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Elephant in the Matrix

Ethical Practice and Decolonial Praxis in Sonic Research

ABSTRACT With the maturing of sound studies, and its intersection with critical studies, more attention is being given to the Anglo-Euro-centric and hegemonic legacy of acoustic ecology, as well as the cultural dimensions of sound studies. Discord between the practice of sound inquiry and sound ethnography has thus ensued, signaling the need to reexamine language and concept limitations, long-standing methods, approaches, and assumptions embedded in sonic research. In this paper we question the colonial foundations of sound studies in relation to researcher positionality and the conflicted task of attempting decoloniality from within the colonial institution that is academia. Beginning with a vignette, we position ourselves at the intersections of the discourse of coloniality and empire, and ask how sound studies, and indeed our own scholarship, mobilizes structures of power. Then we review major strands of decolonial scholarship within Canada and from key Latin American theorists, in relation to Canadian sound studies. And lastly, we offer what we call a speculative sonic framework for decolonial praxis: a set of suggestions for researchers that starts with the experiential more broadly, and the sonic more specifically, to mobilize decolonial praxis at the core of the research design. KEYWORDS colonial matrix of power; decoloniality methods; feminist STS; sound studies

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM: "WHAT AM I ALLOWED TO SAY/DO?"

The policemen stand, elbow to neon elbow, their backs surrounding the plinth. Atop the plinth, a portly imposition of Winston Churchill lurches toward Big Ben and the houses of parliament, his stride immortalized in bronze. The textured echoes of many loudspeakers ricochet across the heaving thrum of the crowd. The low hum of peaceful chanting and impassioned political oratories commingle: "We can't defeat them in the commons or the Lords, where do we defeat them? ON THE STREETS!!" Whistles shrill and drums beat. Voice upon voice upon voice. Here at this protest against the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, Black, Asian and minority ethnic speakers hold the mobile stage; the thousand-strong audience is captivated.[1] The speakers draw attention to the punitive treatment of asylum seekers; the urgent need to dismantle judicial practices that discriminate according to race and class; the silences continue to uphold British political rule at home and abroad. Importantly, they name the project of British Imperialism and how bodies from different nations are still used as tools for imperial expansion. Individual words emerge into a thread of lucidity, before weaving back into the cacophony. As Carcross/Tagish curator Candice Hopkins argues, "Listening to cacophony, to noise, tells us that there is a world beyond the structures that we inhabit and that also inhabits us."[2] Listening to the many threads of sound here at this protest, we interpret the

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underlying message behind the structure to mean that, very publicly, British citizens are bringing light to the colonial underpinnings of Great Britain and want to dismantle the lies us Brits grew up with about "the Empire upon which the sun never sets."[3]

The anti-imperial, anti-colonial conversation in the UK is clearly different from that within the Canada and the United States, which contend, in different ways, with the ongoing reverberations of slavery, associated racial tensions, and the social dynamics that weave through settler colonial systems. In Britain, where everyday life emerges from the literal and physical infrastructures of Empire, the specter of perpetrated violence silently haunts every aspect of British culture and is inextricably linked to the ongoing colonial genocide against Indigenous peoples in Canada. Building on the work of genocide scholars Andrew Woolford, Jeff Benvenuto, Christopher Powell, and the legal analysis of Indigenous Canadian genocide by the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, we do not use the term *colonial genocide* lightly. Rather, we draw attention to how colonial genocide is insidious and takes place across time in different ways, and to how the lack of its naming in public discourse is not due to the lack of its occurrence but rather to the ways that ongoing colonial ideologies obfuscate Indigenous lived realities and cultivate cultural amnesia.[4]

And with this grave reality in mind, here lies one of the problems when discussing the evolving parameters of sound studies in relation to the critique of coloniality. How might we bridge the gulf of injustice that sits between violator and violated? Whose coloniality and whose sound studies are we discussing? Moreover, who can or should define the parameters of sonic decolonial theory, and importantly, how might we navigate the complexities of this in relation to the nuances of our disparately positioned realities within the Anglo-US institution? Our disquiet in relation to all the above emerges from our increasing understanding of colonial violence in Canada, in relation to the relative lack of public discourse around it in the UK. While there are conversations happening, this protest being one of them, the extent to which British government and institutions acknowledge the magnitude of ongoing colonial genocide is embarrassingly paltry. Colonialism is discussed in the past tense. When one of the authors moved to Canada in 2017, she was shocked and ashamed to see, hear, and learn about this disconnect. In this regard, "the elephant" describes both the gravitas of institutional silence and the nuanced complexities of navigating our own complicity and relations to colonial violence, as settlers, and from within a colonial institution.

This piece was written by three researchers from diverse non-Indigenous backgrounds, all navigating coloniality from different lived perspectives, and different relations to "the elephant." We understand decoloniality as an epistemic stance that differs from anticolonial and postcolonial thinking, and the practice of decolonization. We adopt the lens of decoloniality to operationalize critical theory and practice in sound studies enunciated from within a predominantly white Canadian institution immersed in the fraught and troubling process of decolonization. To that end, we begin with literatures on decolonial theory that we connect to formulations of the field of sound studies, focusing specifically on ethnographic practice with and through sound. While we attempt parameters around disciplinary versions of sound studies and main methodologies, the field is too vast, and

we make no pretention to encompass it all. We also understand the contradiction of attempting decoloniality with colonial tools.[5] Our aim is to speak the unspeakable of the quagmire that is contemporary critical inquiry in sound and speculate on how decoloniality might be mobilized through praxis for those undertaking ethnographic sound research.

