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Whiteness and the ontological turn in sound studies

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been a noticeable ‘turn’ toward questions of sound’s ontology in sound studies. Apropos of this ontological turn, there is self-professed move away from questions of culture, signification, discourse, and identity; and toward questions of materiality, affect, potentiality, aesthetics, and abstraction. Moreover, the ontological turn in sound studies can be understood to mark a move away from the specific to the general. Yet, general models are not neutral models. Though they often appear abstract, the theoretical and analytical tools through which sound is heard, experienced and understood are inextricable from cultural and political histories, economic imperatives, aesthetic priorities and gendered and racialized epistemologies.

*Taking Christoph Cox’s Cagean sonic philosophy as exemplary, I propose that the turn to ontology in sound studies is often predicated on what I refer to as a ‘modest’ white aurality – a collective, racialized perceptual schema that is both universalizing and situated. The notion of white aurality is further articulated through the comparison on two sound works: Lawrence English’s *Airport Symphony* (2007) which is understood to sonically enact the move toward generality; and Chino Amobi’s *Airport Music for Black Folk* (2016), whose abrasive and disruptive soundscapes gesture toward the racialized violence that is imperceptible to and muffled by sonic philosophy’s white aurality.*

In this article, I consider how the revived interest in ontology within sonic theory connects to questions of race. Symptomatic of a broader ‘turn’ to ontology in critical thought, the (re)turn to ontology in sound studies is predicated on an ‘origin myth’ that disavows ‘old’ questions of culture, signification, discourse, and identity and promotes ‘new’ questions of materiality, affectivity reality and being. This origin myth is re-articulated with the introduction of Christoph Cox’s materialist sonic philosophy, which hears the ‘richest’ sound art as giving voice to ‘the nature of the sonic’. Building on Nikki Sullivan’s notion of white optics, I suggest that Cox’s ontology is predicated upon a ‘modest’ white aurality – a racialized perceptual standpoint that is both situated and universalizing. Just as whiteness is not simply an individual trait that is possessed, white aurality is not specific to or possessed by Cox; indeed, I suggest that in Cox’s work, white aurality is partly indebted to a particular engagement with John Cage: an engagement that amplifies an apparent distinction between the social and the ontological in Cage’s work, while muffling its political dimensions. The notion of white aurality is further exemplified through the comparison on two sound works: Lawrence English’s *Airport Symphony* (2007) which is heard to enact a move toward sonic generality; and Chino Amobi’s *Airport Music for Black Folk* (2016), which, apropos of Fred Moten’s notion of blackness as paraontological disruption, is heard as sounding the racialized violence of objecthood that often goes unheard by sonic philosophy’s white aurality.

The racial politics of ontology

The transdisciplinary return to ontology and the concomitant return to realism and materialism has been widely celebrated and contested. For its advocates, the ontological turn marks a radical and much-needed reinvigoration of philosophy and critical scholarship

that boldly takes aim the ‘great outdoors’ of thought; for its critics, the ontological turn is a politically suspect, retrograde move that, in its pursuit of objects and matter, tunes out key questions concerning the social, economics and history.¹

The return to ontology is primarily associated with three theoretical ‘movements’ or ‘schools’: speculative realism, object-oriented ontology, and new materialism. Though there are important divergences between these ‘schools’, there are also some common thematics that run throughout: for example, the decentering of ‘the human’, the social subject and a renunciation of anthropocentrism; a focus on the pre-, extra- or non-social ‘real’ and/or ‘material’ world; the utilisation of ‘scientistic’ approaches; and an interest emergence, speculation, potentiality, the ‘general’ and the ‘universal’. These theoretical commitments are frequently posited as antithetical to the dominant paradigms of twentieth-century continental thought: namely, social constructivism, linguistics, structuralism, poststructuralism, deconstruction and psychoanalysis. The disavowal of these ‘correlationist’ and ‘anthropocentric’ approaches functions as an origin myth. Against the ‘staleness’ of social theory, discourses of signification and representation, textual analysis and cultural critique, the ontological turn, in its abolition of the Kantian shadow over philosophy, promises a vibrant new line of flight. Nick Srnicek clearly exemplifies this tendency in his description of speculative realism:

Do we really need another analysis of how a cultural representation does symbolic violence to a marginal group? This is not to say that this work has been useless, just that it’s become repetitive...Speculative realism provides the best means for creative work to be done, and it provides genuine excitement to think that there are new argumentative realms to explore.²

The ‘repetitive’ focus on the symbolic violence committed against marginal groups, is countered by the ‘excitement’ of the speculative turn to the ontological, the real and the material. In turning his attention to ‘properly ontological questions’, the philosopher refuses to partake in the reduction of his field to ‘an analysis of texts or of the structure of consciousness.’³ This new vanguard rises from the ashes of philosophy’s worn out paradigms, generating a much needed reinvigoration of critical discourse.

