

Listening to time at sound's limits

Ending the grip of Time restores the World anew.^[1]

Coming to terms with our experience of time is not an easy pursuit. Its language is complex and contentious, quarrelled over anywhere from astronomy and philosophy to poetry and musicology, physics, psychoanalysis and critical theory. Its multifarious, yet inadequate, terminology betrays the possibility that language alone can articulate what it knows how to represent, warding off experience of the world on any other terms. In this particular arrangement lies the foundational gesture of a whole philosophical tradition that prescribes particular positions of enunciation by speaking of time through language rather than through time itself.

Sonic Continuum is the new issue of *The Contemporary Journal*, a reflection on time through sound, both as a force that constitutes the world and a medium for producing knowledge about it. It brings together contributions that draw on sound as narrative substance and wherein possibility is constantly receding and being renewed. Embracing our uncertain futures, *Sonic Continuum* takes an editorial approach to our latest research strand, questioning how our programmes can become public in digital space and exceed the temporality of an event-based format. Problematising our compulsion towards publicness through ever more excessive forms of digital consumption, this issue is also an interrogation of how an institution might remain lively in the face of the otherwise.

Sonic Continuum launches at what feels like an unprecedented moment of uncertainty, amplified precarity, resurgent nationalism, presumed right-wing immunity, and little or no assurance of what our collective futures might entail. By assembling multiple, overlapping timeframes, *Sonic Continuum* proposes rhythm as a relational language, which today, perhaps more than ever, might inspire a sense of co-belonging. As the philosopher Michael Marder highlights in a recent article, 'Viruses are more than occasional threatening eruptions on the seemingly calm global horizons; they are also figurations of the contemporary social and political world.'^[2] In this scenario, the sonic offers a multidirectional form of social experience against the law-like authority of clock-time, set alongside the evolutionary tempos and rhythms of extinction as well as everyday metabolic processes and broader socio-political chronologies.

Echoing modern theories of resonance in the fields of acoustics and musicology, the ear is irrefutably linked to the perception of time. In the nineteenth century, the ear canal was emphasised as the medial threshold through which to apprehend the world. Anatomical findings related the transformation of vibrations into electric signals in the cochlea to an increasingly material and erotic understanding of hearing. Experiments in auditory cognition within the field of experimental psychophysiology brought forward relational concepts such as the 'auditory unconscious', 'auditory memory' and 'auditory image'. Meanwhile, increased interest in the study of soundwaves further emphasised the haptic qualities of sound.

As the sense of hearing acquired new epistemic functions, emerging forms of auditory regulation publicly enacted forms of exclusionary listening through standardisation, soundscape design, noise legislation and music consumption.^[3] Around 1900, a broader crisis of

time consciousness emerged alongside a new concept of musical time. These debates had a profound impact on how meters, alongside clocks, organise time.^[4]

At the intersection of colonial expansion, developments in technology and industry, and the rise of modern culture marked by the development of tourism and colonial sociability, the increasing speed of railway travel in the second half of the nineteenth century made it necessary to create codified time zones. Einstein saw that clock coordination was essential for defining simultaneity in international time-distribution networks. He proposed a universal and interrelated view of Time and Space (spacetime), wherein time stands with, not behind, experience. The philosopher Henri Bergson, however, claimed that there was more to time than the physicist wagered.

In 1922, Bergson participated in a fervent debate with Einstein at the French Society of Philosophy and published his reflections as *Duration and Simultaneity* later that year. In 1889, Bergson had already used the phrase of a melody to describe his idea of Time as an ever-productive motion and progress, and to define Duration. With the sounding of each note, Bergson argued, the listener hears both the notes that precede it and the whole that it is part of.^[5] In the perception of music was contained an experience of time that is not made of singular instants freely standing in space but rather of interpenetrating successions, which the philosopher refers to as ‘qualitative multiplicities’.^[6]

Now influenced by new philosophical ideas about time, modernist composers would privilege a temporal shift from time to duration, characterised by extensions of tonal, harmonic, melodic and rhythmic forms. This shift marks the development of musique concrète and electroacoustic composition,

indeterminate music and electronic music, in which rhythm emerges as a movement and a becoming.