Tuck and Yang succinctly propose, "The metaphorization of decolonization makes possible a set of evasions, or "settler moves to innocence," that problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity."[6] They further argue that non-Indigenous attempts to theorize decolonization are problematic. Taking this into account, as the first author of this article; a white British researcher, of colonial descent, working in Western Canada, I've felt unsure of the "right" way to engage with decoloniality here without causing more trauma or simply adding another voice to the liberal echo chamber. A colleague suggested this paper should begin with a quote from an Indigenous scholar, proposing that if we start with my personal experience of the protest, we center my whiteness and inflict more violence. This feels complicated. I fear the line between researcher positionality and appropriation becomes easily murky. Similarly, we clearly need to move past the outdated assumptions of neutrality that worm through the hegemonic practices of the academy and imply, with their calls for diversity and inclusion, unspoken systemic authority. To "include" is a different proposition than to be "included."[7]

Positionality, from both a social and epistemic location, might be a useful starting point through which to adopt a critical perspective of coloniality, which includes hegemonic knowledge and the type of power it reproduces.[8] A pertinent example of how we might locate both the social and epistemic together is through the work of sociologist and member of the Modernity/Coloniality Group Ramón Grosfoguel. Specifically, members of this group, including Arturo Escobar, Walter Mignolo, and Rolando Vázquez, discuss coloniality as an ongoing, dynamic, and interrelated system of domination that emerges from European colonialism and is perpetuated through the Eurocentric project of modernity. Coloniality in this sense is different from colonialism, in that it articulates what Aníbal Quijano calls the colonial matrix of power that extends through Eurocentric systems of knowledge, work, authority, and gender/sexuality.

With this context in mind, Grosfoguel[9] expands on Donna Haraway's situated knowledges[10] to propose an approach to positionality that he calls a "body politics of knowledge." Building also on African-centered epistemologies of Black feminist scholars, the "geopolitics of knowledge" offered by Enrique Dussel, and the scholarship of Franz Fanon and Gloria Andulzúa, Grosfoguel illuminates a scholar's geopolitical and embodied (body political) positioning within the context of power. As Grosfoguel argues, "The disembodied and unlocated neutrality and objectivity of the ego-politics of knowledge is a Western myth."[11] So, from this perspective of an embodied politics of knowledge, the scholar is called to address the aggression of systemic coloniality as it is reproduced through hegemonic knowledge assumptions and methodologies. By situating the corporeal in relation to the geopolitical, and an ethics for practice that counters Anglo-Eurocentric propositions of the universal, Grosfoguel's approach cultivates *pluriversal* ways of knowing and

being that speak to the embodied processes of listening and knowledge-making in relation to power. Arturo Escobar describes pluriversality as a political practice of alterity involving a deep concern for social justice and a respect for a "world where many worlds fit."[12] It is within this context of pluriversality that scholars Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh adopt the concept of *Vincularidad*, which references how some Andean Indigenous thinkers understand "the integral relation and interdependence amongst all living organisms (in which humans are only a part) with territory or land and the cosmos" to describe how "different local histories and embodied conceptions and practices of decoloniality, including our own, can enter into conversations and build understandings that both cross geopolitical locations and colonial differences, and contest totalizing claims and political epistemic violence."[13]

Building on these ideas, the proposition of pluriversality, and the concept of Vincularidad, the initiation of this paper through the context of personal analogy is intended as an invitation to engage with the layers of nuance around researcher positionality and open a conversation about decolonial praxis from both epistemic and social perspectives. In this paper, we attempt to untangle some of the messiness of navigating decolonial praxis in relation to sound studies, from within an institution that upholds the colonial matrix of power. In many ways this is an unsolvable task, and we reference here the work of Sara Ahmed, who discusses complaint as feminist pedagogy and highlights the ways that reflexive inquiry might challenge coloniality and whiteness by adopting decolonial, feminist, and critical lenses from the outset.[14]

We also want to draw attention to how sound studies is uniquely situated in relation to decolonial thinking. From a methodological perspective, the sonic situates the listener in time and space, facilitating an embodied connection to the four cardinal points, north, east, south, and west, thus calling into question our understanding of time in relation to space and the very foundations on which Western epistemologies are founded. Rolando Vázquez emphasizes these connections and the ways that coloniality "annihilates relational universes" and stakes claims on what is considered real. Listening, argues Vázquez, acts as an entryway for engagement with the "real."[15] With this in mind, we suggest that sound isn't itself an entry point to decolonial thinking but affords the potential for nuance in the ways we might take a decolonial stance, in contrast to grand propositions about how sound studies might decolonize.

Mi'kmaw elder Albert Marshall proposes knowledge creation as a co-learning journey, through what he calls a "two eyed seeing approach."[16] This means to consider both Indigenous and Western epistemologies. Indebted to Marshall, we are interested to explore the issue of coloniality within sound studies from both the perspective of a pluriversal approach to listening and knowledge creation, and from the perspective of the body politics of the authors. With all three authors being immigrants to Canada, we look to facilitate dialogue with Latin American decolonial scholarship in relation to Canadian communication/sound/media theory-scholarship and acknowledge the complicated ways that migration and immigration close and open networks of exchange. Concerned with the following questions, we trace the language and concept limitations in sound studies, in relation to different decolonial approaches, and explore how these rifts preclude the

mobilization of decolonial praxis from the offset. In summary: our concern is, how do we navigate the elephant within the colonial matrix of power? By this we mean, how might we approach the discomfort and messiness of unequal power relations, systemic, unspoken, and unintended violence, and the paradox of our own complicity, and where do our own body politics come into play? As researchers embedded within the system (the colonial matrix), how might we approach listening and knowledge-making as practices that acknowledge their relations to power and take a decolonial stance, not just in theory, but through the methodological practices of listening, feeling, and sensing sound?

DECOLONIALITY VS. DECOLONIZATION AND POSTCOLONIALITY

Decoloniality, in theory and practice, is contentious. Within the Americas, epistemological rifts mark definitions of what it means to decolonize, versus the meaning of decoloniality.[17] And, despite the necessity of recognizing the geopolitics of place regarding the emergence of theory, there is no one way to describe either decoloniality or decolonization. Different conversations about what it means to decolonize emerge from two distinct canons of work: decolonial and postcolonial scholarship. These two thought trajectories have divergent lineages that draw from different social and historical critiques to modernity, and as Harding claims, a wide range of political movements that broadly speaking embrace the South both as an epistemological and a geopolitical site of enunciation from which to engage with an anticolonial worldview/project.[18] Postcolonial thinking builds on Eurocentric postmodern and post-structural projects, and therefore maintains a worldview in which the axis of modernity originated in Europe. Even within postcolonial theory, however, there are epistemological rifts between those taking or rejecting a Marxist approach, and differing ideas about the relations between race, class, and gender as systems of exclusion under capitalism, and specifically the agency and autonomy of different bodies in relation to the production of capital.[19]