The formation of the ontological turn’s origin myth prompts important questions about the political commitments and motivations of these ‘exciting’ and ‘creative’ projects. Indeed, many of the marginal groups implied by Srnicek’s dismissal have good reason to be suspicious of a reinvigorated interest in ontology, given the historical complicity of metaphysics in erasing and justifying violence against marginalized social groups. Sylvia Wynter, for example, has shown how secular ontological accounts of the human emerge with colonial conquest; and how being, subsequently, is equated with the overrepresented ethnoclass of western, bourgeois man, resulting in the obfuscation of other modes and possibilities of being.⁴ The conflation Wynter identifies, which sees Enlightenment notions of humanity spoken about ‘as if it were the human itself’⁵, is risked when ‘the human’ is spoken about in the singular, including when ‘the human’ is something to be overcome, decentred or disposed of: a departure from the subject, of anthropocentrism and of white, Eurocentric humanism is by no means a departure from whiteness.⁶ Likewise, in ‘The Fact of Blackness’ Frantz Fanon articulates the underlying and unspoken whiteness of the ontological and its entanglement with the ‘historico-racial schema’: ‘ontology...does not permit us to understand the being of the black man...The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man.’⁷ For Fanon, the colonial history of race and of racialization inhibits blackness from inclusion in the white-defined realm of being. Instead, blackness and its subjects are banished to a field of non-being. The ontological, meanwhile

is 'naturalized' as universal ground, obscuring the realm of non-being upon which it is predicated. Thus where the ontological has come to signify 'a realm of apparent liberation from the miasmas of the social world' in much realist and new materialist thought, Fanon regards ontology itself as 'a mystifying form of appearance that posits itself as outside of social inscriptions of race, when in fact this very positing is integral to the dialectics of racialization itself.'⁸ Fred Moten, building on but also in contradistinction to Fanon, asserts that blackness should not be reduced to its absence, its ontological impossibility, for 'what is inadequate to blackness is already given ontologies'.⁹ For Moten, Fanon leaves unclaimed is an 'irremediable homelessness common to the colonized, the enslaved and the enclosed.'¹⁰ Blackness, as that which operates 'at the nexus of the social and the ontological, the historical and the essential', demands a paraontology of disorder.¹¹ Blackness is paraontological in that lived experiences of blackness both enact and escape the assignment of blackness to social death, of non-being. This straining of blackness against itself disrupts and resists the ontological: it is; it is escaped and is what escapes.

In light of Wynter's, Fanon's and Moten's remarks, it is significant that these racialized erasures and exclusions from the realm of ontology have been echoed in the historicizing of recent ontological thought: with the shift from ontologies of presence to 'withdrawal', transcendence to immanence, and, in some instances, subject to object, there remains little acknowledgement of questions of racialized (non)being that have been raised within critical race studies and beyond.¹² Indeed, the rush to position 'new' realist and materialist trends as a theoretical vanguard has resulted in the sidelining of significant antecedents: the materialisms, non-anthropocentrism and more-than-human actors of indigenous cosmologies¹³; the 'inhumanisms' and alternative humanisms of decolonial and black scholarship (including Wynter's work)¹⁴; and the speculative tendencies of various feminisms.¹⁵ The erasures of these bodies of work in the ontological turn's origin myths have led Métis scholar Zoe Todd to assert that 'ontology is just another word for colonialism'.¹⁶

These critical antecedents suggest the concerns of the ontological turn do not simply preclude a consideration of race. Nonetheless, the failure to acknowledge these critical antecedents has been coupled with a notable present-absence of issues of whiteness, racialization and coloniality in recent scholarship addressing 'properly ontological questions'. This present-absence of race might be considered symptomatic of attempts to scission the ontological (and, by proxy, the real; matter/materiality) from the realm of politics and social life (and death).¹⁷ If the ontological turn appears to try and move 'beyond' the social, then it might be inferred from the realist/new materialist quietude that race and racialization are too social, too discursive and too 'human' to merit attention within these extra- non- and post- human/social paradigms. As Diana Leong notes apropos of new materialism, race is often crudely reduced to 'identity politics', or sidestepped in the rush to endorse paradigms of difference-without-race.¹⁸ Yet race is not only a socio-discursive fiction: as Sara Ahmed has shown in her phenomenological discussion of whiteness, processes of racialization are real, lived and material.¹⁹ In Ahmed's account, whiteness is something that does, that reifies and orientates: it is a protocol that produces and orders spatial-temporal relations, and enhances and limits a body's affective capacities in relation to its surroundings. Thus racialization is not simply of 'the social' and 'the human', but that through which 'the human' and 'the social' is (re)produced.

The ontological turn's to reach the pre-, non- or extra- social, moreover, has some troubling resonances with retrograde socio-political tendencies. As Jordana Rosenberg argues, the ontological turn's marked interest in the 'ancestral realm' – a pre-conscious terra nullius, unmediated by social order – calls to mind a number of New-World 'primitivist' fantasies that are familiar to scholars of colonialism and settler-colonialisms.

