

Oral/Aural: Pastness and Sound as Medium and Method

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In archival footage uploaded online of a concert at the University of the Western Cape in 1988 musician Robbie Jansen declared that the next composition to be performed was named ‘Freedom Where Have You Been.’¹ Before counting the band in, Jansen offered a short discourse on the meaning of the phrase *hoya chibongo*. Hearing the Afrikaans *hoorie* (meaning *listen here*) in the expression *hoya*, Jansen proceeded to split up the word *chibongo* to accentuate *chi-* as aurally reminiscent of the suffix *-tjie* that is used in Afrikaans to mark the diminutive. *bongo*, in this context as Jansen remarked, is the drum, leading Jansen to exclaim that the phrase *hoya chibongo* means to ‘listen to the (small) drum’, the drum that is, according to Jansen, ‘the truth’. In Jansen’s exact words, ‘the drum speaks the truth and the drum has always been our language before these funny words that we are speaking now’. Jansen’s translation was markedly oral, not only in its expression of speech and languaging but also in its invocation of a historicity through the oral; an oral tradition, for all intents and purposes. In its locatedness in a musically expressive and performative moment, Jansen expressed a duality of sound that exceeds the oral itself: calling attention to how language might be a conduit for the instrument, and how in some sense the drum might speak across time and space. It usefully deepens the often cliché proclamation rehearsed in and out of music studies in particular that music is universal, or that sound might be thought of as a kind of connective tissue that allows a specific sense-making of the social.² In Jansen’s invocation of ‘before’ in his statement about the drum as language, and in debates around the meaning of sound to the social, it is history – or, a representation of pastness – that is called upon to bring about a set

1 *Robbie Jansen UWC – 1988* (University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, 2014), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9AKG0UGmzJs>. It should be noted that the composition is titled ‘Hoya Tjibongo’ as track 7 on his album *Vastrap Island*, and not ‘Freedom Where Have You Been’, as Jansen names it in the live performance. R. Jansen, *Vastrap Island*, CD (Cape Town: Mountain Records, 1989), 7, <https://www.discogs.com/Robbie-Jansen-Vastrap-Island/release/4202996>.

2 We are thinking here of a keynote address by South African musicologist Christopher Ballantine where a reflection on the link between the social and practices of music-making in South Africa was framed through a question of the social, a social that can only come into being through a relinquishing of the self towards a broader, universal social. The backing fabric for this surrendering of identity was music itself, a foregrounding of the way in which the ‘universal content of music is one of reciprocity: a mutual giving and receiving...an exchange that has the capacity to leave both sides undone yet newly produced as a “we”’. Ballantine calls for a re-valuation of syncretism as a mode through which to foster the cohesiveness of the social. C. Ballantine, ‘On Being Undone by Music: Thoughts Towards a South African Future Worth Having’, *SAMUS: South African Music Studies*, 34/35, 2015, 510.

of futures where sound mediates the experience of a temporal matrix where truth, or freedom, might be found. What Jansen does/did was not necessarily an act of translation into a local vernacular as it is the blurring of the oral and the aural in a moment that might express the relation between sound, its interpretation, and its social life, obliquely. The truth for Jansen was what the drum expressed; but it was also the drum itself. The oral is aural, as the aural is oral.

We might take a moment to read this sonic archival snippet as an exemplar of a particular entanglement of sound, pastness, technology and archive. It is from this entanglement of sound, pastness, technology and archive that this special issue sets forth. What is the *sono-historical object*, and how do we interpret, archive, ‘ab-use’ and deploy it as practitioners and scholars?³ What aesthetic work might such sono-historical objects do, and what does it demand of scholars, practitioners and curators in the work of interpretation? This entanglement of the object of analysis and the practice of analysis itself, which we can characterise as a ‘problem-space’ in David Scott’s terms, is not only a recording of the field (an account or audit of a set of arguments, debates and discourses) but is also a field recording; that is, ‘an ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political stakes) hangs.’⁴ This entanglement is evident in the ways in which sound has been an object of historical interpretation, whether as sonic trace, music, sound art, kinetic embodiment or sound archive, and the attendant debates in Southern African studies and studies of Southern Africa, as this essay will show. This volume of *Kronos: Southern African Histories* collects a number of interventions that attempt to think about the relationship between sound and history in a broad sense, and the various aspects of method, theory and practice that this intersection produces. It seeks to trace the outlines of a field – to record the field, as it were – against already existing disciplinary formations, and in so doing name the grounds as a problem space. In contemplating approaches to history or historical approaches to thinking sound, we hope to engender a different approach to sound’s relation to historical inquiry as sense and as intermedial.