Decolonial theory emerges from a Latin American context in which scholars specifically understand modernity to have originated in relation to the Iberian colonial project. The trade routes and subsequent advances of science and technology that Iberian colonialism cultivated meant that the axis of modernity as it emerged was not centered in Europe as many postcolonial scholars claim, but situated as much in Africa and the Americas, whose exploitation is considered the backbone to modernity. Many decolonial scholars, therefore, argue that the Western history of modernity, the history from which postcolonial scholarship draws, is as much a history of the erasure of Latin American and African voices.[20] Some decolonial scholars draw attention to these historical and systemic practices of erasure by arguing that decoloniality is a route through which we can understand the concept of modernity.[21] Building on the groundbreaking work of Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano,[22] Mignolo and Walsh for instance argue that modernity, coloniality, and decoloniality form a "colonial matrix of power" that can only be properly understood through engagement with the concept of decoloniality. This, they argue, is different from the act of decolonization, which must be understood partly as an individual project that questions Western biases.[23]

While recognizing the legacies of decolonization stemming from the independence of nation-states at the time of the Cold War, for Mignolo and Walsh and other scholars associated with the modernity/coloniality working group, “the horizon is not the political independence of nation-states,” but rather the goal is to unravel the hold of modernity/coloniality (the colonial matrix of power) with respect to our “thinking, being, knowing, living and understanding of the world.”[24] This points, therefore, to the ways in which the conceptualizations and enactments of decoloniality are multiple, contextual, and relational. And importantly, it points to how we are all implicated in the reproduction of the coloniality of power, in such a way that its hold on the contemporary world is no longer situated in the North Atlantic, nor is it “simply controlled and managed by the West (Anglo US and Europe).”[25]

For Walsh and Mignolo, the end of modernity/coloniality in its current conjunction with neoliberal globalism is the ultimate horizon. They believe that decolonization is an individual process to the extent that each of us is responsible for how we endorse or embrace decoloniality and therefore “our own decolonial liberation.” However, importantly, it is also “a communal process in which no one should expect someone else will decolonize him or her or decolonize X or Z, and it means that none of us, living-thinking-being-doing decoloniality should expect to decolonize someone else.”[26] The issue, or ethical dimension here, is that there will always be a temporal disjunction in the process of decolonization, as not all bodies are intersected equally by the colonial matrix of power or by the same degrees of violence. The prospect of this temporal disjunction as a precursor to process is key when thinking through decoloniality in relation to sound studies. Much as coloniality intersects all bodies differently, so too does the sonic, and we propose that the process of engaging the sonic must question how we understand the relations between time and space, how we might imply epistemic authority in relation to this, and what living-thinking-being-doing decoloniality really means for a researcher in Canadian and North American academic institutions working with the sensory-driven particularities of sound.

The issue of epistemic authority is another important thread in this tangle and is taken up by Bolivian feminist activist scholar Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, who argues that some decolonial scholars, such as Mignolo and Walsh, perpetuate colonial domination through the monopolization of decolonial discourse and frameworks within the Western-biased academy.[27] For Cusicanqui, a decolonial approach must draw from and give back to the local; anything else runs the risk of erasing the local, neutralizing true decolonial practice and generating what she calls a political economy of knowledge. Much like Fanon,[28] who saw the radio as an actor marking space between the settler and the Indigenous mindset, Cusicanqui draws attention to how some decolonial scholars perpetuate the Anglo-Eurocentric imaginary, and this especially relates to the multiculturalism mobilized by Mignolo.

Cusicanqui argues that multiculturalism is another way of maintaining colonial dominance through the myth of “First Peoples,” where Indigenous voices are caricatured, forced into piecemeal and reductive roles, and cut off from inclusive narratives about modernity. For Cusicanqui, this exclusion operates within another dimension akin to

epistemological multiculturalism. Through a selective and facile expropriation of discourses regarding modernity and coloniality, scholars related to Mignolo's modernity/coloniality group develop "fashionable, depoliticized and comfortable multiculturalism."[29] Discourses for easy consumption in the northern academy, which are then exported back to the South and, according to Cusicanqui, capture the energy and availability of Indigenous intellectuals "who may be tempted to play the ventriloquist of a convoluted conceptualization that deprives them of their roots and their dialogues with the mobilized masses."[30] The author is in this way aligned with some decolonial scholars in Canada who argue against decoloniality as theory or academic discourse and for the practice of decolonization.

In settler-colonial Canada, where multiculturalism exists as a policy employed to include Indigenous communities in the national project, the question of what it means to decolonize is also diverse and complicated. Many of the arguments center around what Canadian-based scholars Michelle Daigle and Margaret Marietta Ramírez call "a politics of place."[31] In Canada, the politics of place has a particular kind of potency, as First Nations populations live with the injustices of colonialism each day while being fed dominant discourses about multiculturalism.[32] This idea of a politics of place is also asserted by Unangaxä scholar Eve Tuck, and K. Wayne Yang, for whom decolonization centers on the repatriation of Indigenous lands and practices.[33] Much like Cusicanqui, Tuck and Yang are outspoken critics of decolonization as a "metaphor" and argue that it is only through the inclusion of Indigenous voices, ontologies, and epistemologies that any valid decolonial conversation can take place. However, inclusion within a system is at odds with the rejection of that system. Yellowknives Dene scholar Sean Coulthard critiques multiculturalism in opposition to the romanticization of indigeneity and takes a Marxist approach to argue for a practice that rejects capitalist power structures and resituates Indigenous governance, economic independence, and sovereignty.[34] For Coulthard, settler colonial attempts at reconciliation through practices of multiculturalism perpetuate white privilege and dominance. In this way, Coulthard's position of decoloniality aligns with that of Mignolo, who argues for an epistemological "delinking" from Western imperialism.[35] However, Mignolo rejects the Marxist approach to decoloniality for its omission of Latin American agency within written histories of modernity. Similarly, Ramon Grosfoguel and Juanita Sundberg accentuate how sometimes a Eurocentric (postmodern) focus is taken by decolonial scholars, pointing out that Eurocentric epistemologies, conceptualizations of modernity, and other Eurocentric biases drive the idea of postmodernism to continue and reproduce colonial power imbalances. They argue that a true critique of the colonial project cannot be considered if it's biased in this way.[36]