While Rosenberg warns against crudely framing recent ontological scholarship as a colonialist project, there remains a need to ask ‘why the lust for dehistoricization, for demediation, for temporality outside of history’ is currently flourishing and what is the ‘cost’ of this apparent autonomization: ‘matter may appear to free itself from the subject and drive toward unpredictable aleatory newness, but we celebrate this only at the cost of participating in the “attack” on the social’ that characterizes the current political moment.²⁰ Similarly, Mel Chen has suggested apropos of the recent theoretical drive toward the experimental, potentiality and the ‘strange’, the desire of whiteness to ‘go cosmic’ is a recurring thematic of capitalism and empire. In light of this, Chen asks to what extent new materialist and realist scholarship can be considered new technologies engaged in forgetting, in which lived and embodied differences such as race, class, sex and ability are no longer deemed relevant due to fictions of scale.²¹ Building upon Rosenberg and Chen’s observations, it might be asked what are the historical circumstances of this technology of forgetting: to what extent does the turn away from lived differences, social mediation and historicism and toward being-without-sociality, the object-itself and the pure productivity of matter mirror the rhetorical and material formations of ‘post-civil rights’ ‘post-racist’, ‘post-sexist’, ‘post-class’, ‘post-identity’ capitalist society? Indeed, the critical work of Fanon, Wynter and Moten reminds us that ontologies bear the traces of their historical moment – even when those ontologies ‘withdraw’ from mediation.²²

Sonic philosophy

The (re)turn to ontology in philosophy and critical theory *contra* the purportedly anthropocentric questions of cultural representation, signification and identity has been echoed within sonic discourse. This shift might be articulated apropos of the disjuncture between ‘sound studies’ and ‘auditory culture’, as the terms have been defined by Brian Kane. While the terms are often used interchangeably, Kane suggests that ‘sound studies’, conceptualised as a particular body of scholarship interested in addressing the ontology of sound via Deleuzian metaphysics, can be understood to position itself as autonomous from the priorities and methodologies of ‘auditory culture’. Where the latter disciplinary label typically pertains to ‘cultural’ research, such as the development of auditory techniques, histories of media technologies and the emergence and maintenance of sonic communities, the former joins the broader ontological turn in seeking to break away from culturally-oriented questions of representation, signification and subjective experience. As Kane asserts, in this context, ‘representation’ and ‘signification’ ‘stand in for a variety of hermeneutic and interpretive commitments, like those of cultural studies, phenomenology, historicism and deconstruction, to name a few.’²³ The problematics of an ontologically-oriented sound studies, broadly conceptualised, are imagined to radically depart from those which animate the theoretical modes lumped together under the rubric of ‘signification and representation’ or ‘the linguistic turn’.

The separation of auditory culture and sound studies thus marks a distinction between ‘narrowband’ and ‘broadband’ interests: where the former prioritises situated knowledges, practices and histories; the latter is interested in the foundational, the abstract and the general. Symptomatic of these ‘broadband’ interests is the prevailing interest in noise, conceptualised via Deleuzian notions of the virtual; and a concomitant aesthetic prioritisation of sound art practices that are considered to turn their ear to the materiality of sound. Where music is thought to obscure material being of sound by virtue of its cultural, representational and meaningful content; experimental music and sound art is understood to interrogate the affective, non-representational and non-discursive dimensions of the sonic. As a result, ‘materialist’ sound art has been credited with exposing the ontological specificities of sound-itself.

The sonic ontology that is developed by Christoph Cox over a series of essays is exemplary of these critical tendencies. Cox calls for the development of alternative materialist and realist approaches to sound art, insofar as sound art is resistant to the dominant paradigms of musicology and art history: 'prevailing theoretical models are inadequate to it [sound art]. Developed to account for the textual and the visual, they fail to capture *the nature of the sonic*.'²⁴ It is 'the nature of the sonic' with which sound art is understood to preoccupy itself. However, for Cox, the response to this myopia should not be to think *about* sound but to 'think sonically'; to allow sound to generate its own forms of thought.

While Cox's ambition elevate sound on a par with philosophy is both admirable and provocative, his pursuit of the 'nature of sound' risks uncritically naturalizing what is ultimately a specific onto-epistemology of sound that is entangled with, amongst other things, histories of whiteness and coloniality.²⁵ Indeed, Cox's argument appears to be caught between the development of a specific ontological approach appropriate for (and therefore contingent upon) what he considers to be the aesthetic priorities of post-Cagean sound art (i.e. a materialist ontology of sound art); and the much grander accreditation of sound art as revealing 'the nature' of sound-itself as it exists 'beyond' the realm of representation, signification and culture.

Cox asserts that sonic ontology is 'strange' insofar as it radically unsettles our ordinary ways of speaking, sensing and conceiving. This 'strangeness' is illustrated by contrasting a normative, 'everyday ontology' of objects, that privileges sight and touch, with an immersive sonic ontology of flow and flux. Where an ontology predicated on vision relies upon the distance between perceiver and perceived, subject and object, the sonic is presented as immersive and engulfing: "lacking earlids, we are forever and inescapably bathed in sound, immersed in it in a way that we are not immersed in a world of visible objects. An attention to sound, then, will provoke us to modify our everyday ontology and our common sense conception of matter."²⁶ For Cox, sound is a virtual, material and temporal flow that is actualised in human activities such as music and speech but also exceeds them. The 'richest' works of sound art – such as Cage's *4'33"*, Alvin Lucier's *I am Sitting in a Room*, Max Neuhaus's *Times Square*, and Christina Kubisch's *Electrical Walks* – Cox's hears as turning their attention to this virtual dimension of the sound and consequently reveal their ontological basis, 'disclosing a genuine metaphysics of sound'.²⁷

