

Bryce McCormick, UNC Chapel Hill

UNIT: Human/Subject/World

“Sound Studies, Resonant Bodies, and the Construction of Meaning”

### **Takeaways, Sound Studies**

My three key takeaways from sound studies pertain to knowledge production, the body, and its analytical potential for thinking about the politics of listening.

- First, the sonic space, while integral to the production of knowledge, remains understudied and is often overshadowed by the dominance of textual and visual analysis.
- Second, sound permeates the porous body, creating emotional resonance that shapes the very foundation upon which meaning is constructed.
- Finally, sound studies offers a diverse set of conceptual tools—noise, silence, rhythm, music, language—to deepen our understanding of political phenomena, including processes of racialization, the exploitation of affective labor through digital technologies, and the formation and maintenance of empire.

### **Annotated Bibliography**

Butler, Shane, and Sarah Nooter, eds. *Sound and the Ancient Senses*. The Senses in Antiquity. New York: Routledge, 2019.

- This edited volume explores how ancient Greek and Roman people perceived and conceptualized sound. A recurring theme throughout is the juxtaposition between sound and silence and how both were utilized in ancient practices to evoke emotional responses and convey meaning. Of note is Stephen Kidd’s chapter, “Sound, an Aristotelian Perspective,” which focuses on the philosopher’s attempt to bridge the gap between sound as a physical phenomenon, and our subjective experience of hearing that sound. Kidd’s analysis centers on how Aristotle thinks of sound not just as an external vibration but as something intrinsically linked to the act of hearing. This forces the reader to consider the (im)possibility of experiencing “just sound” devoid of its emotional and cognitive associations.

Eidsheim, Nina Sun. *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019.

- This book argues that vocal timbre contains little to no information despite racialized truth claims, or “timbral discriminations” that are often asserted about a person based on the sound of their voice. Of the many interventions regarding the relationship between vocal timbre and the construction of race, Eidsheim argues that the listener produces their own assessment, and assigns a value (gendered, racial, cultural, religious, etc). In this way, the listener becomes the source of the sound. The voice, for the author, is collective not singular, cultural not innate. Both listener and speaker operate in tandem to affect and entrain the vocalizer materially and thus sonically.

Hainge, Greg. *Noise Matters: Towards an Ontology of Noise*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.

- Hainge argues that noise, often dismissed as something to be suppressed, possesses significance beyond the auditory. Noise, the author claims, exists in everything from physical matter to abstract ideas thus challenging traditional dichotomies between sound and silence, music and noise, and signal and interference. Hainge critiques how noise has traditionally been seen as a disruption, proposing instead that noise is ontologically central to how we experience the world.

Kane, Brian. *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

- Acousmatic sound refers to a sound that you hear without being able to see the source of that sound. By focusing on how we listen to sounds without seeing their source, Kane suggests that we can gain a deeper understanding of how sound affects us and how it can create meanings. This approach allows the author to propose an ontology of sound that includes not only the technical aspect of sound but also, and importantly the ways in which sound is experienced, interpreted, and used in different cultural and historical contexts.

Lochhead, Judith, Eduardo Mendieta, and Stephen Decatur Smith, eds. *Sound and Affect: Voice, Music, World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021.

- This edited volume brings together essays exploring the historical and contemporary intersections of sound and emotion, with a focus on how listening and musical experience are deeply embodied, involving the body's physical, emotional, and psychological responses. Two notable chapters are by Eduardo Mendieta and Martin Scherzinger. In "The Philosopher's Voice: The Prosody of Logos," Mendieta critiques the disembodied view of language in philosophy, emphasizing how rhythm, tone, and accent are crucial to meaning making. Scherzinger's "Music, Labor, and Technologies of Desire" examines how digital technologies commodify both music and the affective experiences of listeners, shaping desires and reinforcing consumption patterns. Scherzinger also raises concerns about how these technologies exploit affective labor and manipulate listener behavior in the digital age.

Radano, Ronald, and Tejumola Olaniyan, eds. *Audible Empire: Music, Global Politics, Critique*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

- This edited volume explores the intersections of music, sound, and imperialism, with various authors arguing that empires were "audible formations," where music played a key role in the spread of imperial power. Notable chapters examine the influence of European tonal systems on African indigenous music, the limitations of colonial field recordings, the manipulation and racialization of music to serve imperial agendas, and how American jazz became part of an imperial archive that reinforces a national narrative while erasing non-U.S. contributions.

Schulze, Holger. *The Sonic Persona: An Anthropology of Sound*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018.

- Schulze presents a thorough exploration of how sound shapes human experience, perception, and identity. He argues that listening is not just a passive act, but a deeply embodied and culturally constructed practice that plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' social and sensory worlds. The author introduces the concept of the "sonic persona" to describe how sound experiences are integral to the formation of both personal and collective identities. The book blends sound studies, anthropology, and media theory to analyze how sound materializes, becomes a cultural force, and influences political and sensory sensibilities.

Stoeber, Jennifer Lynn. *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*. New York: New York University Press, 2016.

- This book connects sound with race demonstrating how the listening ear functions in marking the racial other in American history. Against the overdetermination of "visually driven epistemologies" the author argues that sound works in tandem with sight in the construction of race and the performance of racial oppression.

Wallmark, Zachary. *Nothing But Noise: Timbre and Musical Meaning at the Edge*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022.

- Wallmark focuses on timbre's role in shaping musical meaning and emotion, examining how timbre, rather than just pitch or rhythm, holds significant cultural and affective weight. The author argues that timbre is central to the sensory and emotional experience of music, positioning it as a key aspect of human perception, empathy, and aesthetic judgment. The book highlights timbre's capacity to evoke embodied and emotional responses, drawing on studies of empathy and motor resonance to demonstrate how listeners physically and emotionally connect to musical sound through its texture.

Wilshire, Bruce W. *The Much-At-Once: Music, Science, Ecstasy, the Body*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2016.

- Building on William James' idea of "much-at-onceness," Wilshire explores the abundance of stimuli and emotion that constantly affect us, but that we often fail to recognize or appreciate. Drawing on philosophy, phenomenology, and ecological perspectives, the author argues that music reveals the dense, layered nature of time, emotion, and existence, allowing individuals a deeper connection to experience life beyond the intellectual or rational.

### **Relation to my own work**

My research focuses on race, religion, and sound in late colonial and early American New Orleans. I apply sound studies as a decolonizing methodology to spaces like Congo Square, a historical site where enslaved people from the African diaspora gathered, practiced religion, sang, danced, drummed, and peddled wares.

Sound studies reveals layers of history, resistance, and meaning that have been silenced by colonial narratives. Rather than centering Congo Square solely as the origin site of jazz, I

emphasize it as an intellectual space of well-being, solace, and rebellion against racial oppression. This approach privileges Afro-diasporic sacred ways of knowing as a form of decolonizing resistance, challenging colonial impacts on non-Western religious practices.

Sound studies also provides insights into the processes of white racial logic by examining how noise is constructed as an “other.” Historically, what is labeled as “noise” often reflects racial and religious othering, reinforcing boundaries of public space, religious excess, and whiteness. By exploring how marginalized sounds have been deemed disruptive or threatening, I uncover how “noise” has been used to regulate racial and religious identities, exposing the ways in which power operates through sound to define and exclude the other.