Part 1: Field recordings/recording the field

Sound has become a loud, if not deafening, presence in the humanities, especially in relation to questions about archive, music studies, technology and, indeed, knowledge in the global south, through in part the now-established field of sound studies but also from long-standing inquiries into aesthetic practice, particularly music and sound art.⁵ There have been concerted efforts to make sense of what role sound in all

3 G. C. Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, First Harvard University Press paperback edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2013).

4 D. Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 4.

5 G. Steingo and J. Sykes (eds.), *Remapping Sound Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), R. M. Radano and T. Olaniyan (eds.), *Audible Empire: Music, Global Politics, Critique*, *Refiguring American Music* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

its different iterations – music, sound art, radio, voice, etc – has had in the production of the postcolonial present. Sound has a particularly prominent place in the discussion of African pasts and presents both on the continent and beyond, and sound practice is a bedrock of African aesthetic and political thought, as our opening salvo has demonstrated.⁶ Historically and historiographically, and although not always named as such, sound has always had several homes in studies of Africa and ideas of Africa: the concept of the voice in anthropology; oral history as method and archive; linguistics and its various associated debates around writing and inscription; sound as a foundational ontology of relation in various intellectual traditions; and the mediation of sound through the technology of the phonograph (which comes to form the methodological foundation of transcriptive disciplines such as ethnomusicology).⁷

Within the scholarship and practice of African history in particular, the oral as spoken sound has had a constitutive presence, not only in terms of historical practice but also as it brought into view the political stakes of history as a discipline itself and for the publics it creates.⁸ Voice is one of the heartland concepts of African history alongside experience, and it is through a study of orality that these two concepts are activated and put to work in specific contexts.⁹ These contexts have their own political stakes, as is clear in part in how the colonial discourse of disappearing authenticities in Africa has direct ties to orality as a condition of knowledge-making from Africa, resembling almost an accusation of media primitivism.¹⁰ As philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne has it, detractors of African philosophy wield orality as a limitation of knowledge-making, in which orality is ‘fragile like the memory of the ancestors; that the continuity of its passage is menaced by rupture, synonymous with death.’¹¹ Thus, orality and oral tradition as constituted against the documentary bias of a more traditional historicism reliant on the written word upend not only the theoretical basis of the discipline of history but also the form of interpretation and what is considered the work of history. It is also in African history wrought with these debates about the historicity of oral texts and the archival legacies of colonialism and apartheid that

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- 6 These debates cut across the geographies of the Atlantic, and much of the more recent work can be thought of as located within scholarship emerging from North America, often under the disciplinary label of ‘sound studies’, which itself is a contested moniker. See for example, J. L. Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*, Postmillennial Pop (New York: New York University Press, 2016), and A. Reed, *Soundworks: Race, Sound, and Poetry in Production*, Refiguring American Music (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021). On the continent itself, much of the scholarship is located disciplinarily in the areas of history and anthropology. See for example Marissa Moorman, Annette Hoffman and Lee Watkins.
 - 7 See for example, E. Ames, ‘The Sound of Evolution’, *Modernism/Modernity*, 10, 2, 2003, 297–325, V. Erlmann, *Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), W. Peitz, ‘The Phonograph in Africa: International Phonocentrism from Stanley to Sarnoff’, in *Post-Structuralism and the Question of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), E. Brady, *A Spiral Way: How the Phonograph Changed Ethnography* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999).
 - 8 J. Vansina, ‘Oral Tradition and its Methodology’, in J. Ki-Zerbo (ed.) *Methodology and African Prehistory*, General History of Africa / UNESCO 1 (London: Heinemann, 1995), 142–65, N. Rousseau, ‘“Unpalatable Truths” and “Popular Hunger”: Reflections on Popular History in the 1980s’, in J. R. Forte, P. Israel and L. Witz (eds.), *Out of History: Re-Imagining South African Pasts* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2016), 53–72.
 - 9 J. Hoegaerts, ‘Voices That Matter?: Methods for Historians Attending to the Voices of the Past’, *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques*, 47, 1, 1 March 2021, 113–37, <https://doi.org/10.3167/hrrh.2021.470106>.
 - 10 D. Collier, *Media Primitivism: Technological Art in Africa (The Visual Arts of Africa and its Diasporas)* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 2.
 - 11 S. B. Diagne, *The Ink of the Scholars: Reflections on Philosophy in Africa*, J. Adjemian (trans.) (Baltimore, Maryland, Dakar, Senegal: Project Muse, CODESRIA, Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, 2017), 49.

new methodologies to attend to orality and to the work of sound as vocalisation and speech have and continue to emerge.¹² The oral and the aural, it would seem, are always opaque and complementary objects in the study of the present and past.