Despite his assertions of the mind-independence (and by extension, hearing-independence) of sound, the contrast between an 'everyday' and sonic ontology resonates with what Jonathan Sterne has referred to as the audiovisual litany: a series of 'rhetorically powerful but not very accurate' axioms that account for the relationship between hearing and vision.²⁸ Indebted to the spiritualism and the ascendancy of the white Christian West, the audiovisual litany is organised around a series of dualisms that treat visual and sonic experience as unchanging and transhistorical givens. According to the audiovisual litany, vision tends toward separation, spatiality and perspective; whereas hearing pertains to immersion, immanence, contact and temporality. Cox's response to philosophical ocularcentrism – philosophy's historic reliance and emphasis on the eye – is to invert the audio-visual litany, substituting the distance of the visual with the immersiveness of the sonic.

The resonance between Cox's sonic philosophy and the audiovisual litany suggests that while it is presented as a general model, the notion of sound-as-flux is by no means neutral. Rather, as Cox himself makes clear, 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.²⁹ The centrality of (a particular reading of) Cage to Cox's sonic philosophy is perhaps unsurprising, given the striking resonances between many of the former's aesthetic and philosophical priorities and those of the contemporary ontological turn: for example, Cage's work is 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 objects³⁰. Cox seemingly inherits a number of Cage's ideas – notably, the Cagean ambition to 'let sounds be themselves' and, correspondingly, the bifurcations of sonic materiality and social signification, nature and culture; as well as the desire for a shift from egocentric composer to 'modest' curator of sonic flux. This distinction of composer and curator underlines Cox's dualism of music (which stands in for signification, culture, meaning, discourse) and sound art (which stands in for ontology, materiality, sound-itself, flux).

To describe the Cagean curator as modest invokes to the term's Harawayian usage.³¹ Modest is the modernist virtue of scientific and traceless observation; entangled with formations of whiteness, masculinity and eurocentrism, it pertains to a subjectless position from which the world is observed from everywhere and nowhere, and from which bias is 'removed' through obfuscation. As Ben Piekut argues, while it has often been attributed to his borrowings from 'Asian' philosophy, the Cagean ambition of self-abnegation, 'reproduces an all-too-familiar dynamics of power in the West': Cage recapitulates the self-invisibilization of the white, masculinist and Eurocentric standpoint, enabling himself to become the auditory observer of sound's nature.³²

The racialized dynamics of Cage's self-abnegation are reiterated apropos of Cage's criticisms of jazz. In his essay on Afrological and Eurological improvisation, George Lewis describes how whiteness enables Cage to become an objective arbiter of aesthetic value, and subsequently deem Afrological improvisation in need of improvement by becoming more 'free' in accordance with Eurological musical values. Importantly, Cage criticises jazz for its maintenance of personality; Lewis cites the composer's remarks that 'the form of jazz suggests too frequently that people are talking – that is, in succession – like in a panel discussion...if I am going to listen to speech then I would like to hear some words.'³³ In other words, to Cage's ears, jazz fails to sufficiently abandon the self. Here, there are traceable echoes of Cox's aforementioned comments about the 'richest' sound art: it can be inferred from these remarks and (the selective interpretations of) his artistic examples that the richest sound art does not tell stories but is avowedly depersonalised in its disclosure of the materiality and ontology of sound.

As Lewis makes clear, Cage's aesthetic sensibilities are racialized, though rarely acknowledged as such. Yet the Cagean distinction between sonic materiality and sociality that Piekut identifies and Cox repeats is complicated by its relationship to the political. Cage's aesthetic philosophy is by no means 'asocial', inasmuch as it is explicitly indebted to what he identified as an anarchistic politics, which prioritized non-hierarchy, the dissolution of power-over, and a particular conception of 'freedom'.³⁴ The Cagean call to 'let sounds be themselves' was expressive of a (by no means unproblematic) politics that sought to relinquish control. However, Cox's reading of Cage is necessarily selective – it separates Cagean aesthetic philosophy from its political underpinning. In doing so, Cox can be understood to amplify the latent 'modesty' of Cage, so as to maintain a distinction between sonic materiality and sociality.

To highlight the 'situatedness' of Cox's ontology and the metaphor of flux is not to demand its dismissal so much as to recognise its partiality. Yet in spite of Cox's own historicism, the sonic flux exposed (or, more accurately, generated) by Eurological sound art and philosophy is not presented as a specific ontological figuration, borne out of a

particular historical, geographic, social, aesthetic, epistemological and technological milieu. Rather, to borrow from Wynter, it might be said that Cox risks speaking of this particular conceptualisation of the sonic-as-flux as if it were ‘sound-(in)-itself’. Moreover, the bifurcation of materiality and meaning, sonic nature and culture in the path towards a ‘genuine metaphysics’ obscures the co-constitution of ‘sonic ontology’ and ‘the social’ (if, indeed, these categories can be clearly distinguished from one another). Although Cox suggests that ‘if we proceed from sound, we would be less inclined...to draw distinctions between culture and nature, human and nonhuman, mind and matter, the symbolic and the real, the textual and the physical’,³⁵ these dualisms are re-produced by Cox’s origin story: as with many of the proponents of the ontological turn, Cox’s materialist ontology is predicated on the disavowal of insufficiently materialist/ontological approaches (i.e. textual, representational, discursive, sociological), resulting in the reestablishment of the oppositional categories that these ‘outdated’ approaches are criticised for failing to overcome.

