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Touching Listening: The Aural Imaginary in the World Music Culture Industry

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The Poetics of the Aural Imaginary

It is that contact point between the hair on the skin and the thrust of a subwoofer, that note held so long that we forget the song entirely, climb on the note, and follow it into sonic oblivion. Within the aural imaginary there is an interaction with the other that is at times voyeuristic, at times sadistic, and at times narcissistic. Sometimes the sound is where we find ourselves; sometimes it is where we get lost. It is our entry point to alternate temporalities and spaces, where our moving body meets our still body. It is where our performative selves look down their noses at our subjective selves, where memory collides with futurity, where we subvert the limits of our social selves and embody ourselves differently. It is in the aural imaginary that we yearn for the raspy qawwali melismatics of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, the temporal drift of Indian ragas, the dizzying fingering of the flamenco guitar, the polyrhythms of samba, rumba, and bomba.

We want the aural imaginary and it wants us. At times a place, a process, and a thing, it is titillating, melancholic, enraging, or humorous, our entry point into a collective fantasy. It is where our materiality is plastic, where another sculpts us, and where we sculpt the other. In the aural imaginary, sound denatures us and we culture it, a dialectical roll in the hay. In the aural imaginary, fantasy, desire, and affect intersect with sound, capital, and the other. It is there that sound makes artifice of us and we thingify it. It breaks our laws and we want it to. It is where we confront ourselves as paradox.

The aural imaginary is the setting for scenes such as this:

This CD should be listened to in the dark with or without the one you love (or love right now), sipping something cold and smooth with a bite. You are alone and lost at night in a foreign city, and you just want somewhere to sit down and have a drink. You stumble down a dark lane looking for someone, somewhere, and you spot light coming from a doorway. You walk in. You think it's just a bar, and you take the nearest table and order a drink and look around while you sip. Then the sound. Oh, the sound. It's pure, slow, hot love. You

look at the people around you and see so many possibilities. You melt back into your seat, and make eye contact with the stranger at the next table. You realize you aren't lost; you're right where you want to be.¹

Paphian's testimonial, titled "Turn off the lights," voluntarily left on Amazon.com for the Kinship Records compilation *Torch Songs*, exemplifies the role of fantasy played by sound in the aural imaginary.² The description, "Then the sound. Oh, the sound. It's pure, slow, hot love," is no mere daydream about the (mostly) female torch singers on the album, although these performers figure centrally within that fantasy. Instead what Paphian describes is a complex scene in which sound, the listener's body, escape, and affect double in on one another to construct an imaginary site of contact with *other* bodies. In fact, Paphian echoes a statement composed for the liner notes by the compilation's producer and president of Kinship Records, Jon Cohen. After describing the inspiration behind the compilation and offering a brief history of the torch song, which he describes as "songs of passion," he concludes by saying, "This is definitely a CD that's all about mood. From tough to tender, wistful to passionate, the various great singers on this compilation deliver a range of emotions that place these tracks into a classic song style that very much lives and breathes today."

Clearly, Paphian has picked up on the intentions of the compilation CD's producer, allowing his (or her) imagination to creatively embellish and riff on the highly affected moods sonically represented on the album. But how can we interpret the intensity contained within the testimonial and unfold the layers to decipher the palimpsest of liquids, exchanged glances, and decomposed pulp of the aural imaginary?

The aural imaginary is foremost an affective site to which we are attached. We love and hate our affects, are proud of some of them, embarrassed by others, wish we could do without this one yet would never dream of letting go of that one. But this is not an article about the cultural relativity of affective attachments; instead what I aim to examine is how they are structured and arrived at within the aural imaginary. In particular, I examine how the culture industry structures fantasies about world music and how these fantasies take hold of and in listeners, asking: what forms do sonic others take in world music's aural imaginary? In what follows, I examine how this racialized and gendered music functions in fantasy, focusing especially on the site of listening as the location for producing difference.

Touching Hearing

Hearing is a form of touch. You can feel as though you can literally reach out to that sound and feel that sound.

—Evelyn Glennie, *Touch the Sound: A Sound Journey with Evelyn Glennie*

To begin, let me historicize listening, *audile* perception, and the sense of hearing with an example that I use in the context of teaching hearing to undergraduates.³ Grammy award-winning Scottish percussionist Evelyn Glennie, deaf since the age of twelve, was invited to present before an eclectic group of scholars, celebrities, and entrepreneurs at the 2003 Technology, Entertainment, and Design (TED) conference held in Monterey, California, on the topic of how to effectively unlearn the idea that hearing was focused through the ear and seeing through the eye. During a particularly poignant segment, she narrates a kind of primal scene of musical awakening,