For Daigle and Ramírez an intersectional approach to decoloniality is important, and the politics of place on which they focus is not just the land but also the human body. In concurrence with Emma Peréz, who discusses the imposition of colonial heteronormativity in relation to the construction of the US–Mexico border, and Argentinian scholar and member of the modernity/coloniality group Maria Lugones, who argues that the gender binary is a colonial construct, Daigle and Ramírez propose an extension of the decolonial toward our understanding of the colonial construction of gendered bodies, in

particularly queer, trans, and two-spirit bodies.[37] Building on these ideas around the ways that coloniality formulates gendered differences, Bolivian anarcho-feminist activist María Galindo proposes there is no decoloniality without depatriarchalization.[38] With all these arguments in mind, the rift between decoloniality and decolonization is clear and shows how complex the field of study is.

Where then, does this leave sound studies, as a field that emerges from an Anglo-Eurocentric lineage[39] and constructs the concept of orality in relation to the North, and in opposition to the South?[40] A field whose ethnographic application stems from the Canadian tradition of acoustic ecology and is organized around the spatial-anthropocentric notion of a "soundscape."[41] Alejandra Bronfman argues that categories of difference are created and recreated through sound,[42] an idea that is also explored by critics of the historical sound studies canon who highlight the lack of discourse about sound as a system that shapes and reproduces racial hierarchies and colonial heteronormativity.[43] Building on these ideas, we question how sound studies might both address its gaps in the context of decolonization and support sound scholars who are keen to take a decolonial stance and, more, apply decoloniality at the core of their research design. We discuss this in detail at the end of the paper, but first we attend to the ways that sound and listening have been implicated, through the concept of orality, in the construction of South as a geographical and epistemological construct different from the North.

ORALITY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SOUTH FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF NORTH/CANADA

Early North American communication studies, and subsequently sound studies, are intimately bound in the construction of "South" as a category, both geographically and epistemologically. It has been argued widely that the way we use our senses, if not constitutive of epistemology, at the very least shapes, influences, and co-constructs our epistemological relations in any given socio-historical context.[44]

Ong and others have argued that the emergence of writing created an epistemological paradigm shift characterized by analytical, structured thought, different from the poetic traditions of primary oral cultures.[45] Literacy, they posit, helped shape the logical, analytical tradition of philosophy and science culminating in the period of modernity in the West. This is part of a classical discourse sometimes referred to as "oral theory,"[46] which is concerned with the differences, both epistemological and cognitive, between "literacy" and "orality." The orality/literacy debate foundational to modern (Canadian) communication studies focuses on the origins of Western civilization and is deeply problematic precisely because it explains Western modernity without attention to the colonial matrix of power from which modernity emerges.

"Orality"—within the discursive domain of early communication studies—denotes pre-literate traditions of dialogical, participatory knowledge practices characterized by a unity of the senses[47] and intimate connections between human experience and the surrounding environment.[48] In trying to conceptualize the emerging media age, Marshall McLuhan was inspired by Jack Goody's anthropological work on the orality of

"traditional societies" of the South. Goody argued that cultural differences (as opposed to psycho-cultural—per Ong) between the developed West (the North) and Indigenous peoples of the South should be presented as an oral–literate divide.[49] Unlike McLuhan, Goody wasn't a romantic when it came to a "return of orality"—he hoped his research would show how literacy has elevated Western civilization from the dark ages of song to the light of the written word (not subtle with the title of his book being *Domesticating the Savage Mind*). Still, it is important to keep in mind that these early anthropologists were trying to evolve conceptions of the Other away from a duality of "savage" vs. "civilized" societies, replacing these labels instead with the more innocuous oral–literate distinction.[50]

Along came the media age, and with it, McLuhan's totalizing idea of the sensorium. Located in this idea is simultaneously an evolutionary explanation for media technology and a reframing of North–South distinctions. Early communication scholars started to romanticize orality and sound as symbolisms of wild, untamed culture, in contrast to the dogmatism of a literate Western modernity. However, the excitement of liberating the "forgotten senses" of hearing, touch, or smell from the clutches of the visualist tradition makes it easy to slip into revisionist histories and rewrite the "story of sound" as a de facto radical historicization.[51] As anthropologist Veit Erlmann puts it: "it seems problematic to make the reverse proposition that, if we are to explore new possibilities for challenging Western hegemony, it will become necessary to map an alternative economy of the senses in which prominence must be given to the neglected 'second sense.'"[52] Erlmann cautions that post-structuralist critiques of modernity often "appear to be couched in nostalgic terms"[53] and in the case of the auditory—as a hankering for an "authentic subjectivity" that is really the familiar fascination with "the Africa within" (as per McLuhan's "man of total awareness" based on his readings of Carpenter and Goody's anthropological works).[54]

What we can surmise from this theoretical context is that Anglo-Euro-centric colonial thinking is central to the formation of a North–South distinction in communication studies, with sound/orality being the linchpin in these debates. Acknowledging this theoretical heritage is thus critical to the project of decolonizing sound studies. In a project to address the conceptual flaws of the "audio-visual litany"—a set of persisting essentializing oppositions between vision and sound—Sterne's book *The Audible Past* demonstrates that the story of Western modernity can be told in sound just the same as it can be told through literacy and visualism. Sound, then, is not a de facto decolonizing angle or even a counter-hegemonic perspective, and the question of how to do decolonial sound studies, therefore, remains open. Recent work within the wider field of sound studies attempts to address decoloniality at both conceptual, epistemic, and pragmatic levels, in several different ways. In the following sections we survey these critiques of sound studies in conversation with our own propositions for a decolonial lens to use when working with sound.