There is thus a simultaneous use of sound as medium and method as it is woven into how Africa is thought and conceptualised. The study of African music and music from Africa has produced sonic concepts that exceed the notions of voice, speech and sonic performance that studies of and from Africa have otherwise conceptualised, and these contributions have subsequently been drawn into the debates on orality in African history.¹³ Outside of the above, the now-established field of sound studies and research associated with technology and media studies have also turned to method, asking what the appropriate concepts might be to make sense of the thin boundaries between speech and sonicity, or speaking and sounding.¹⁴ Notions such as acoustemology, soundscape and the audit are evidence of a larger concern about the porousness of sound as an object of study, whilst music studies has developed its own language around sound as a notated object through sound practice itself.¹⁵ *Remapping Sound Studies*, is a volume that calls specifically for a southern sound studies that cuts across the disciplinary boundaries of musicology, ethnomusicology, sound studies, anthropology and history to think about how to configure a study of sound that does not repeat the asymmetries of the global North. An earlier volume titled *Audible Empire: Music, Global Politics, Critique* also engages the question of sound and global dynamics of power. In both the study of African music and sound studies as a global formation, there is a projection of a universal understanding of what sound does, how sound might work, and how to work with sound. Whilst scholars have concerned themselves with how sound study can take place as an academic practice, sound practitioners – musicians, sound artists, collectors and curators – have also set to work to think about how the line between the oral and the aural blurs when the sound object is put to different ends, and how the hemispheric is reoriented when one does so. What are the critical practices that we might think with in locating the inquiry from the locations and geographies constituted as outside of the global?

12 See A. Impey, 'Sound, Memory and Dis/Placement: Exploring Sound, Song and Performance as Oral History in the Southern African Borderlands', *Oral History Journal*, 36, 1, 2007, 33–44.

13 A. G. Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); T. Jaji, *Africa in Stereo: Modernism, Music, and Pan-African Solidarity* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

14 Wolfgang Ernst amongst others have called for an attention to sound as a form of knowledge itself, deeply intertwined with its technological reproduction. Ernst posits the concept of sonicity: "Sound" and "music" describe things we can hear; "sonicity" gives us a concept to grapple with things we cannot. Before such waves are rendered audible (or visible) to humans, they reverberate through, and are in fact constitutive of, physical reality. Sonicities delineate the modern sonic environment, McLuhan's "acoustic space", which "does not simply refer to sound and music but designates a specific temporal form that [McLuhan] correlates with electronic media sphere of itself – the sphere of resonances". Acoustic space is actually temporal because sonic waves are finite expressions of time. Because McLuhan's term does not account for articulations that escape human perception, Ernst pushes beyond "acoustic space" to develop a concept that accounts for how micro temporal vibrations are constitutive of the very space of being itself: sonicity. This concept, whilst not engaged in this introduction in detail, marks a problem in the thinking of sound as only speech, perception or machinic noise. See W. Ernst, *Sonic Time Machines: Explicit Sound, Sirenic Voices, and Implicit Sonicity*, Recursions (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 14–15.

15 S. Feld, 'Waterfalls of Song: An Acoustemology of Place Resounding in Bosavi, Papua New Guinea', in *Senses of Place* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1996), 91–135; R. M. Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester: Destiny Books, 1994); J. Mowitt, *Sounds: The Ambient Humanities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

A contribution to this volume titled “‘Echoes From Africa’: Abdullah Ibrahim’s Black Sonic Geography’ by Molemo Ramphalile, Thabang Manyike and Gregory Maxaulane seeks to address precisely this locatedness and directionality of thinking about sound that is Africa. If the past is mediated through Abdullah Ibrahim’s sonic aesthetic, it is a pastness that is caught up in the everyday, in the modes through which sound allows a temporal link between the past and present experiences of colonial and racialised violence. Their approach is to weave together sound, space and time as fundamentally intertwined with and constituted by the experiences of racial violence and anti-blackness in a modern colonial world. In the work of Abdullah Ibrahim, they discern a relation to space and time resulting from and coincident with a spatial reality that calls upon the constant survival of death-defying situations as a norm, highlighting Ibrahim as a theorist of a black ‘geography’. Blackness is highlighted as a political condition of such an aesthetic inquiry. The authors qualify a reliance of the Black Atlantic aligning it provisionally with an undefined African geography. The article proceeds to read several geographical registers in Ibrahim’s output including his poetic ode to District Six, his notion of timing in the black townships of Manenberg and Soweto, the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds, and of course his complex relation to Islam in his aesthetic. This shares concerns by Siyanda Kobokana in his review of Liz Gunner’s *Radio Soundings: South Africa and the Black Modern*, where the relationship between the use of a medium such as radio by the apartheid state to produce specific notions of Blackness and the subversion of those demands by African interlocutors constitute a complex notion of agency. Both Kobokana and Ramphalile et al. ask what it means for sound as medium to be deployed in relation to regimes of differentiation and, perhaps, reorient them elsewhere.