White aurality

Just as the critical gaze of new materialisms and speculative realisms have been understood to co-produced with, through and alongside what Nikki Sullivan has referred to a ‘white optics’, Cox’s sonic ontology (and indeed, Cage’s) can be understood to be situated through and within a ‘white aurality’. Sullivan’s white optics pertains to a racialized yet naturalized perceptual schema that makes matter ‘matter’ by virtue of its opposition to ‘culture’. Metonymically associated with ‘physical processes’, ‘the non-human’, ‘the physiological’ and ‘the animal’, matter is produced with and through this perceptual schema as both ‘more than human’ and ‘other than cultural.’³⁶ White optics are ‘modest’ insofar as it involves seeing from everywhere and nowhere, having liberated itself of (which is to say, obscured its indebtedness to) perspective. However, though it often appears as such, perception is not considered a neutral process of mediation; nor something that a perceiving subject processes. Rather, perception is shared, social and co-constitutive process that shapes and is shaped by knower and known, perceiver and perceived. It is an effect and vehicle of sedimented contextual knowledges, which ‘constitutes that which it presumes to merely apprehend.’³⁷ In this regard, it is akin to Ahmed’s notion of whiteness as material, lived and real orientation: white optics is that through which and with which the world unfolds. One does not *have* perspective but is *in* and (re)produced through perspective.

Drawing upon Sullivan’s notion of white optics, white aurality can be understood as not just relying upon but actively producing a series of bifurcations in its ‘hearing-with’: it 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 invisibilizing its own constitutive presence in hearing the ontological conditions of sound-itself. White aurality is not an ahistorical, unchanging perceptual schema, insofar as whiteness and aurality are both material-discursive composites that shape and are shaped by one another and in relation to a particular environment; but nor is it simply the product of individual bias. Rather, recalling Sullivan’s description of perception as shared and occupied rather than possessed, white aurality can be understood as co-constitutive with, amongst other things, Eurological histories, practices, ontologies, epistemologies and technologies of sound, music and audition.

In arguing that Cox’s sonic ontology is reliant on perspective, I am not seeking to affirm that there can be no sound without listening subject, nor am I seeking to deny that sound has something to do with materiality and matter – quite the contrary. Rather, what I wish to foreground is the role of white aurality in constituting a sonic materiality that can

be cleanly distinguished as preceding sociality, discourse, meaning, power; and its role in consequently defining the virtues of ‘modest’ sound art. As with whiteness more generally, the presence of white aurality is marked by its absence: indeed, the reliance on situated and racialized aurality is obscured by an implicit slippage between ‘is’ and ‘heard as’ – sound art *is* revealing of sound’s ontological specificities versus sound art *is heard as* revealing sound’s ontological specificities. This slippage between *is* and *heard as* is symptomatic of what Kane has identified as a ‘category mistake’, through which exemplification and embodiment are conflated. Kane, citing Nelson Goodman, describes exemplification as a form of reference where an entity symbolizes properties of its own kind; while embodiment means that an entity is of a certain kind. Where the former comes in degrees (an entity may be better or worse than another entity at exemplifying properties), the latter does not: an entity either is or is not. And where the former is a mode of reference; the latter is a condition. Kane further demonstrates this distinction referring to Cox’s treatment of sound art: ‘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.’³⁸ The sound art that Cox privileges as revealing the ontological condition of sound itself does so through exemplification – through a *perceived* likeness to what is thought to be the work’s ontological condition. Thus background noise, de-personalized fuzz and abstract hums become sonic metaphors for virtual flux and flow. And yet, as Kane asserts, ‘there is no purely logical reason why the movement of attention from figure to ground should be ‘like’ the movement from the actual to the virtual. If this analogy makes sense, it is not because of any metaphysical or ontological truth but because of shared cultural practices and shared conceptual schemas.’³⁹ If no sound work is, by definition, no more or less ontological than any other – if this is no firm basis for a meritocracy – then this raises the question as to how the ‘richest’ works of sound art come to be exemplary. Indeed, it is surely not coincidental that Cox draws heavily from an already well-established, predominantly white and masculinist canon of experimental music and sound art (e.g. John Cage, Alvin Lucier, Pierre Schaeffer, Francisco López) whose formation has been heavily influenced by Cagean aesthetics and principles.

If white aurality pertains to the present-absence of a universalizing yet situated orientation that, in modestly ‘hearing-with’, amplifies certain things and muffles others, then this leaves open the possibility of hearing otherwise. However, as Sullivan warns apropos of white optics, perspective cannot simply be thrown off by going ‘beyond’ culture; nor simply replaced with another at will. It might be, however, that amplifying the present-absence of white aurality allows other possible perceptual schema to come to the fore.