I remember when I was twelve years old and I started playing timpani and percussion and my teacher said “well how are we going to do this? You know, music is about listening . . .” and I said “yes, I agree with that, so what’s the problem?” and he said “well, how are you going to hear this, how are you going to hear that?” and I said “well how do you hear it?” he said, “well, I think I hear it through here [points to ears].” And I said “well, I think I do too but I also hear it through my hands, through my arms, my cheekbones, my scalp, my tummy, my chest, my legs and so on.” . . . And so what we would do is I would pop my hands on the wall of the music room and together we would listen [makes double quotation mark signs with hands] to the sounds of the instruments and really try to connect with those sounds far, far more broadly than simply depending on the ear because of course the ear is subject to all sorts of things: the room we happen to be in, the amplification, the quality of the instrument, the type of sticks, etc. etc.⁴

Here Glennie situates hearing as a corporeal rather than merely aural process. Because of the countless variables that affect how sounds are heard (acoustics, density of materials used to strike), she describes aurality as the weaker link in the process of perceiving sound. The allegory presented by this virtuosic percussionist is that the separation of modes of perception through the five senses was impairing her music teacher’s ability to hear, an impairment from which she did not suffer because of, ironically, her hearing loss.⁵ Aided by Glennie’s expertise, audience members are called on to deconstruct the limits of their perceptual taxonomies, opening their bodies up as tools for engaging sound.

What necessitates this presentation by Glennie and the reason the well-heeled audience was in need of such a lesson is the differentiation of perceptual modes and sensual processes in modernity. What Glennie illustrates is that

sound is experienced (felt) by the whole body intertwining what is heard by the ears with what is felt on the flesh, tasted on the tongue, and imagined in the psyche in a process that the anthropologist Alan Merriam referred to as the “intersense modalities” through which we perceive music.⁶ But the differentiation of the five senses has resulted in a distribution of labor in which each sense organ is imagined to serve a different perceptual purpose. As many scholars have helped historicize, epistemologies structuring the order of things situate how the senses perceive the world out there.⁷ Glennie’s presentation identifies a relationship between hearing and touching that illustrates the materiality and the corporeality of sonority. Ultimately, she reiterates what Don Ihde has said of the auditory process, “The gradations of hearing shade off into a larger sense of one’s body in listening. The ears may be focal ‘organs’ of hearing, but one listens with his whole body.”⁸

Regardless of how bodies listen, industrialization and colonization slowly and carefully parsed the senses out into distinct modes to distinguish their use-value, maximizing the profit and biopolitical potential along each sensual path.⁹ Technologies developed in response to this have further isolated and focused our senses and modes of perception.¹⁰ For example, Walter Benjamin observed that industrial capitalism of the late nineteenth century was distinguished by phantasmagoria that were different from those described by Karl Marx, precisely because of their ocularcentric qualities.¹¹ Benjamin noted that it was the “commodity-on-display” that yielded a new form—“representational value”—that could be consumed visually.¹² His *Arcades Project* chronicles the Paris arcades as a space of architectural sociality in which Parisians could not only absorb the aura of commodities by walking through an enclosure designed expressly for their presentation but also feast on and consume their representation. The emergence of “representational value” marks a paradigm shift in which capital combines with sensuality to create a form of pleasure that focuses consumption through an isolated sense organ: the eye. This practice of visual consumption has developed into a core value in advanced capitalism, as evidenced by the enormous importance of ocularcentric economies like advertising, film, television, and print media. But as Jonathan Sterne has argued, alongside and intertwined with this has been the emergence of an “acoustic modernity” that paired brilliantly with visual modernity making audible those processes previously attributed only to visibility.¹³ In what follows, I examine the role that the culture industry has played in reinforcing perceptual divisions and how listeners of world music have responded.

Cultures of Aural Imaginaries: World Music

A paradigmatic context for the study of aural imaginaries is within the culture industries, and specifically for my research, it has been the San Francisco–based world music record company where I worked and performed ethnographic research from 2002 to 2004. At the time of my fieldwork, Kinship Records was a highly acclaimed independent record label with some of the most commercially successful world music artists signed to their roster.¹⁴ During 2001–4, for example, there was hardly a Bay area restaurant or boutique that did not at some point play songs from Bianca Costa’s *Fortuna Commemorada*, the label’s highest selling and most popular artist, as ambient background music to accompany high-end boutique browsing or cocktail sipping.¹⁵

World music is an especially fertile object of study because the lyrics are often sung in a language other than English.¹⁶ In the case of Costa, a majority of the songs on her first few albums were sung in Portuguese, yet the biggest markets for her music were in Japan and the United States. Many listeners testify to having less of a connection with the semantic content of her lyrics and more with the sound of her music,

This is the most beautiful and intoxicating non–English speaking music I have ever heard. This is coming from a guy that hates subtitles in movies and heads for the first McDonald’s when he is traveling abroad. I don’t usually think writing biased reviews for Amazon is helpful to anyone but American audiences need to know about Bianca Costa! This was love at first sight (listen) for me and it will be for you too!