Examined against a critical history of hearing, these developments in musical theory show the continued stronghold of the ear as a distinctively accurate form of knowing time. As theorists and artists including Tina Campt, Nikita Dhawan, Ana María Ochoa Gautier, The Otolith Group, Fred Moten, Julio Ramos, and Rolando Vázquez, have argued, just as European modernity conditioned our way of hearing the world, it also reproduced this sensory configuration as universal, objective truth. Charting scenes of imperial and settler listening further stresses the relationship between hearing and rationality. For critical race theorists such as Jennifer Lynn Stoeber, the ideological foundations of colonial modernity’s sonic and aural culture helped to delimit another form of enclosure: the ‘sonic color line’, which ‘produces, codes and polices racial difference through the ear’.^[7]

Writing about Blackness’s capacity to signify otherwise, the Brazilian philosopher Denise Ferreira da Silva urges us to think of our planetary condition as being framed by an ontological context ‘always already in Time’. Silva finds inspiration in particle physics, in its indistinction between matter-energy, and in concepts like impingency, phase-transitions, virtuality and nonlocality,^[8] as well as its bewilderment at these findings, which constitute something that physics cannot describe in its own terms.^[9] Articulating an ethical programme that tries to expose how time works through descriptors (i.e. categories of thought, such as Human, Race, Gender, Individual, Freedom) to continue sustaining global capital, Silva instead proposes a poetics of the world that includes quantum and cosmic scales, that refuses to signify in spacetime and is intimately implicated.

A conceptualisation of sonic history as non-linear and syncretic manifests our understanding of time and, by extension, our experience of the world, as constantly seized by the language that describes it. In an effort to de-essentialise the ear and denaturalise the historical construction of time as a category of Western modernity, we might begin to grapple with how time controls representation and what consequences this might have for the field of visual cultures. Listening to time at sound's limits opens up the effects of practices that divide subjects from objects, the routes of racial capitalism, and different possibilities of coming to voice.

Sonic Continuum thus attempts to propose a poetics for temporal deprogramming, wherein conjoining our senses with the unsound, the not-yet audible and the silenced might construct new solidarities, aural alliances and forms of attunement. Importantly, it seeks to locate the complex relationship between time and the ear during the formative period of Western modernism^[10] and offers a grammar that does not organise experience according to time but in disjointed temporalities, multiple rhythms, and dramaturgies of time. As bell hooks reminds us, spaces of voiceless absence are where a counter-language may emerge, and with it a 'new location from which to articulate our sense of the world'.^[11]

As imaginative forms of distributed study that resist distance and division, *Sonic Continuum* gathers contributions from artists, sound researchers, musicians, academics and poets who listen to what lies outside time's monopoly of representation. This issue confabulates with contributors from *Histories of Listening*, which investigates how the complex of time emerged out of colonial encounters between human, vegetal and mineral lives; *Listening as Critique*, which explores sonic modes of knowing and being that evade or refuse representation, transparency and legibility; and *Expanded*

Listening, which tunes to the haptic and sensorial dynamics of listening across auditory registers and a wide spectrum of frequencies. It also comprises a special issue expanding on the artistic practice of Sung Tieu (b. 1987, Vietnam), entitled *Acousmatic Paranoia*, which explores how resonant frequencies can redefine spaces of conflict as well as how we might develop new languages to address sonic materiality. Thinking through sound, silence and speech, whose voices are heard, who listens, and by what means, *Sonic Continuum* explores the sonic as the articulation of tempos and cycles of time.

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Denise Ferreira da Silva. ‘Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness Toward the End of the World’, *The Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (2014): 90.

[2]

Michael Marder, ‘The Coronavirus is Us’, *New York Times*, March 3, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/03/opinion/the-coronavirus-is-us.html>

[3]

Jennifer Lynn Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line* (New York: NYU Press, 2016), 32.

[4]

Rhythmic organisation and the classification of time signatures in compositional practice has been one of the fundamental concerns of Western musical theory. In the medieval and Renaissance mensural systems, rhythm was rooted in an Aristotelian conception of temporality, whereby the passage of time is conceived as a succession of discrete, individual times each marking a

concrete type of cyclical motion. Newtonian views informed eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetic values in which rhythm was understood as cumulative metrical units free to assume a variety of durational patterns defined by a hierarchy of accents. See William E. Caplin, 'Theories of Musical Rhythm in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries', in *The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory*, ed. Thomas Christensen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 657–694.

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Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1950), 111.

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For a longer discussion about their conflicting views see Jimena Canales, *The Physicist and The Philosopher: Einstein, Bergson, And The Debate That Changed Our Understanding of Time* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2016), 3–15.

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Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 11.

[8]

The idea that an object can be affected by another object without being mechanically moved, and their ability to instantaneously know about each other's state, even when separated by large distances. A direct contravention to Einstein's 'principle of local action', nonlocality has inspired much resistance in physics.

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Silva, 'Toward a Black Feminist Poethics', 92.

[10]

For a genealogy of a new time consciousness that ushers new forms of mass culture informed by the acoustic space and theories of the unconscious see Veit Erlmann, *Reason And Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality* (New York: Zone Books, 2014), 271–306.

[11]

bell hooks, 'Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness' *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 36, (1989): 23.