What the intersection between the oral and the aural has thus inaugurated is a demand for a method appropriate to both the study of the past and the study of sound in all its manifestations and embodiments. How do we *read* the sono-historical object as archive, as performance, as past and ‘presence’, as composition? Annette Hoffmann’s *Listening to Colonial History: Echoes of Coercive Knowledge Production in Historical Sound Recordings from Southern Africa* in particular begins to put together a method aptly named ‘close listening’ as a method with which to attend to sonic archives created by moments of ethnological encounter. This echoes the close reading resonant with the poststructuralist turn in historical studies and the turn to methods of literary criticism present in the reading of form in oral history. The method of close listening, which Hoffmann describes as ‘listening not only for the purposes of translation and understanding semantic content, but with an ear for rhetoric form and genres of speech’, is applied to archives of colonial knowledge production.¹⁶ These archives are sites that contain (in both a carceral and defining sense) the traces of pastness connected to communities rendered violently silent by the colonial machinery,

16 A. Hoffmann, *Listening to Colonial History: Echoes of Coercive Knowledge Production in Historical Sound Recordings from Southern Africa* (Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2023), 537.

and which are now indelibly marked by these histories of extraction. Hoffmann provides a number of conceptual provocations, such as the concept of historiology to refer to orally transmitted interpretations of history, a concept that both reveals and subsequently conceals the work of history itself as a discourse of interpretation.¹⁷ Hoffmann's concept of close listening sounds very much like the turn to form that marked oral history as a practice and as a counter to the documentary bias of a more traditional historicism. This is a resonance best captured in Jan Vansina's earlier claim that oral forms call for attention to the mythical function of narrative, and that a certain borrowing of the methods of literary criticism and anthropological ethnography is necessary to fully grasp the historical source that is not documentary.¹⁸

To what extent is sound thus itself produced as an object of inquiry by the discourse of history? In order to address this question, we must turn to what has been called the *aurality* of history, or the ways in which the echoes of the archive constitute an encompassing aurality that must be attuned to.¹⁹ The aurality of history, when constituted as a method instead of the inherent structure of sound within the archive, is also a means by which to not only describe sound in the past as vocalisations or speech or orality but also to be reflexive of the ideological operation of the historian's method as well. Thus, to speak of aurality and orality interchangeably – in a sense, productively mispronounce at will – is to pay attention to how sound is constituted *as* sound, historiographically and media-archaeologically speaking. This is, as scholar Maarten Walraven has called it, a certain kind of historical resonance where one is attentive to how the archive produces resonance and what that means for a receptivity to the discursive production of historical sources as such. The aurality of history, however, is itself premised on the very historicism that often misreads the oral source or tradition or avoids subjecting itself to the debates around the dynamics of the colonial archive as a scripted, determined and neurotic space, rather than an ordered, rational and objective storehouse. Such debates must thus come to terms with the debates around archive that have emerged from below and that have consistently called for attention to how the archive has been figured, how it must be 'read against the grain' as the now famous formulation puts it, and how what we are calling historical evidence is not necessarily as simple as it sounds.²⁰ Perhaps the aurality of history might

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- 17 'What have been archived as examples of music and languages, often hold elements of repertoires, which can be fragments of record-keeping such as oral poetry or songs and narratives that are part of a body of historiology. This means that the expressiveness of recorded voices and sounds must be listened to with cognizance of the politics of their production as recordings, yet the rules and practices of creations may not completely grasp nor direct the performativity, generic properties, and meanings of spoken, sung, or played recordings, both in respect of their utterances and reception. The complexity of oral genres, or the inability to understand languages, means that contents of various repertoires may have entered sound archives unidentified.' Hoffmann, 536.
- 18 'In an oral society most literary works are traditions and all conscious traditions are oral utterances. As in all utterances, form and literary criteria influence the content of the message. That is the main reason why [oral] traditions must be placed in the general framework of a study of literary structures and be critically evaluated as such.' Vansina, 'Oral Tradition and its Methodology', 144.
- 19 M. Walraven, 'History and its Acoustic Context: Silence, Resonance, Echo and where to Find them in the Archive', *Journal of Sonic Studies*, 4, 1, 2013; M. Smith, 'Sound – So What?', *The Public Historian*, 37, 4, 2015, 132–44.
- 20 A. L. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