Hearing Airports

The sounds, sites and affects of aviation have been a frequent source of intrigue for artists. Airports and air travel have been heard as symbols of the human condition within a globalised modernity; a ubiquitous component of everyday life that combines the banal with the extraordinary and traverses distinctions of work-time and leisure-time, anxiety and excitement, militarism and entertainment, ‘home’ and ‘away’, the ‘same’ and the ‘new’. Air travel is also an emblem of noise pollution and environmental damage. Indeed, art has been instrumentalized in reducing aviation noise – Paul De Kort’s ‘soundproofing’ land art around Amsterdam’s Schiphol airport, for example, has been credited with minimizing ambient aircraft noise. Artists have also aimed to encourage listeners to hear the noise of air travel differently, as is the case with Lawrence English’s *Airport Symphony* (2007).

A homage to Brian Eno’s ambient collection *Music for Airports* (1978), *Airport Symphony* is a series of sound works by eighteen artists that provide ‘a personal meditation

on aspects of travel in the modern age and suggests ways in which we control, augment and ultimately exists in a time where almost no part of the face of the planet is inaccessible.⁴⁰ Commissioned by the Queensland Music Festival and Brisbane Airport Corporation, each track is based around field recordings that were made by English in and around Brisbane airport between March and June 2007. Brisbane Airport Corporation said they hoped the work would put ‘romance, poetry and even musicality’ back into travel: ‘We like the mix of the mundane and the artistic. Airports don’t normally hold a strong affection in people’s hearts, so anything that tries to break down the clichés of the airport as a soulless, windswept, barren, unfriendly place, we’re keen to support.’⁴¹ English sought to counter the negative connotations of aviation noise and airport soundscapes by providing an opportunity to hear otherwise. In a newspaper report on the piece, English claims he is unable to understand why people complain about aeroplane noise: ‘Living under the flight path is like having the best seat in the theatre.’⁴²

While English refers to the compositions of *Airport Symphony* as personal meditations, such a description exists in tension with the depersonalised aesthetic that underlines the compilation. Indeed, despite the variety of artists featured – contributors include Christian Fennesz, Francisco López, Jason Kahn, Tim Hecker, Camilla Hannan, Toshiya Tsunoda and David Grubbs – the compilation is somewhat homogenous in terms of style: slowly evolving drones, abstract hums, gentle rumbles and soaring engine noise are in abundance. ‘Human’ voices infrequently feature and are often distant and distorted when they do – Christopher Willett’s ‘Plane’ is the notable exception, which centres on the tannoyed voice of the flight attendant and the sounds of passengers before descending into rapidly panned noise. Likewise, the soundscapes of *Airport Symphony* for the most part remain ‘locationless’: there is very little that marks these sounds as being of Brisbane Airport, beyond the accompanying liner notes. Rather, these nominally site-specific sounds – of lounges, runways, shops – could be taken from any airport. As Will Schrimshaw suggests, the sonic materials that form the basis of these pieces are utterly generic, they evoke the ‘transitory boredom, aesthetic banality and idle consumerism often associated with airport architecture and air travel’. Yet ‘through various processes of phonographic abstraction sonic matters are mobilized against this banality in the composition of something beautiful and singular, if unspecific.’⁴³ As with Willett’s ‘Plane’, many of the pieces of *Airport Symphony* audibly moves between the recognisable and the unrecognisable, ‘figure’ and ‘ground’, narrowband ‘signal’ and broadband ‘noise’, the ‘banality’ of the generic and the ‘beauty’ of the general.

The noisy, abstract and depersonalised soundscapes of *Airport Symphony* have much in common with Cox’s ontologically-oriented sound art, through which abstract noise, hums and drones are associated with a worldly sonic flux. The movement between ‘figure’ and ‘ground’, ‘signal’ and ‘noise’ might be understood as an aural re-presentation of the oscillation between ‘actual’ and ‘virtual’, insofar as the latter is framed as ‘the noisy substrate of significant sound’.⁴⁴ In other words, apropos of Cox’s sonic philosophy, *Airport Symphony* might be understood to turn the ear toward the virtual dimension of sound.

This potential interpretation of *Airport Symphony*, however, fails to account for the ways in which the shift between the generic and the general is racialized. For many living in a post- 9/11 world, airports are not just sites of banal indifference; rather they are heavily securitized and often hostile spaces of racialization, surveillance and borders. Indeed, it is no accident that Sara Ahmed’s discussion of whiteness-as-orientation gives the example of the airport as a site of immobility, blockage and discomfort.⁴⁵ Where some bodies that ‘pass’ are able to *flow* through and with space, bodies that are deemed ‘out of place’ are slowed down, becoming sites of suspicion and stress. Not all bodies that flow are ‘white’

but these bodies nonetheless are able to blend in to the ‘background noise’ of whiteness, passing through the site of the airport as unremarkable. Others, meanwhile, emerge as suspicious ‘signals’. If the affective experiences of airports is contingent upon bodies blending in with or standing out from the background noise of whiteness, then this suggests that to hear the airport only as bland, boring, unremarkable and so on is predicated upon a white aurality, the presence of which is obscured by the repeated (aural, aesthetic and discursive) figuration of airports as *generic* spaces of banality and blandness, boredom and consumerism.