—Michael from Brooklyn, NY

Descriptions of the musicality of language (which abound in reference to Brazilian Portuguese in particular) emphasize sound over lyrical meaning. In addition, the absurdly vast amount of cultural variation contained within the world music genre guarantees that a majority of listeners will neither comprehend the lyrics nor have previously been exposed to the particular musical tradition being represented.¹⁷ The record company plays a pedagogical role in translating musical traditions and scales, framing the history of artists’ careers relative to their local music scenes, and even interpreting colonial histories that are imagined to have begotten the hybrid variation of a particular subgenre. Kinship has developed brand loyalty among a fan base that looks to the record label as a source of geopolitical knowledge. And rarely does the record label provide lyrical translations foregrounding instead the sonic qualities of the vocals relative to the overall sound of the song, genre, or music from the

region in general.¹⁸ Overall, it is the sound that is emphasized as meaningful in world music, and it became abundantly clear to me during two years of ethnographic fieldwork that listening is the privileged sensory mode and that consumers were understood by the company as listeners first. Contrary to everything I had learned about the hegemony of ocularcentrism and specularity, it seemed that in this context there was a phonocentrism at work, and the ear's materiality was central to this. Additionally, synesthetic descriptions in which listening functions as a conduit to other sensual experiences abound. Note the illustrative description of *Fortuna Commemorada*, Costa's first Kinship release, by a listener nicknamed Bioluminescent Sea,

like a honey lemon tea on a parched throat, . . . like a cool aloe lotion on a sunburn, . . . I can't recommend this enough. Understated, minimalistic and at the same time bold and layered. Trust the Kinship label, they have exquisite taste.

For another reviewer the synesthetic qualities override the tedium of linguistic translation by connecting the sounds to the listener's body erotically. Despite being fluent in Portuguese, this listener emphasizes the music's sound above everything,

Not since Barry White's early grooves or the sensual crooning of Marvin Gay [*sic*] has there been such a delightful, soulful and sexy artist like Bianca Costa. As the daughter of Joao & Astrud Gilberto [*sic*], she has beautifully carried on the tradition of lush, mystical Brazilian bossa-nova at its most subtle and sublime. As whimsical and sensual as her mother, Bianca's Portuguese-tinged English vocals and straight "Brasileiro" songs need no translation, and the smoothly shuffling Bossa Nova goes straight to your hips and toes. It's like a trip straight down to Rio or Sao Paulo. The fact that this reviewer speaks Brazilian Portuguese makes it even sweeter and more sultry. Bianca IS the real girl from Ipanema. Wonderful, soulful, sexy and jazzy. Bossa Nova for this generation! FANTASTIC! . . .

For the first listener the music is described as a salve; for the second, it is sublime, going straight to the body's nether regions. These testimonials illustrate how the ears function as conduits to an incorporeal materialism and to the affective qualities of sound. The testimonials construct pleasure through complex evocations of synesthetic fantasy that awaken the listener's bodies through desire and yearning. Moreover, the songs "need no translation," it is implied, because of their capacity to affect listeners in parasemantic ways.

The ear is a heuristic in my research because it is a symbolic contact zone where the listener interacts with the performer. The other enters the listener's body through this orifice, and Kinship places a great deal of symbolic weight on this physiological-cum-imaginary process. Though I concede that the

tympanic membrane is but one of many surfaces through which the body receives vibrating sonic information (as illustrated by Glennie), what is of most interest to me is the symbolic capacity of the ear (1) as a site of aural and affective interaction between a listener and the racialized and gendered other of world music, and (2) as an entry point into the body that has been erotically charged through differentiation within the musical culture industry (the symbolic weight of sound's penetrating quality is not insignificant here).

Consumers return time and time again to purchase new releases that represent the next chapter in the ongoing narrative of the Kinship Records "sound." Cohen describes this sound as a hybrid form that blends seemingly disparate sonic parts, mixing "traditional sounds with modern production values." Through such framing devices as liner notes and album artwork, Kinship curates and guides the listening event, training the consumer-listener how to function as what I call an "ear agent." In the following example, Cohen describes to Nancy Dayne, host of the Public Radio program "The Voyager," what to listen for and how to hear the music on a compilation CD called *San Escapes*.¹⁹

ND: Now before you play us a little cut, tell us what are the instruments that the San people use? Obviously when we hear electronic we know it's not them, but what are the sounds that they basically make?

JC: Mostly you're going to hear from them voices and very, very simple percussion instruments. Everything else that you hear has been added after the fact.

ND: Ok. Let's take a listen . . .

(sound clip)

ND: Wow!

JC: Most of the songs of these people are, you know, songs about the land, about nature, about family, and I would assume that's probably what we're hearing here.

In this example, Cohen, who reductively interprets Khoi San music through the limited tropes available for interpreting indigenous African music—as voices singing about "the land and nature" and musicians who play rudimentary instruments—enlists Dayne, as proxy for "the listener," to do the same. She is impressed.

What I discovered early on in the fieldwork process, and what I argue in the remainder of this article, is that gender and race are central components to world music's aural imaginaries. Kinship attempts to systematize consumer engagement with its products by emphasizing the consumer's role as listener and enlisting the ear as the site that determines how the sounds of the other get figured as gendered and racialized. The Kinship formula includes synthetic, digitally generated beats and melodies mixed with sounds (including vocals

sung in various languages and non-Western instrumentation and scale) from diverse cultural regions.²⁰ Kinship's credo "everything is closer than you think" de-emphasizes cultural differences, be they linguistic, religious, or aesthetic, emphasizing instead the universality of music and multicultural aesthetic pleasure.