SOUND STUDIES TO THE RESCUE

While scholars such as Steingo and Sykes[55] propose a "remapping" of sound studies with their "turn to the global south," we instead acknowledge the depth of sound studies'

colonial mindset, and seek to examine the ways that we might, as a field of study, unlink from it, beginning with a more localized perspective that facilitates a pluriversal approach to knowledge creation via a body politics of knowledge.[56] To build up these ideas we draw from the work of Indigenous feminist scholars Aymaran Julieta Paredes and Mayan Lorena Cabnal, who argue for community feminism and a decolonial practice that undoes the hetero-patriarchal structures that define all relations and social structures and implies concrete actions to free "pueblos originarios" (Indigenous communities).[57] While we acknowledge that this is something we cannot do, we do recognize the ways that decoloniality is entangled with patriarchy and can't be separated.

We also draw here again from Cusicanqui, for whom the Aymara concept of *ch'ixi* articulates contradiction as a vital energy and points to how we might live as complete subjects despite our inconsistencies. Within this tangle of messiness, we lean on Donna Haraway's discussions around "staying with the trouble"[58] and argue that any approach to "remap" sound studies falls short through its imposition of a homogenous declaration of sound studies' emerging parameters. As conceptualizations and enactments of decoloniality are multiple, contextual, and relational, so too are the ways we think through, and with, the sonic. Just as warnings against a "sensory atomism" of sound as a presumed counter-hegemonic lens[59] are materialized in Sterne's story of North America's sonic modernity,[60] we caution that a geopolitical redirection of sound runs the risk of essentializing the South as an inherently different context, and a focus on place at the expense of researcher positionality and decolonial research praxis. We take seriously the need for sound studies to question its foundational epistemologies, as Paredes argues: "Epistemologies have power. They have the power not only to transform worlds, but to create them. And the worlds that they create can be better or worse."[61] We posit then that what sound studies needs is not a change of scenery, not even a change in fundamental questions, but changes in process that start with the role of the researcher and their reflexive and body political relationships to the subject and substance of study, its geopolitical context, and their obligations to knowledge creation.

Before we move on with critiques of the Western hegemony in sound studies, we must first define what sound studies is and how it relates to cognate disciplines that engage sound. Slippage of field definitions have resulted in a confusion of critiques and ultimately a confusion of best practices for research and theoretical continuity. In a 2005 article Michele Hilmes asks, "Is there a field called sound studies and what is it?"—referring to discourses surrounding sound studies as an "always emerging never emerged" field.[62] Between then and the present moment sound studies has not only emerged but has become so entrenched as to have a conceptual "canon," presumably stemming from Sterne's articulation of the field.[63] But which sound studies? In this paper we use the prefix "cultural" sound studies to refer to Sterne's established principles for undertaking sound-themed research, in contrast to, for example, ethnographic approaches that use listening as method: a set of practices that share more with anthropology and hearken back to the "soundscapes methods" of acoustic ecology.[64]

If we follow a historical lineage, anthropology has had a history of mainly speaking with voices from the North/West about cultures of the South. This is certainly the case in

ethnomusicology, which makes Steven Feld's[65] longitudinal work with the Kaluli a notable exception. In a separate methodological piece, he acknowledges the problematic extractivist canons of ethnomusicology by sharing his ethical struggles in the field:

> And the first day I was there, within two hours of arriving in the village, we heard sung weeping. Somebody had died. They said, "Get your tape recorder." I didn't understand the language. I didn't know anything! So here I am, wham! With big Nagra [tape recorder] and headphones and microphone sitting among all these people who were weeping. I just sort of closed my eyes and listened and realized that I could easily spend a year trying to figure out the first sounds I was hearing.[66]

Although Feld's research practice hasn't significantly permeated anthropology, the tradition of sensory studies that is based on the anthropology of the senses is an exemplary starting point for a decolonial listening praxis.[67] In arguing for a development of common language for the study of the senses, Porcello, Ochoa, Meintjes, and Samuels propose, similarly to our argument here, an interrogation of traditions from communication studies to anthropology with the aim of generating common language and common practices of "body sensorial knowledge."[68] One might even say that what is lacking in sound studies in the present moment is precisely critical, reflexive sound anthropologies that interrogate and challenge coloniality and whiteness not through engaging sound per se, but by the very process of forming inquiries, positioning their work, and adopting a critical, feminist, and/or decolonial lens at the onset. This leads us to a unique tradition in sound studies: the emergence of acoustic ecology in the late 1960s as another critique of modernity that sets up sound as a new entry point into understanding ailing post-industrial relations.[69] Importantly, Schafer was a contemporary of McLuhan and shared in many of his theories around media and the sensorium.[70] Schafer's cornerstone text *The Tuning of the World* is filled with references to orality and an undercurrent of romanticization of an "acoustically rich" tribal subject. Another key contemporary of this field is Bernie Krause, whose work in bioacoustics crystalized in the notion of "acoustic niches" and likely inspired Schafer's own articulation of acoustic masking as a detriment to healthy sonic environments.

Acoustic ecology is a truly interdisciplinary field: it is ethnographic in utilizing listening as a method of lived experience, but it is also hermeneutic in that it organizes soundscapes into building blocks and categorizes sound ecologies as healthy or unhealthy.[71] Acoustic ecology is thus both normative and interventionist, which is ironically what has inspired its recent critiques: it prescribes a certain attentive listening as almost a civic practice and holds up natural environments as balanced optimal acoustic systems. Early acoustic ecologists generated theory and raised awareness of issues important to them; given the poverty of diverse voices in art and academia at this historical point in time it is not hard to imagine why acoustic ecology is critiqued for having white hegemonic roots.[72] Acoustic ecology, however, was undoubtedly a unique and exciting moment in the history of interdisciplinary academia and inspired much of the emergence of cultural sound studies in the early 2000s. Again, acoustic ecology is neither anthropology nor cultural theory, and its fluidity has produced both decades of sound art and

casework in soundscape studies: mini ethnographies that feature localized exploration of cultures through sound, whether focused on a region or a technology. It is more accurate to speak of acoustic ecology as a movement than an academic discipline: its core practice of listening borrows as much from spiritual traditions of meditation as theory and methodology. That makes it a sort of grandmother to sound studies, which, as an institutionalized field, seeks to formalize itself at the same time as critique its foundations.