be constituted in practice and in the publics that sound and history invoke in their collision with one another. In their contribution to this volume, Brett Pyper offers an attuning to ethics, aesthetics and method in his study of listening to audiovisual history. Pyper asks while drawing attention to how social history constitutes community whether the archive can indeed be embodied as a collective act in the present, a question that has for Pyper a distinct pertinence for the discipline of ethnomusicology. His interlocutor, Bra Reggie, offers an aesthetic account of his jazz performance in which his dance, his approach centre on attaining a 'beautiful mind' at jazz listening sessions. Reggie's dancing is tinged with a 'dreaminess', and Pyper invokes the photographs of Cedric Nunn taken at Papa's Tavern, in 2015, bringing a 'beautiful mind' into kinetic expression. Municipal community halls, local taverns, all become places to 'do art'. Notably, Pyper seeks to renounce representational authority, to defamiliarise the expectation that providing authoritative commentary should be his primary role. Instead, he offers a critical revisiting of the affordances and limitations of the ethnography of listening to jazz, and indeed positioning the study from the perspective of listeners. It is notable that, in the study, what is known as 'the jazz public' is an internally variegated and often enduringly segregated constellation of scenes, several of which remain quite intimate and, indeed, beyond the view of the 'general public'.

Citing David Coplan and Christopher Ballantine, these 'jazz stokvels' have a lineage in the *stokvel*, a black social institution dating back to the 'rotating cattle auctions' or 'stock fairs' of English settlers in the eastern Cape during the nineteenth century. Pyper's article offers a study of how listening can be socialised and enculturated. It is also an exploration of how sociality is co-constituted through listening, of how we become members of aural collectivities in distinctive ways, extending beyond the mediation of spoken or written language. In this approach, he seeks to employ decolonial and queer critiques of ethnomusicology, centrally its normative separation from fields of practice, and to centre the knowledge that is in theoretically informed practice and practically informed theory, that is, in praxis. In this, Pyper is attuned to what Steven Feld called the potential affordances of a recourse to the aesthetic in anthropology. Moreover, the consideration that South Africa, too, hosts a jazz funerary tradition might invite conjectures across wider horizons, registering both a shock of recognition and the imperative not to homogenise these practices in ahistorical and essentialist ways, and hence to dialogue with Feld's work and that of his interlocutors, on jazz cosmopolitanism in Accra, Ghana.

The contribution by Sinazo Mtshemla and Ben Verghese also grapples with the auality of history, foregrounding the ways in which we might listen closely to both the archival inferences as well as the structure of archival formation itself. What is it about the auality of the presence of musician Johnny Dyani in the archive that tells us about the figure of Dyani and the archive itself, both as speaking and sounding historical subjects and objects? What is a method for doing so? The authors seem to enhance an dialogue with archivists which they call 'gathering', making demonstrable use of Dyani's presence in the National Heritage and Cultural Studies Centre's

collections (NAHEC) at the University of Fort Hare – the outcome of Dyani’s work for the liberation movements in exile in the 1960s and 1970s. Sinazo Mtshemla is herself an archivist at the NAHEC in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa, and the article offers readers a sense of the re-making of archive. This remaking is born of the determinations of an activist practice which, while it accedes to the general condition of archivability accessible in a media technological age, echoes Janet Topp Fargion’s wager that ‘we are all archivists now’.²¹ It also seems to caution that a deliberate curatorial practice – perhaps an ethics of care – is necessary if we are to interpret the sonic archival object, as is evident in this exegesis. The result of this ‘gathering’ is a form of historical writing where the archive in its various forms interrupts the text, providing mediated interferences in the expected narrative structure of the text. While Mtshemla and Vergheze invite the reader to listen along, mimetically, it does not prove an easy task – an internet search might not produce an easily accessible copy of this recording. In a time of abundant digital content, this is a reminder that archival recovery is still vital to a changing global practice that underscores the fact that, despite impressions to the contrary, not everything is on the internet. Close listening is the key mode of attention here, echoing Vansina and Hoffmann’s reminder that the oral and the aural return us to form and structure. Hence, attention to what might usually be considered to be noise becomes important in this archival context, as the authors demonstrate in their reading of the return of Dyani’s instrument after his passing and the image of the bridge of a bass in the album under discussion.

Both Walraven and Hoffmann, as perhaps exemplars and useful interlocutors as we navigate the construction of the sono-historical object, make useful contributions in addressing the very nature of the production of the sonic source as such, or the intersection between technology and archive as this volume is attempting to represent. However, as seen in the contribution by Mtshemla and Vergheze, in each case where sound and pastness intersect, it would seem, the aurality of history is heavy with the question of the production of history. Where sound has been treated in a larger historicist sense, the complexities of sound as it is produced – both technologically as recordings and also historiographically as sounds in the text – may be overlooked. This calls for a method for the treatment of sound in history that accounts for the production of history itself, a sonic historiographic approach perhaps.

Part 2: Sound, technology, and the subject of history

The media scholar David Cecchetto, citing Aden Evans, observes how the act of hearing as a perceptive act is deeply implicated with an experience of difference:

21 Topp-Fargion asserts that archiving requires ‘a re-imagining of archival production as a mutually beneficial partnership and a means to breaking down the walls between the academy and the community.’ See C. Landau and J. Topp-Fargion, ‘We’re All Archivists Now: Towards a More Equitable Ethnomusicology’, *Ethnomusicology Forum*, 21, 2, 2012, 125–40.