Many scholars have commented on world music's function in neoliberal multiculturalism, so I will not belabor that point here.²¹ But few have considered the affective and psychic structures through which this process functions and the appeal it has for first-world listeners. Some scholars have begun to explore the allure of world music when sampled in Top 40 music (e.g., the music of Shakira and Madonna) and hip-hop and electronic music (e.g. Diplo) and more recently licensed for commercials, thus suturing a multiethnic listening audience into world music's aural imaginary.²² But since the efflorescence of scholarship on the topic over twenty years ago, world music has experienced crossover success both aesthetically and commercially, thus expanding its listenership.

Kinship Records systematizes consumer encounters with sonic others and promotes listening practices that remap the consumer body, marking the ear as the site of signification for difference. A great deal of emphasis is placed by the record company and by consumers on the ear as a contact zone that brings the other into the listener's body. Thus, as I argue below, it is not only in the site of the composition and musical arrangement, which I concede has historically been central in constructing sonic otherness and normativity, but with the advent and expansion of the world music culture industry there has emerged a complex social process in which it is the consumer who is called on to sonically construct the other through listening, in what I have termed the *aural imaginary*.²³ The body is essentially remapped, and the ear is interpellated as the main site for the signification of sonic affect and alterity.

The listening event is not only mediated by album artwork and curatorial text but additionally by the musical production practices that carefully position the gendered and racialized sounds against what Cohen refers to as "modern production values." As Paphian's testimonial exemplifies, expensive condenser microphones, sound compressors, and filters and the careful placement of sound within the stereo spread heighten the erotic response to Kinship's releases and contribute to creating a consistent label "sound."

Culture industries and their technologies, including the music industry and the more specialized world music industry, not only developed in response to the sensual specializations that emerged through industrialization and modernization but also enabled these very processes. In the case of the music industry, listening with the ear was developed as a critical focal point for an

emerging commodity: sound. Isolated, the ear functions as a contact zone between the private life of the individual listener and an imagined performer or performance whose sonic essence is captured, enhanced, and mixed down to perfection on a recorded medium (note how the earliest audio technologies mimicked the ear both mechanically and in their aesthetic design). As Greg Downey has put it, “If music is constituted in the ear as much as on an instrument or in a throat, we may be able to locate processes that condition the ear, preparing it for its active role in music performance.”²⁴ And today’s music industry has seen a revival perhaps because of the refocusing of attention onto the ear through downloadable music designed for mobile MP3 players and private music consumption through headphones.

Communities of Listeners

Cosmopolitanism, though, is not merely a matter of cocktails or market ebbs and flows. It’s what we praise in those who read novelists from every continent, or in the audiences and performers of world music.

—Craig Calhoun, “Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Social Imaginary”

Although the ear is isolated and individuated by the culture industry, distribution processes network individual acts of listening into what Benjamin Lee and Edward LiPuma have referred to as “cultures of circulation” where performative practices of consumption enlist listeners as members of consuming publics and interpretive communities.²⁵ As Craig Calhoun describes above, listening to world music as a member of a culture of circulation enables the performance of an aural cosmopolitanism that sets the listener apart through distinctive listening practices. The performativity of listenership through which a private relationship to music is constructed, what Sterne has referred to as the “individuation of the listener,” is achieved through various technologies that promote private musical consumption like personal hi-fi systems, MP3 players, and private music collections that stand as notions of distinction.²⁶ Like ordering a cosmopolitan at a bar, consuming world music is the performance of oneself as a discerning listener alongside a consuming public, a form of distinction that constitutes an imagined self and collectivity through an imagined performing other.

As Lee and LiPuma have described it, there is a “performative constitution of collective agency” imagined for entities like “markets” and “the public sphere.”²⁷ To imagine oneself as a part of what they term a “culture of circulation” is to recognize one’s relationship to the product consumed as well as one’s relationship to other consumers of that product. Listeners’ awareness of themselves

vis-à-vis other world music consumers constitutes the collective agency, that “fetishized locus of self-reflexive collective agency,” of the world music marketplace.²⁸ It is this collective agency that is addressed in the biographies and curatorial narratives that accompany all Kinship releases. It is also this collective agency that is addressed in testimonials written about the music by listeners, as the following testimony about Costa’s first album attests:

I agree with what many previous writers have alluded to: put on Bianca Costa’s *Fortuna Comemorada* as the background at any gathering and—before the CD is through—everyone will have asked you what you’re playing. The music is infectious and Bianca’s voice is lilting, silky and sensuous, a feeling that comes across in either Portuguese or English (the sounds are a mixture of each—sometimes dividing choruses between the two). In fact, you’ll probably get hooked by the most approachable songs, like the English language “Nice Samba” but then learn to love the Portuguese-penned tunes as well.