Sound studies is a term Sterne introduces in his 2012 reader, with its main method being historiography—an exploration of archival documents and media with a cultural theory lens. Sterne's guidelines for sonic research are not limited to historiography, but that is what his work models. Much of the work in this now-emerged field of sound studies is inspired by science and technology studies (STS). It takes technology as its basis and extrapolates conceptually outwards to socio-cultural patterns. Sound studies has since come to stand for any and all inquiries into sound, or through listening, which we hope to demonstrate is epistemically and practically problematic. When (cultural) sound studies talks about listening, what is meant is listening as a concept and a macro-level cultural practice: a crystallization of socio-political conditions and "audile techniques."[73] In other words, sound and listening operate as hermeneutic abstractions. When ethnomusicology, sensory anthropology, or acoustic ecology talk about listening we mean actually using our ears to listen to sound. Under a decolonial lens that means the particular ears of a particular researcher listening to a particular place, nested in a larger socio-historical time. To be clear, we reference sound studies without any pretension to comment on it or address it in a comprehensive way, but merely to acknowledge that it is vital to separate ethnographic explorations into sonic realities from cultural theory. To that end, critiques of that amorphous field that we call "sound studies" must account for the internal foundations and goals of each branch on its own terms.

This messiness of disciplinary boundaries is evident in our next section, where we offer three moments of discursive critique of the field of sound studies. Each work problematizes its West/North-based roots and offers decolonial or postcolonial readings of sound studies scholarship. To this we add our discussion of what we see as conflating and asymmetrical critiques and center them around the tension between empirical or anthropological work in sound, and the "canon of sound studies" as sonic STS. We do this to chart a path between the mounting critiques of sound studies at the same time as the field itself is imploding, and arguably, in need of restructuring.

CASE STUDIES IN SOUND: THEORY AND PRACTICE

In *Remapping Sound Studies*, Gavin Steingo and Jim Sykes set out to develop what they call "a new cartography of global modernity for sound studies"[74] to reorient the field toward the Global South and provoke a conceptual and political unsettling, drawing heavily from a postcolonial approach. They propose thinking sound, not as the South (or analogous with the South) but rather in and from the South. Inspired by the work of postcolonial theorist and feminist activist Françoise Vergés, for Sykes and Steingo the South is a kind of radical horizon of geopolitics that dislodges the North as the site of the

original and the true.[75] A move toward tracing alternative cartographies to undo epistemic elisions to address the lacunas in Anglo-European scholarship is not novel. For instance, feminist scholars have resorted to tracing alternative geographies of feminist art to decenter the canon of Western art histories for more than a decade now.[76] This move is generative and strategic when the objective is to augment and diversify the existing canon. But the imperial logic underpinning cartographic imaging may not lend itself to a decolonial unsettling. It may reproduce the epistemic structures that define a (the) canon. This is the paradox underlying Steingo and Sykes's approach. As Ochoa Gautier points out while drawing attention to the colonial/modern logic that simultaneously conjoins sound with South and to the deliberate omission of sound practices and theories from the South, the authors and editors in this volume grapple with the paradox of tracing new geographical terrains while reproducing dominant epistemic traditions, from their very much Northern prestigious institutions.[77]

How then do the authors propose to dislodge the North as the site of origin and truth without questioning its epistemic and ontological foundations? Steingo and Sykes propose to do so with two moves. First they suggest an "imaginary reader" composed of Southern-focused and mostly anthropological/ethnographic sound studies that have been omitted from what they define as the "sound studies canon" to highlight the concomitant and long existence of sound discourses in the South and define seven key topics: sound ecologies; speech acts and oratory; speech acts and oratory; race, ethnicity, class, and gender; sonic ontologies and religion; colonialism and neo-colonialism; encounters of domination and technology and media. The selection of texts in the "imaginary reader" reveals their postcolonial and anthropological mapping approach, which is heavily centered on studies on Africa, South Asia, and India written in English and mostly published in Anglo-based journals, the politics of which are not fully addressed. In passing, the authors acknowledge that the reader should include translations from texts in other languages (mainly here they cite canonical work by Latin American scholars).

Their second move is to argue for the construction of a new, but not exclusive, cartography of sound theory through three main proposals: (1) rethinking the relationship between sound and technology; (2) questioning the ontological relationship between the listener and something heard, and (3) a conceptualization of sonic history as nonlinear and saturated with friction.[78] While these three main proposals tackle new understandings of the sonic, the aural, and their entanglements with different histories and practices of listening, it is unclear how the frameworks for relationality are so different from the ones articulated in "canonical" sound studies. Sure, the interpretations and conclusions of how sonic technologies operate in the South might be different, but the very idea that they are co-constitutive and governed by geopolitical and culturally specific principles remains. Even in terms of shifting the geographical focus of sound-themed work away from the North/West domain, the volume leaves out a wealth of scholarship in sound that has actively tackled epistemic and ontological foundations of sound through more situated and intersectional methodologies.[79]

Moreover, while the invitation of this volume is "to disassemble and reassemble, from the South, in the South, and through the South, the privileged montage of sound studies

as understood in the North,"[80] the ideological and geographical binary underpinning this project relocates the site of articulation and validation of knowledge in the North. And as Ochoa Gautier points out, the intention of these approaches is not to name a lack, as in the lack of South in sound studies to create a new genealogy, but to provoke a "change of route by the act of naming." Instead of launching further critique that this reorientation isn't doing enough to place sound in the "East," as in Middle East or Eastern Europe, or operate in non-English, we argue, as stated above, that what ethnographic sound studies needs is a change in process, starting with the role of the researcher.

Sound studies for sure needs a reckoning to be more inclusive, to include more voices that will naturally speak from new cultural and geographic localities. But some of that work has been done all along and it needs recognition: after all, part of the "Northern" canon of academic work is to manufacture "gaps" in knowledge, and a genuine commitment to inclusivity might necessitate not writing more books but stepping back and listening to what may already be there from the Global South, and East. At the same time, what we hope to offer here is a speculative process for doing critical and ethical research with sound and listening. Building from a broad range of feminist epistemologies, we acknowledge how the positionality of a researcher (their race, ethnicity, gender, body ableness, and cultural and social capital) influences the outcome of any research question, project, or proposition.[81] As Haraway puts it: "Our positionality inherently determines what it is possible to know about an object of interest." Comprehending situated knowledge "allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see"[82] (or hear?). Without this accountability, the implicit biases and societal stigmas of the researcher's community are twisted into ground truth from which to build assumptions and hypotheses. At the same time, for positionality not to turn into an "unloading" and a performative declaration of innocence, the process of articulating positionality needs to be self-reflexively connected with the particular listening practice, or sonic inquiry; with the particular method, relationship-building, or even access to space. Without this careful reflexive process, the exercise of "remapping" sound studies remains a discursive move only.