To hear is to experience air pressure changing... One does not hear air pressure, but one hears it change over time [such that] to hear a pitch that does not change is to hear as constant something that is nothing but change. To hear is to hear difference ²².

Even before its modern entwinement with mimetic technology, hearing is already governed by movement and dynamic change, or, in Brian Massumi's terms, when a body is in motion, it does not coincide with itself, but rather, coincides with its variation, its movement.²³ If the entanglement of sound, pastness and archive emerge through a set of debates around sound as an object of historical inquiry, the question of technology and sound is one that is caught up in the production of such a pastness in the present, or its mediation. The perceptive experience of sound enables new experiments with disciplinarity and study precisely because of how sound is both a sensorial experience and through reproductive and re-presentative technologies a profoundly mediative experience. To think sound, therefore, is to consider how sound shifts the grounds of perception first as an isolated sensory experience and secondly as an ontology marked by its technical reproduction. The invention of sound recording technology in the late nineteenth century was a fundamentally unsettling event in the history of interpreting sound. The effects of it are particularly important for how the sono-historical object can be thought of, and for how we might consider the entanglement of sound, pastness, archive and technology. In an essay titled 'The Phonograph in Africa: International Phonocentrism from Stanley to Sarnoff', William Pietz begins to draw attention to the work of structuralism on the discipline of history. In making an argument for 'a *non-deconstructive* post-structuralism for historiography particularly interested in the problem of modern history and capitalism', Pietz asks what the representative regime of the phonograph as a shift in the problem of western phonocentrism might mean for how history relates to its foundational and legitimating object that is the written document. Pietz argues that the phonographic representation of speech supports a micro-regime of phonocentrism without itself participating in phonocentrism. He points to the way 'the phonograph reproduces speech without itself speaking; its lines and bands silent, without intention or subjectivity' and are 'inscribed with singular material points or lines which can be *decoded* but which do not *represent* what they record'. Thus, in effect, Pietz reiterates Massumi's claim, effectively rendering the claim that the sonic source as constituted by historical discourse and attendant methodologies of interpreting this source must account not only for the difference between spoken and written words but also for technologically reproduced speech. If we are to follow Peitz's argument, this is an entirely novel structure of sonic and linguistic representation caught up in the moment during and after colonial encounter and the reification of a particular

22 D. Cecchetto, *Humanesis: Sound and Technological Posthumanism*, *Posthumanities* 25 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 2.

23 B. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, *Post-Contemporary Interventions* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 4.

structure of difference. Pietz's argument is premised on a core moment accompanying the invention of the phonograph and the realignment of mimesis and cultural mediation, namely the colonial encounter as it used the technology of sound reproduction to legitimate its practice of producing the other of the west. This resonates with the idea that the phonograph inaugurated a specific relation to sound, one that defines sound as sound and that creates sound as an object, where the practice of phonography is one that has 'come to be associated less with writing sounds down than fixing them repeatedly *as* sounds,' a view that scholar of early phonography Patrick Feaster has captured in the stressing of the *re-* in *re-presentation*, emphasising how the phonograph presents sonic material again, the second time as text.²⁴ By connecting the regime of phonocentrism reliant on the western subject who is constructed on the order of the signifier and signified that writing upholds, and which is unsettled by the phonograph as device, Peitz asks in its aftermath *who* is the subject of history.

Such an argument resonates with the traditions of African historiography as it attempts to chart and map a subject otherwise denied history. If anything, Pietz shows us that the vision of the subject of history must contend with how the technology of sound reproduction ruptures the very core of historical discourse through its reliance on the signifying function of the voice and of speech and how recording – capturing, documenting, writing down, inscribing – is also unsettled. In this Pietz seems to point towards an unsettling of the terms of a reading of the historical subject, constituted in primitivist approaches to African artmaking and relation to the technical. Delinda Collier seeks to disband the literal and allegorical inscriptions of the ethnographic gaze, seeking to redefine an African modernism not solely by nationalism or anticolonialism but rather by the granular detail, work by work, of concepts and substances that make up the concept of technology – and thus the concept's reticence, seeming interiority and poetics.²⁵ The crisis of representation that Peitz and Collier are grappling with was, as Tsitsi Jaji has shown, also in the minds of early anticolonial intellectuals at the turn of the century as they grappled with textual acoustics through musical notation, phonetics and orthography in their attempts to make sense of a sense of pastness reoriented through colonial discourse and technologies of sense.²⁶ This has implications not only for the historical subject per se but also for the method of historians who must work with orality and aurality, with sound and voice, simultaneously.