—Andy from Addison, TX

Testimonials such as these link listeners to what Arjun Appadurai has called “communities of sentiment” mutually constituted alongside the production of an outside, in this case the imagined gendered and racialized others and spaces that the music evokes for the listener.²⁹ To experience a shared sentiment for the racialized-gendered other in one’s own private listening event is the performative enactment of membership within another racialized-gendered and classed site: the culture of world musical circulation. It is a sentiment that is gendered masculine even though a majority of Kinship records consumers are women, and it is a sentiment that is marked as racially unmarked and appropriately desires racialized others.³⁰

Steven Feld has elaborated extensively on the development and function of world music, which formed as the commercial arm of ethnomusicology. And, as he has astutely commented, although ethnomusicology emerged with the “liberal mission” of democratizing musicology, a discipline that had hitherto focused only on the Western art music tradition (arguably remaining so today), the conditions of possibility for its emergence reified the differences originally imagined between Europe and its others by institutionalizing the study of musical difference and thus partitioning off a zone for non-Western (read: third world, ethnic, other) music (the exception to this has been jazz, which has only recently crept into a small handful of conservatories and musicology programs). This distinction is part of world music’s origin story, as Feld has historicized:

The relationship of the colonizing and the colonized thus remained generally intact in distinguishing *music* from *world music*. This musicology/ethnomusicology split reproduced

the disciplinary divide so common in the academy, where unmarked “-ologies” announced studies of normative Western subjects, and “ethno-” fields were created to accommodate the West’s ethnic others.³¹

This origin story thus not only haunts the form’s disciplinary and commercial formations but functions as an audible, sonic distinction.

As a popular, colonial genre, world music deals in a racial economy that brokers in others for first-world consumption. As Ronald Radano and Philip Bohlman have argued, “World music and postmodern hybridities have yet to eliminate racial barriers and they show no signs of masking the conditions that give rise to racial differences.”³² Thus the culture of world music’s circulation constitutes and constructs a white, male listening subject, regardless of the actual listeners’ bodies.³³

Bodies matter in the practice of listening to Costa’s music, and as Donald M. Lowe has argued, “perception is the intentional connection between an embodied being and the enviroing world.”³⁴ Listening functions as a way to construct an aural imaginary about Brazil, modernity, escape, sensuality, and the performing, gendered other as well as the listening self. Consumers of Costa’s music regularly testify to its transcendental potential and hybrid qualities exemplifying the sensual world imagined by this community of sentiment. Testimonials are often intertextual, citing other listeners’ experiences as parallel with one’s own. Imagining the music, performers, and spaces evoked as others and elsewhere, Kinship’s cultures of circulation are, on the contrary, composed of selves situated here. Testimonials along with company-sponsored events held at clubs in major cities throughout the United States and Canada help reinforce the culture of circulation as a community of sentiment that imagines itself as affectively bound to the music, performers, and one another but, most importantly, distinguished from the performers and the places they musically signify, a distinction critical to the affective pleasure experienced in the world music’s aural imaginary. It is a culture of circulation open to a multicultural cast of listeners who are welcome to the pleasure of the aural imaginary as long as they are participants in its logic. Like the discursive contact zone that preceded the racialization of indigenous peoples through colonial exploration/exploitation, the ear as a contact zone is, borrowing from Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, “already racialized and inscribed within a racial symbolic by the signifier Whiteness, which largely functions to subsume and homogenize incommensurable difference.”³⁵ Thus to even imagine musicology, music, whiteness, and so forth is to mutually constitute its other and what it is not: ethnomusicology, world music, and racialized others.

Debates centered on world music as exploitative have missed the point by focusing exclusively on labor-relations or have taken the form of the “culture-culture” critique, viewing culture primarily as intellectual property, with critique narrowly focused on royalties, authorship, and compensation.³⁶ What has scarcely been addressed is the geopolitical, historical, libidinal, discursive, and affective formations that structure desire and pleasure for racialized and gendered others. The exploitative or imperialist question would be more accurately posed in a context that helps map the psychical and structural limits placed on how we can perceive these performers or the affective and imaginary roles they have been cast to play.

Listening and the Aural Imaginary

world music creates a voyage of discovery,
a sonic experience of contact,
an auditory deflowering that penetrates the harmony of difference.

—Steven Feld, “A Sweet Lullaby for World Music”

Feld’s apt description of world music’s magical and libidinal qualities is as relevant today as when written at the end of the last millennium. But world music has grown up and has expanded to the mainstream; no longer limited to urban yuppies, college town New Agers, or liberal celebrants of multiculturalism, it is claimed by indie rock hipsters as musically formative and has even made it to Broadway.³⁷ It is thus as relevant a topic for cultural exploration today as when he chronicled the genre’s emergence. However, what has remained unexplored in the genealogy of the genre’s formation is precisely how the genre constructs and conveys libidinal and affective forces. The aural imaginary is where I argue these experiences are constituted. The aural imaginary exists at the interface between the listener and the culture industry; it is a formation that emerges through capitalist and colonial relations, each depending on the other to complete the process through which it is formed. The ear is central to how the record company imagines the listener, and the ear functions for listeners as a synecdoche for the whole of the listening body.