Inspired by the work of Dylan Robinson and Rolando Vázquez, our approach differs substantially from Steingo and Sykes's postcolonial focus on building sonic solidarities across Southern spaces articulated within and for an Anglo-speaking academy. Vázquez articulates how coloniality upholds normative understandings of temporality that frame the practice of listening as a linear process. For Vázquez, there is a transformational quality to listening through the lens of decoloniality. By shaping our listening thus, we might situate ourselves in a relational cosmology that understands a diverse complexity of relation over the linear subject.[83] This is ultimately a position that does not seek to impose power: "decolonial aesthesis posits the primacy of relation, over abstraction and authorship."[84]

Also thinking through the relations between sound and power in a Canadian context, xwélmexw scholar Dylan Robinson articulates an approach to listening that places the listener in the context of unknowing and situates the sonic in the context of that which should not be extracted. Drawing on Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the contact zone,[85]

and how unequal power structures might be sensed through the embodied process, Robinson calls for a fine-tuning of our relationships to privilege and how they influence our sonic experience. Hungry Listening, argues the author, describes extractivist settler colonial practices whereby the listener places value judgments around aesthetics and assumes certainty about what is being heard and how the sonic is theorized. In contrast, Indigenous listening practices understand the sonic as a potential mode of communication through which Indigenous Knowledge might be passed. Robinson's invitation to dissect the nuances of our individual positionality is contextualized by his proposition that positionality is not enough. Building on Tuck and Yang's argument against theory-based decoloniality, the author argues that positionality should work as a dynamic and guiding process in tandem with practice-led intent. Through this process, he proposes that new strategies for settler listening might accept incommensurability, or that which we do not have common language for, and challenge organized narrative, which he proposes gets in the way of the "new temporalities of wonder."[86]

SPECULATIVE SONIC FRAMEWORK FOR DECOLONIAL PRAXIS

How then, with all these approaches and contradictions in mind, might the sonic researcher attempt decoloniality from within the colonial matrix of power? Specifically, how might we highlight the elephant in the room: the messiness of our own complicity, and limitations as researchers, the contradiction of doing research from within a colonial institution, while also structuring our research design with decoloniality at the core of our methodology? In what follows, we draw together the legacy of decolonial scholarship that we describe above, in relation to the legacy of sound studies, to respond to Cabnal's proposition that "concrete actions" are needed to decolonize.[87] We further respond to Mignolo's call for "new subjective modalities"[88] that support the process of unlinking from the colonial project; the work of Jairo I. Fúnez-Flores, who suggests decolonial thought and praxis as not an "end goal but an attitude";[89] and referencing Sterne's[90] Sonic Imagination checklist, we offer our Speculative Sonic Framework for Decolonial Praxis: a set of five lenses that we hope will encourage and inspire the operationalization of decoloniality in sonic research. There are many ways of doing decoloniality from within and outside the system, and we see this is as an open-ended gesture that seeks to pluralize[91] rather than transcribe how it might be done. Contextualized by the gravitas of remediating the colonial project, we hope to encourage a sense of playfulness here and invite readers to imagine their own lenses in addition.

1. Situating: As we describe above, decolonial theory, and sound studies, are not monolithic disciplines with fixed criteria. Instead, they are complex ecosystems, each with its own contexts, nuances, and intricacies. The project of decolonizing sound studies and practicing decoloniality means different things in the Anglo-academy in contrast to the embodied histories in Australia or Latin America, for instance. We highlight therefore the importance of knowing who we are in conversation with, and seeking clarity on where a new research inquiry fits within the frameworks of its branch field. This is where we get to define our cosmology of relations, which includes identifying which philosophy of

method to use, knowing the methodological topography, its patterns, constraints, and affordances. It includes getting clear on what contribution the research will make, and to which field of study. For instance, studying how other people listen requires methods from sociology, while exploring the acoustic environment requires guidance from ethnography and sensory anthropology.

2. Positionality: Dylan Robinson suggests using listening positionality as a starting point for sonic research, emphasizing that there is no fixed correct method. We imagine positionality as a dynamic force and omnipresent guide that helps the researcher align subjectivity with all aspects of the research, rather than simply listing personal identity. We highlight here the importance of not overshadowing methodological responsibility by excessively focusing on positionality, a concern noted by David Howes;[92] rather, we propose taking a stance of curiosity about how positionality acts as a compass guiding us toward our research questions. How does it give (or not give) us access to the research site, to participants, and to sonic "content"? How does our positionality define what our body politics of knowing are, within the context of power? Are we someone who must navigate safety in public space, for instance? What are the ways that we can think about, embody, and practice "situated listening?"[93] Do we have access to wilderness? Do our life responsibilities preclude certain durations of time spent in the field? How is our work impacted by finances, and in relation to this, what is our access to technology like?

3. Reflexive iteration: While positionality happens at the stage of framing the research question and then again when writing up the project, we articulate reflexivity as an essential, ongoing process that permeates every phase of the research. We also envisage reflexivity as a pursuit of transformation. Our perspective on this is as follows: when the outcome is solely our approach and positionality, the focus of the work centers the researcher again. Reflexivity transforms the sometimes-static research objectives, choices, and analysis into luminary possibilities through which to explore the decolonial principles we hold dear and the decolonial approach we are taking. One of authors here recalls a time when their led soundwalk was interrupted by a participant who broke the "silence" rule to exchange words of solidarity with a local Black activist. This prompted the researcher to reflect on the arbitrary rigidity of soundwalk rules and attempt to develop ideas for responding in real time in a way that honors the critical, feminist values of the project.