How might the subject of history be constituted against and with the complexities of the sono-historical object? What is the work of history in its wake? Warrick Swinney's article in this issue ventures into such an engagement with the technical, and the poetic, offering a non-fictional account of his work as activist and curator with Shifty Records, documenting a biography of the Lesotho-based band Uhuru/Sankomota. The narrative has several beginnings, including a trail leading back to the role of technical production and the new capacity for mobile studios to produce work

24 P. Feaster, 'Phonography,' in *Keywords in Sound* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 140.

25 Collier, *Media Primitivism*, 4.

26 T. E. Jaji, 'Sight-Reading: Early Black South African Transcriptions of Freedom,' in *Africa in Stereo: Modernism, Music, and Pan African Solidarity* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 24–65.

independently of the corporate record industry. Beginning during the early 1980s, two rock musicians, Ivan Kadey and Lloyd Ross, struck up a partnership, pooled their resources and set about creating an environment to record music that interested them and fell within a specific outsider/political aesthetic. What Swinney is interested in is the kind of future imagined through Sankomota's present rearticulations of the past in this context of production. Swinney draws on a concept of the hauntological as a means by which to speak to what he names as 'apartheid's cancelled futures', building on the work of theorist Mark Fisher and philosopher Jacques Derrida. For Swinney, hauntology – itself intended as a slip of the tongue – is a heuristic intended to demonstrate the question of presence caught up in both the experience of the past in the present, and the ways in which, as Massumi and Cechetto articulate, how hearing is in the 'time of the "always-already"'.²⁷

Part 3: Sound, history, and its aesthetic objects

There is another sense in which the earlier account of Robbie Jansen hailing his audience with the *bongo* drum is worth noting. One might read it as a 'redirect', an encouragement to produce a mythic past anew, something sonic that was 'lost', so to speak, in past erasures. This claim then works *against* apartheid's mythical claims and primitivism. It seems to want to call a new mythos into being, one that is ambiguously oral and aural. Robbie intentionally inhabits borderlines between a nomadic, disreputable persona embodied particularly in the grain of his vocal as well as 'saxophonic' voices, and on the other, signifying through his command of English, a sonic class mobility. With both instruments, Jansen produces an expressionist aesthetic and politics, refusing to be called a jazz musician, yet reaching for jazzing sensibility while calling himself a pop musician. He is a child of forced removals, knowing both sides of the class divide between the middle and working class (marked as disreputable). He possessed and used his literacy, and fluent bilingualism in Afrikaans and English, a skillset that gave him much purchase in his musicking(?) career, valued as he was in his early career for his skill with accuracy in capturing song lyrics, his articulation and fluency in English as well as Afrikaans. Notwithstanding his disavowal of the jazz label, it is no accident that one of his albums is called 'Nomad Jez' – as if he is deliberately playing with received categories and with the invocations that the jazz moniker provokes, vernacularising a concept of jazz in the process. He grew up in Harfield Road, Claremont (the site of the forced removal of a community) and Elsies River, a black township on the fringes of Cape Town. The affective power of the drum in a folklore of the 'Cape' prizes the sentimental and operatic voice above the drum as a mark of a certain modernity that became a folk memory in the 1920s. In fact, in *atja* performance, the imperative is to flee from the threatening boom of the large hand drum. There was only one fleeting icon in living memory – Kamalie

27 M. Fisher, 'The Metaphysics of Crackle: Afrofuturism and Hauntology', *Dancecult*, 5, 2, 2013, 42–55, <https://doi.org/10.12801/1947-5403.2013.05.02.03>.

the *atja* (a marching ‘Indian’ tradition imported from the Caribbean which includes New Orleans, USA) who once performed with the great Abdullah Ibrahim at Athlone Stadium. Robbie’s encouragement to his audience, then, is to listen to the drum, and hence to revitalise a mythic (including sonic) past and harness its technological mediations.²⁸ We began this introduction with close attention to Bra Robbie’s crossing of the line between language and music, and in it the invocation of pastness is key to understanding how the sono-historical object does not belong to history, nor pastness as history’s object. In these ways, Bra Robbie reminds us of how the entanglement of sound, pastness and technology demands an aesthetic practice, a method commensurate to the object that must simultaneously produce and subvert it.