There are numerous related concepts that have contributed to the development of aural imaginary. Though also enacted through listening, Ihde’s concept of “the auditory imagination” builds on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s concept of inner speech to theorize the imagined sounds that musicians experience contemporaneously with performed music.³⁸ The auditory imagination is singled out as distinct from spectral imagination and also distinct from hallucination.

A related concept to Ihde's is "aural imagination," which is used more generally in music theory to refer to such broad areas as a musician's ability to hear a score while sight-reading,³⁹ or a composer's ability to sonically imagine the piece he or she is composing.⁴⁰ However, these terms fail to account for the discursive limits to aesthetic play. A musician is limited in his or her "aural imagination" to that which is intelligible as musical in the first place; the very notion of musicality is epistemologically constructed.⁴¹

Aural imaginary is more akin to (yet still distinct from) the psychoanalytic "sonorous envelope" described by David Schwarz as "a fantasy of a thing and a threshold crossing space,"⁴² which remains tied to the "oceanic fantasies" or the sonorous womb of the mother's voice, notions that have been elaborated on by Kaja Silverman (acoustic mirror), Mary Ann Doane (sonorous envelope), and Julia Kristeva (maternal voice) as exemplary of *objet petit autre*. Though fruitful, the concepts, however, fail to acknowledge the political economic and neocolonial context for listening or to account for how race is structured within that process.⁴³

Aural imaginary recognizes listening as a perception constituted by and through the colonial encounter, and when conducted by the world music culture industry it is structured in overdetermined ways. The concept reads the psychic with the social to theorize the stubborn musical desire that is repeatedly directed at particular others structuring the listening self within the culture of world music's circulation.⁴⁴ I do not deny that pleasure is complex, that there are postcolonial forms and artists who talk back to the neocolonial order of things, but these represent exceptions to the rule. Aural imaginary implicates first-world consumers, global northern elites, and flexible bourgeois citizens in a perceptual logic that is necessarily racialized as unmarked—hence white—and gendered through male heteronormative desire all the while maintaining a focus on the ambivalence inherent to this positionality.

Scholars who have come closer to theorizing how the colonial has structured our senses have tended to neglect the psychic or affective and have additionally neglected the complex processes of gender at work. For example, Radano and Bohlman's notion "racial imagination" is attentive to the fundamental importance of race to Western music, musicology, and ethnomusicology writing:

We define "racial imagination" as the shifting matrix of ideological constructions of difference associated with body type and color that have emerged as part of the discourse network of modernity. . . . The imagination of race not only informs perceptions of musical practice but is at once constituted within and projected into the social through sound. Intersecting the musical and discursive, it becomes a "soundtext" that circulates within as well as across national boundaries.⁴⁵

The “racial imagination” bears the greatest resemblance to aural imaginary; however, as is unfortunately *de rigueur* for studies of race in cultural studies, questions of gender and sexuality are either absent or afterthoughts, often merely implied (i.e., perhaps what Radano and Bohlman mean by “body type”?). What is missing is a holistic understanding of the multiplicity, intersectionality, and coproduction of race through gender and sexuality and how these qualities are conveyed through sound.

The aural imaginary theorizes the symbolic realm in which the listener engages in an imagined relation, often affective, with an other that is elicited in sound. It builds on Jacques Lacan’s “imaginary order,” which according to Anika Lemaire, “concerns the intuitive lived experience of the body . . . of the affects . . . of activity, of passivity, of the will to power, etc., lived experiences which overlap, accumulate, and overflow into infinite successions of sensorial, emotional and conceptual jugglings.”⁴⁶

Because of its connection with Lacan’s famous “mirror stage,” the imaginary has primarily been taken up as a visual, image-centered theory in which the subject (mis)recognizes himself or herself in the mirror and constructs a fictional sense of coherent identity around this image. The ambivalent relationship the subject has with this appearance of coherence—loving it but hating that it is external to it—results in a love-hate relationship, which constitutes the imaginary order. However, I recognize Lacan’s mirror stage to be a representational framework for illustrating the subject’s coming into language that need not be interpreted as literally pertaining only to visual images. In fact, numerous audiologists, sound studies scholars, and film scholars have noted sound’s capacity to resonate through many surfaces, including the amniotic sac, thus making sound the first medium through which humans are structured into language and cultural systems. So we need not limit our understanding of the mirror stage to visual systems. Instead, aural imaginary theorizes this process sonically and examines the imaginary order as a representational map for deciphering how fantasies about racialized and gendered sounds are sonically structured within the symbolic.⁴⁷

A significant distinction between aural imaginary and psychoanalytic concepts that theorize sonority is its composition, best described through Michel Foucault’s notion of “incorporeal materialism.” In “The Discourse on Language,” elaborating on how an event can be imagined as discursive, Foucault writes,

of course, an event is neither substance, nor accident, nor quality nor process; events are not corporeal. And yet, an event is certainly not immaterial; it takes effect, becomes effect,

always on the level of materiality. . . . Let us say that the philosophy of event should advance in the direction, at first sight paradoxical, of an incorporeal materialism.⁴⁸