In Chino Amobi’s *Airport Music for Black Folk*, other, alternative racialized experiences of airports are gestured towards, amplifying that which remains imperceptible to white aurality in the process. Released via NON records – a collective of African artists and of the diaspora ‘using sound as their primary media to articulate the visible and invisible structures that create binaries in society, and in turn distribute power’ – the project consists of 7 tracks that Amobi created while travelling in Europe. Amobi states that when creating the collection he was ‘interested in the idea of the airport as an international space yet a totally Eurocentric and Western manicured experience. I was thinking a lot about what a black experience is in that space, how it feels to walk through the airport with confidence and not feel like Western culture has superiority over you.’⁴⁶

Though Amobi’s sonic collages do not use field recordings, there are nonetheless some stylistic commonalities with English’s *Airport Symphony* insofar as noise and electronic hums feature heavily in both works. And, as with *Airport Symphony*, *Airport Music for Black Folk* references Eno’s *Music for Airports*. However, while the former maintains its ambient aesthetic, the latter subverts it with a series of abrasive, disorienting and disruptive soundscapes. In the opening track, ‘London’, robotic announcements, electronic hums, squalls and clicks, abrasive buzzers and fading sirens accompany an eerie spoken word recital by artist Evan Ifekoya. ‘Milan’ transforms the ethereal vocals of Eno’s *Airport Music* into something altogether more unnerving, with gasps and tics accompany a repetitive vocoder line. The following track, ‘Warszawa’, however, is much more acerbic, consisting of harsh, waspish synths and distorted drumbeats.

If *Airport Symphony* can be heard as noisily evoking a Deleuzian ontology of flow and flux, *Airport Music for Black Folk* might be heard as noisily evoking Fred Moten’s aforementioned paraontology of disorder. For Moten, this paraontology is and is demanded by blackness; and is reducible to neither ‘simple interdiction nor bare transgression.’⁴⁷ It is significant that for Moten, the phonic is central to opening up space, which, by making perceptible the ‘escape’ – the paraontological fugitivity – of black social life, call into question the illusions of whiteness as ontological ground.⁴⁸ Apropos of Moten, *Airport Music for Black Folk* might be understood to claim blackness-as-fugitivity: instead of flow and flux, it can be heard to pursue turbulence, or what Moten describes as ‘troubled air’.⁴⁹ Moten’s troubled air is what escapes when blackness (as object, as commodity, as non-being) is both enforced and refused, arising through the vibration of the object against its frame. The troubled air of the black object that resists its existence as such might be a screech or a scream; ‘an irruption of phonic substance’ from that which is not meant to speak.⁵⁰ With this in mind, *Airport Music for Black Folk* can be heard to make audible the strain of blackness against itself: it sounds the violent securitisation and surveillance of black bodies-as-objects; but refuses this by giving voice to – and thus rupturing – blackness-as-objecthood and the object/subject distinction. Where *Airport Symphony* morphs the banality of the generic into the beauty of the general, *Airport Music for Black Folk* claims the troubled air of blackness straining against itself and, with this, makes audible, through sound’s affective resonances and sonic ‘ugliness’, the general, racialized violence that is excluded by and ordinarily imperceptible to white aurality.⁵¹ Consequently,

the ‘troubled air’ of *Airport Music for Black Folk works* to denaturalize and situate whiteness as a perceptual schema, stripping it of its ‘modesty’,

Conclusion: situating the ontological

In this article, I have raised questions as to the racialized dynamics of the recent ‘ontological turn’ as it is manifest in sound studies. While the presence of race has been marked by its absence in contemporary ontological scholarship, this should not be mistaken for a post-racialism, insofar as it is whiteness that often enables the orientation of the critical gaze elsewhere. I have suggested that recent figurations of the ontological in sound studies are co-constituted with a ‘modest’ white aurality. This works to distinguish and amplify what is heard as ‘sound-itself’ (which is metonymically associated with ‘abstract’ noise, hums and drones), while muffling sound’s relationship to the social world; and holds apart sound art’s abstract materiality from lived sociality. White aurality names a racialized perceptual schema that is at once situated and ‘modest’ insofar as its own, active presence is obscured. However, in highlighting the entanglement of whiteness with ontology is not to argue for the dismissal of ontology per se. Rather, following Moten and Rosenberg, I want to suggest that ontology requires *resituating* amongst its co-productive relations with the social world – with culture, materialism, history, politics, science, technology, epistemology, aesthetics, experience and perception. Situating rather than simply dismissing sonic ontologies enables us to ask how ‘the nature of the sonic’ is determined – what grounds the sonic ground – while remaining open to how it might be heard otherwise.

¹ For example see Galloway, ‘A response to Graham Harman’.

² Srnicek, cited in Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 132.

³ Bryant et al *The Speculative Turn*, 4.

⁴ Wynter, ‘Unsettling the Coloniality’.

⁵ ‘Wynter, ‘Unsettling the Coloniality’, 259.

⁶ See Jackson, ‘Animal’, 673.

⁷ Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, 109-110.

⁸ Rosenberg, ‘The Molecularization of Sexuality’. Fanon’s notion of blackness as non-ontological outside has been further theorized by ‘Afro-pessimist’ scholars such as Frank Wilderson and Jared Sexton. For more on this see Marriott, ‘Judging Fanon.’