We would be remiss if we did not in our accounting for the embodiment of sound to recognise the performativity key to any method that speaks to and with sound. In particular, it is the relationship between repertoires of performance and the technological reproduction of the senses that demonstrate how the sono-historical object is marked by conditions of production. Here, attention to the word ‘object’ in the formulation of the sono-historical object is a generative exercise. Patrick Feaster has shown how the theatrical in general, and the puppet in particular, are too implicated in a genealogy of cinema and the phonograph.²⁹ Emma Minkley’s article in this issue shows that an aesthetic inquiry of puppet practice itself can yield compelling openings for thinking with sound and history. Here, sound offers a unifying vocabulary for the kinetic object. The puppet is a receptacle for sound and for the human body itself – breath and life – bringing the fragility of breath into awareness, bearing a striking counterpoint to the gramophone’s horn as the remediation of the speaking body. The ‘life’ of a puppet is achieved by a ‘signing system’ or simultaneously choreographed movement of puppeteer and puppet, in which the fragmentation of the body as a vessel for sound is inherently connected to technology and technological advancements which figure the body in parts, whether metaphorically or otherwise. Minkley concludes that to rethink human subjectivities and futurities through the puppet allows us to take on potentially different rhythms and rituals, and adjust how we rehearse and enact or perform ideologies in ourselves and amongst others. By becoming *more* object we can find our way back to different formulations of subjecthood which reanimate, reimagine and re-enchant.

For Minkley, the sound of the puppet breathing is *seen* rather than heard, and the ventriloquism at play in kinetic art seems to enact an acousmatic gesture. The voice is not hidden, but suspended. In fact, it amounts to an amalgamation of all the senses or the mixing of ‘sensory compartmentalisation’ (‘synaesthesia’) within the aesthetic. Minkley is thinking the visual through the other senses, as opposed to solely through the eye, seeing is thus ‘metamorphosis, not mechanism.’ Minkley’s study seems to recall once again Delinda Collier’s observation that African art’s intermediality

28 V. Layne, *Goema’s Refrain: Sonic Anticipation and the Musicking Cape* (Doctoral Dissertation, University of the Western Cape, 2019), 68.

29 P. Feaster and J. Smith, ‘Reconfiguring the History of Early Cinema through the Phonograph, 1877–1908’, *Film History*, 21, 4, 2009, 311–25.

(especially the blurring of the sonic and visual), entanglements and esotericism have haunted modernism's search for the singular and increasingly literal object of art.³⁰ Electricity, in fact, being Harry Garuba's concern with the animist search to re-enchant the world through a refiguring of tradition and technology, is also at the base of Collier's critique of the fetish in African art history.³¹ In other words, for Collier, the fetish is an 'accusation' based on an observation about both art and technology as it applies to Africa. Citing William Pietz, she argues that Western culture is founded in many ways on denying mediation while revelling in its mysteries.

The practice of mediation – mediating sound, remediating objects, mediated archives – is key to thinking about how the subject of history is sonically reorganised by the objects of sound. Related to Pyper's engagement with listening where the archive is embodied, the article by Sinazo Mtshemla and Ben Verghese situate Johnny Dyani's work, attuned to an archival practice we might call DJ scholarship – an 'otherwise' to conventional archival practice. Their article offers the cumulative impact of a work of archival appraisal drawing on practices in Black politics that one might describe as nomadic. Alexander Weheliye describes two main features of DJing, the archival and the sonic, which continue and reformulate what we have been referring to as the material and ephemeral or graphematic and affective.³² Inherent to this archival practice is a logic of bricolage that contains objects at different cultural velocities, and creates a multivalent temporal structure that is presented simultaneously – what he calls the mix. What is especially striking in the account offered is a sense of the movement of these materials from amidst the clandestine operations of a liberation movement in exile in Europe, back to South Africa as part of the larger 'repatriation' of social life and cultural memory. The question of mixing and return is also echoed in Bongani Kona's review in this volume of two texts by writer Hanif Abdurraqib, namely *Go Ahead in the Rain: Notes to a Tribe Called Quest* and *A Little Devil in America: In Praise of Black Performance*.

Conclusion

What is particularly interesting is shortly after Jansen's eloquent lecture on the truthfulness of the drum, we can hear the audio technician remark that the drums be turned up, presumably on the monitor. This intervention, whilst present in the moment of the concert, would have been inaudible to the audience, who Jansen was addressing in his lecture on the beating that asks where freedom might be. Our audition of this moment is only made possible by its archival trace in a recording of the concert that is now freely available on the internet, removed from both its archival placement and temporal locatedness to be actualised at any point in time, and within any socio-political context. We are reminded here of the implication of the object

30 Collier, *Media Primitivism*.

31 H. Garuba, 'Explorations in Animist Materialism: Notes on Reading/Writing African Literature, Culture, and Society', *Public Culture*, 15, 1 April 2003, 262, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-2-261>.

32 Weheliye, *Phonographies*, 88.

and its analyst. This volume of *Kronos: Southern African Histories* alerts us to several ways in which a consideration of sound and history enables in entanglements with pastness, technology and archive, and with a dynamic of the oral and aural. In its collection of essays, we might begin to think about how the sono-historical object is itself an entanglement of the practice of pastness in the present. History here, it seems, is not the past.