Here Foucault outlines how events materialize offering “incorporeal materialism” as a material discursive formation—an event—that has material implications. If we consider the listening event and we take seriously the encounter between the listener and the imagined performer, or the imagined site of performance, then this event has incorporeal materialist repercussions, or as Brian Massumi has put it, resonances.⁴⁹ (Could Fred Moten’s “phonic materiality” be related to Massumi’s “resonances” and Foucault’s “incorporeal materialism”?)⁵⁰

Apropos to this project is Massumi’s description of incorporeal materialism as taking place through “resonation,” a process that “can be seen as converting distance, or extension, into intensity.”⁵¹ Bodies function for Massumi as sensory surfaces that convert distance into intensity, which is the process of bodies becoming aware of (on the one hand) affects. Like hearing, which is in fact corporeal, the aural imaginary is located in the ear, although it is a body imaginary; the distance between “surfaces” and the ear (be they cultural, geographic, linguistic, psychic, etc.) is converted to feelings of intensity, affect, and, as Murray Schafer has said, “touching at a distance.”⁵²

It is through cultural industrialization and concomitant technologies imbricated within and through colonial differentiation that the imaginary process has been isolated to particular parts of the body. It is also what enables the fetishization of particular forms, that is, light (cinema and photography) and sound, as portals to particular and distinct imaginaries. While I would agree with Sterne on the arbitrariness of sound—or the idea that neither sonic media nor aural processes gain us entry into an exceptional perceptual paradigm because they are as historically constituted as any perceptual system—the historical distinctions of sense organs and their differentiation through technologies have resulted in fetishized processes that cannot be ignored. Thus the resonation that takes place through listening has been cultivated as unique, which Jacques Derrida has elaborated on through his notion “the ear of the other,” arguing that it is through the addressee’s ears that meaning is made.

Derrida’s concept is particularly apropos for performing intersectional readings of listening and analyzing the ear as a site for constructing incorporeal materiality. It is, as Derrida so poetically asserts, “the ear of the other that signs”; it is this “ear-organ” that perceives difference.⁵³ Here Derrida recognizes difference as an action performed through hearing. Signature takes place when the *ear of the other* perceives the address; this functions to constitute difference in the addressor.⁵⁴ The ear-organ figures as the site of agency to determine dif-

ference, and the agency bestowed on the ear endows it with a power to *mean*. The ear-agent constructs the subjectivity of the sounds that enter it through a cultural logic of intelligibility, a process of subjectivation in which sounds are gendered and racialized and through which sounds are materialized.⁵⁵ This represents the means through which sound, and in particular its reception—aurality—figures as a site in producing difference. Derrida offers a theory for how the ear and hearing function in producing difference when he describes the ears' key role in subjective signification.⁵⁶ He writes, "The sex of the addresser awaits its determination by or from the other. It is the other who will perhaps decide who I am—man or woman. Nor is this decided once and for all. It may go one way one time and another way another time."⁵⁷

Through this passage, Derrida helps to theorize how gendered difference is engendered through hearing within the aural imaginary. If it is the hearing subject that determines the addressee's gender, and it is "the ear of the other that signs" or the hearing subject whose ears determine the addressor's subjectivity, then we are presented with a site for producing gender that is not reducible to a regime of visible evidence, as evident in the world music culture industry. Decoupled from a material body that can provide visible evidence for sex/gender, and I would add to this race and ethnicity, world music's sounds and voices are othered within the listener's ear. This othering is linked to an economy of pleasure that enables the listener to play with the sounds in the music in what I refer to as an *oto-erotic* performance that cathects pleasure in the aural imaginary. Through this process we can better understand the desire of the hearing subject than we can the addressor's or performer's intentions, as it is within this hearing subject that signification happens. Furthermore, Derrida's theory helps reframe listening as a performative act; like speech acts that are capable of enacting what they describe, listening functions performatively to enact into incorporeal materialism what it imagines aurally.⁵⁸

Touching Listening

If texture and affect, touching and feeling seem to belong together, then, it is not because they share a particular delicacy of scale, such as would necessarily call for "close reading" or "thick description." What they have in common is that *at whatever scale they are attended to*, both are irreducibly phenomenological.

—Eve Sedgwick, *Touching, Feeling*

This section subtitle elaborates on the ubiquity of tropes of tactility in understanding the sociality of sound. It is also a direct reference to Eve Sedgwick's *Touching, Feeling*, a work whose title, she says, "records the intuition that

a particular intimacy seems to subsist between textures and emotions.”⁵⁹ Throughout this article I have tried to maintain a fine, ambivalent balance between describing the aural imaginary as a process both deeply pleasurable and to which I am magnetically drawn, as well as one that has been harnessed by the culture industry and through colonialism for exploitative purposes. In this section, building on Sedgwick, I want to further distinguish this cleavage.