4. Relationality via *Vincularidad:* The speculative lens of Vincularidad invites you to envision the very act of research as a gathering; a coming-together of ideas, voices, and perspectives. Theorists of sound tend to point out that sound (and by extension, listening) is a profoundly relational phenomenon[94] that contains a plurality of experiences, embedded meanings, and structural dimensions. Considering this, we highlight the potential here for new dialogue between individual research projects and local conversations about decoloniality. Positioning yourself as an inquirer in this way initiates speculative contemplation and further questions, such as how your project might engage with local discourse and global conversations concerning social justice. In this way, your research takes on a role akin to a resonant chord struck within the larger symphony of decolonial praxis. Just as sound travels through air, your work has the potential to ripple through

both local enclaves and the global chorus of justice seekers, weaving harmonies of protest that disrupt the outdated cacophony that is the colonial matrix of power.

5. Accountability: This, we propose, is one of the most important aspects of decentering the researcher. It's a call to action; a call to step up and hold us accountable to research methods, decisions, analysis, and relationship-building with place and community. This speculative horizon invites reflection on what it means to unlearn: in what ways can your research be conceived as a method for questioning and searching, rather than arriving at? One of the exciting aspects of this is the potential for community-building through research, writing and the ways we translate and disseminate our practice. Is there a place for piloting experimental outputs? Can you pave the way for others to do the same? This is a call to build networks; systems of support; to hold one another accountable and explore together how to be earnest and candid, to practice humility and humanity in the face of how we are each implicated, restrained, and imposed upon by the colonial matrix of power. How can we inspire and hold each other in this context, while upholding the professional standards of academia?

Between, on one side, romanticizing sound as a de facto counter-hegemonic way of accessing culture and, on the other side, a rejection of the idea of essential differences between sound and vision, there lies a practical and phenomenological uniqueness about sound that is important to recover. In concluding this work, we want to articulate this in ways that hopefully clear a path for emerging researchers. Sound's temporal nature is one quality that merits attention: sound exists in time, and research into/with sound needs to engage and problematize time. Unlike the object permanence of vision, we experience sound as unfolding, making our situational subjectivity critical to analyzing anything in the audible domain. Whether that is allocating sufficient time to listen to place, complicating the ethics of sound recording as data gathering, or seeking to unsettle Eurocentric conceptions of time, research with sound needs to consider time as an important experiential variable.

Sound is always relational—it's caused by and emergent from something else and impacts yet other things. There is no sound without the interaction of at least two material planes, surfaces, or objects. That includes bodies, air, matter, solids, and the dynamics of movement. Again, listening is profoundly physical in a way that looking isn't. An inquiry into sound should be relational and not directive or prescriptive, so in practice and theory it needs to cultivate pluriversal ways of knowing and being. Along with hearing a sound or discovering a sound within a soundscape we ask what caused the sound, what conditions came together to make this sound present. This should now send us down an exploratory path of questioning the socio-political and cultural aspects of culture, of infrastructure, of borders and boundaries, of material reality and our multifarious perceptions of it. As Douglas Khan puts it, sound is a starting point, but it almost always leads away from itself toward other things—the conditions for its existence, including the researcher's own presence in that matrix.[95]

Sound is local. Just as each soundscape is the resonance of its geography, activities, and structures, each listener brings to the listening situation a cultural repertoire that is deeply local and situationally learned.[96] The implication for research here is that we need to

know the soundscapes we work with and heed their geography and geopolitics. We make note and theoretically situate any mediation that sound undergoes as part of the research process: from being listened to, to being recorded, transformed, etc. In his sound ethnography of Havana's vibrant soundscapes of economic decay and major political shifts, Vincent Andrisani argues for a "sonic citizenship"—the idea that fine attunement to the sounds of place, including leaky pipes and ice cream trucks, is part of not only cultural habituation but also political sensibility.[97] That it is through listening that local residents enact agency over their decaying infrastructure. Andrisani does so while being careful to identify his role as a participant observer—an outsider immersed in an environment attuned to unfamiliar cultural perceptions. Yet this concept has great utility across different sites and listening situations as a way of emphasizing that the act of listening is an act of local political agency.

Finally, sound is a different entry point to experience. Because of our psychological necessity to adapt and habituate to the sonic surround (something Schafer pointed out in his original work as us not having "earlids"), intentional listening is always a potentially fresh starting point. To continue to listen means to continue to be open to new ideas, new critiques, and new ways of understanding the world. This doesn't make a sound studies inquiry automatically a decolonial approach. Each researcher has to ask themselves continually in what ways might their work counter hegemonic essentialism, foster multi-epistemic literacy, and challenge one's own relation to power as well as the ways power is wielded by the increasingly fraught system that is academia. Through our suggestions presented here, there is much opportunity not only for the researcher of sound ethnography and sound studies but also for empirical work of any kind. ■

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NOTES

1. The protest against the Police Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act took place in London on January 15, 2022.
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3. C. J. Fordyce, "The Empire on Which the Sun Never Sets," *Classical Weekly* 25 (1931), 152.
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7. As Sarah Ahmed reminds us, institutional discourses on equity, diversity, and inclusion end up being performative acts. That is, by the mere act of naming diversity, equity, and inclusion institutions may appear to be doing the job. Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 51–54.
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12. Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); Arturo Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics: The Real and the Possible* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).
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15. Rolando Vázquez, "Precedence, Earth and the Anthropocene: Decolonizing Design," *Design Philosophy Papers* 15, no. 1 (2017): 77–91.
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21. It is important here to recognize that thinking through concepts of coloniality/modernity within the decolonial studies group associated with Walsh and Mignolo were unraveled via Aníbal Quijano's theorization of coloniality in the 1990s in the context of the failure of Third World liberation struggles. This failure not only revealed the early workings of a new global neoliberal economic order but also the necessity to develop other frameworks to think through epistemic oppressions emanating from postcolonial scholarship. But decolonial scholars also frame their critique to modernity/coloniality within a deep legacy of decolonial thinking that expands to 16th-century Guaman Poma De Ayala in Peru to W. E. B Debois, Aimé Cesar, Sojourner Truth, Ottabah Cuogano, Dolores Cacuango, and Gloria Anzaldua, to name a few.
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26. Walsh and Mignolo, *On Decoloniality*, 11.
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