⁹ Moten, ‘The Case of Blackness’, 187

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid; Moten, ‘Blackness and Nothingness’, 739.

¹² Bryant, *Democracy of Objects*

¹³ Watts, ‘Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency Amongst Humans on Non Humans’.

¹⁴ Leong, ‘The Mattering of Black Lives’; Jackson, ‘Animal’.

¹⁵ Ahmed, ‘Open Forum Imaginary Prohibitions’; Åsberg, Thiele, van der Tuin, ‘Speculative Before the Turn’.

¹⁶ Zoe Todd, ‘An Indigenous Feminist Take on the Ontological Turn’.

¹⁷ For more on this see Leong, ‘The Mattering of Black Lives’, ‘Rosenberg ‘The Molecularization of Sexuality’. Of course, not all ‘new materialist’ or ‘speculative realist’ scholarship seeks this separation; and some seek it more than others.

¹⁸ Leong, ‘The Mattering of Black Lives’, 7.

¹⁹ Ahmed, ‘phenomenology of whiteness.’

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- ²⁰ Rosenberg, 'The Molecularization of Sexuality'. In referring to the 'attack on the social', Rosenberg draws on Fred Moten's collaboration with Stefano Harney in *The Undercommons*. The 'society' that is under attack pertains to the commons (or undercommons) and collectivity. See Harney and Moten, *The Undercommon*.
- ²¹ Chen, 'Questionnaire on materialisms', 22
- ²² See also Rosenberg, 'The Molecularization of Sexuality'.
- ²³ Kane, 'Sound studies', 4
- ²⁴ Cox, 'Beyond Signification and Representation', 146, my emphasis. Cox's overview of the theoretical paradigms of music and the visual arts risks repeating the racialized citational erasures mentioned above apropos of the ontological turn more generally. Kodwo Eshun, for example, pre-empts a number of Cox's arguments (i.e. the call to 'think sonically' rather than to 'think about sound'). However, Eshun uses these ideas to speak to and of blackness and afrodiasporic music. See Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun*.
- ²⁵ I use 'onto-epistemology' to foreground the entanglement and co-constitution of ontology (questions of being) and epistemology (questions of knowledge).
- ²⁶ Cox, 'Sonic philosophy'.
- ²⁷ Cox, 'Sound Art', 25. Cox's reading of these artistic examples is somewhat selective. Christina Kubisch's *Electrical Walks*, for instance, raises 'socially-oriented' questions about space and place; and of the invizibilized presence of technological infrastructures in social life. Indeed, in an interview with Cox, Kubisch explicitly (though perhaps unintentionally) foregrounds the racialization of listening: when asked about hearing voices when participating in *Electrical Walks*, Kubisch recalls an experience in Switzerland: 'I came across a group of people – I think it was a group of Indian people – celebrating a religious service in their own language. Because I didn't understand the language, at first I thought it was some kind of terrorist meeting, with all this shouting and these rhythmic sounds. But then I heard the "Hallelujah" and "Amen" and I understood what it was.' See Cox and Kubisch, 'Invisible cities'.
- ²⁸ Sterne, 'Theology of Sound', 212.
- ²⁹ Cox, 'Beyond representation and signification', 155. See also, Thompson, "Feminised noise".
- ³⁰ See Kahn, 'John Cage: silence and silencing'; Piekut, 'Sound's modest witness'.
- ³¹ See Haraway, *Modest-Witness@Second Millennium*.
- ³² Piekut, 'Sound's Modest Witness', 14.
- ³³ Lewis, 'Improvised Music after 1950', 242.
- ³⁴ For more on the politics of Cagean aesthetics see Joseph *Beyond the Dream Syndicate*. George Lewis notes that there is a disconnect between Cage's 'very American notion of freedom' and 'any kind of struggle that might be required' in order to obtain that freedom,. See Lewis, 'Improvised music after 1950', 222.
- ³⁵ Cox, 'Beyond representation and signification', 157.
- ³⁶ Sullivan, 'The somatechnics of perception', 309.
- ³⁷ Ibid. 315.
- ³⁸ Kane, 'Sound Studies', 13.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 16.
- ⁴⁰ English, 'Various – Airport Symphony'.
- ⁴¹ Kouvaras, *Loading the Silence*, 161.
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ Schrimshaw, 'Any place whatever.'
- ⁴⁴ Cox, 'Sound art', 24.
- ⁴⁵ Ahmed, 'Phenomenology of whiteness' 163.

⁴⁷ Moten, 'The Case of Blackness', 187.

⁴⁸ See Marriott 'Judging Fanon'.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 182.

⁵⁰ Moten, *Into The Break*, 14. Moten exemplifies the phonic resistance of the object apropos of Frederick Douglass's account of his Aunt Hester's scream when beaten by a slave master. The scream is both a reference to and refusal of object status; of fungibility, insofar as the object does not speak. See Moten, *Into the Break*, 1-24.

⁵¹ Amobi has described sonic ugliness as a means of pointing listeners to the violence in society, as a means of working through such violence. See Joyce, 'Chino Amobi makes violent music for violent times.'

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