized listening, in: Proceedings of the Sonologia International Conference on Sound Studies, São Paulo.
- Cox, Christoph (2011): Beyond representation and signification: toward a sonic materialism, in: *Journal of Visual Culture*, 10(2), 145-161.
- Ewell, Phillip A. (2020): Music Theory and the White Racial Frame, in: *Society for Music Theory*, 26(2), Bloomington.
- Goodman, Steve (2010): *Sonic warfare. Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear*, Cambridge, MA / London.
- Kohn, Eduardo / Stevenson, Lisa: Leviathan, an ethnographic dream, in: *Visual Anthropology Review*, 31(1), 49-53.
- Pelleter, Malte (2018): Funkologicalienatimepistomachinistics. Sensorisches Engineering und maschinische Heterochronizität bei Shuggie Otis, in: Fabian, Alan / Ismaiel-Wendt, Johannes Salim (eds.), *Musikformulare und Presets. Musikkulturalisierung und Technik/Technologie*, Hildesheim, 149-166.
- Robinson, Dylan (2020): *Hungry Listening. Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*, Minneapolis.
- Rocha de Souza Lima, Henrique (2018): The sound beyond hylomorphism: sonic philosophy towards aural specificity, in: *Interference: A Journal of Audio Cultures*, 6, 46-61.
- Szendy, Peter (2001): *Écoute: une histoire de nos oreilles*, Paris.
- Thompson, Marie (2017): Whiteness and the ontological turn in sound studies, in: *Parallax* 23(3), 266-282.
- Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo (2014): *Cannibal Metaphysics*, translated by Peter Skafish, Minneapolis.

Translated from the original German by M. Lane Peterson.