As Antonio Negri has described it,

a focus on affects certainly does draw attention to the body and emotions, but it also introduces an important shift. The challenge of the perspective of the affects resides primarily in the syntheses it requires. This is, in the first place, because affects refer equally to the body and the mind; and, in the second, because they involve both reason and the passions. . . . They illuminate, in other words, both our power to affect the world around us and our power to be affected by it, along with the relationship between those powers.⁶⁰

For Negri (borrowing from Spinoza) the value of theories of affect lies in their ability to direct our attention toward the simultaneous forces that affect bodies and that subjects affect. Negri further states that we must always “pose as a problem the relation between actions and passions, between reason and the emotions,” forcing us to rethink what qualifies as power, action, force, and intensity.⁶¹ It is this tension between the mind’s power to think and the body’s power to act that the notion of affect forces us to consider simultaneously.

As Sedgwick articulates above, affective processes are phenomenological, whether at intimate or mass scales. There is a phenomenological hailing that opens so many affective pathways: as listeners we respond to the sounds with our feelings, and it is this affective investment that takes us out of our selves, into the aural imaginary where we engage in incorporeal material exchanges with the other. Barring, for the moment, the counterhegemonic postcolonial, queer, and feminist attempts at reclaiming this process, these exchanges are structured and structure us as listeners in particular, hegemonic ways.

The industrialization of perception has resulted in the formation of sensory fetishism focused around particular sense organs and modes of perception. As sensory fetishists we claim for our preferred medium an exceptional, almost rarified capacity because we have experienced in that medium something profound. Our work functions as a kind of phenomenological testimonial to the medium’s exceptionalism in affecting our senses. The medium is the masseur, to put a spin on Marshall McLuhan’s famous phrase, as the medium seems to have “touched” us in some profound ways and we want to tell the world about it. As a musician and a music-lover, I have understood the world sonically first and foremost. My fetishism of sound is a testimony to experiences

of joy, melancholia, fierceness, or humility that function as phenomenological opportunities. There is a tension here that I am unable to negotiate between the pleasure offered by listening to the musical other, performing the musical other, and the discursive, imaginary, and political-economic formations that have structured me in relation to that object and the pleasure it affords.⁶² But, if we are to be as attentive to the power of affect as Negri and Spinoza have suggested, it is the having been affected by sound, in particular world music, that is being attested to in these quasi-fetishistic claims (including the testimonials and my own). Scholarship on world music, then, should aspire to not only critique the social structures that distinguish the bodies who produce affective labor from the bodies who consume it but also elucidate the psychic and affective processes that draw the bodies together in the first place.

Notes

1. Customer-generated data was collected during fieldwork in the form of customer service correspondences, bounce-back cards (demographic and feedback information voluntarily provided by customers to the record label), and face-to-face interactions at record company–sponsored events. Because of the proprietary nature of the information and the fact that I, like all other record company employees, signed a nondisclosure agreement pertaining to that information, I incorporate as evidence publicly available information like testimonial and reviews written online at sites like Amazon.com, which are exemplary of voluntarily generated user feedback.
2. Artist, record label, and album names have been changed because of the nondisclosure agreement.
3. Jonathan Sterne applies both meanings of what he calls the “somewhat anachronistic” term *audile*: as a noun it refers to a person who privileges auditory over other senses; as an adjective it refers to what is perceived through the auditory. I borrow his term to also signify both meanings here. Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 96.
4. <http://www.ted.com/talks/view/id/103> (accessed July 21, 2010).
5. She, however, maintains a double-consciousness about her ability to [makes double quotation mark sign with hands] “listen,” nonetheless ambivalently promoting an altogether more complex process of bodily engagement with sound.
6. Alan Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 94.
7. See Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972); Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Donald M. Lowe, *The History of Bourgeois Perception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Sterne, *Audible Past*; Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002); David Suisman, *Selling Sounds* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2009).
8. Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 135–36.
9. On the biopolitical role played by sound in French colonialism, see Hakon Chevalier, *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Frantz Fanon (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 72.
10. Lowe, *History of Bourgeois Perception*, 8.
11. Karl Marx used the term “phantasmagoria” to refer to the appearance of commodities as fetishes in the marketplace and the erasure of the human labor power that made the commodity form possible.
12. Susan Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 81.

13. Sterne, *Audible Past*, 9.
14. Kinship is a pseudonym that closely resembles the sentiment suggested by the label's actual name, which I am not at liberty to disclose because of the nondisclosure agreement I and all other employees were required to sign. Artists' names have also been changed. Subsequent to the conclusion of my fieldwork, which coincided with the popularization of MP3 technologies, piracy, and the demise of numerous competing small record companies, Kinship terminated almost all staff positions and lost its highest-selling artist Bianca Costa, the New York-based Brazilian vocalist, to a major label. As of writing, the company is still in operation but is primarily run by its two founders, Jon Cohen and Jamie Alexander.
15. This was Costa's first album, and subsequent to this her songs were being licensed for prime-time television commercials.
16. Thanks to Amy Sara Carroll for pushing me on this point.
17. This is especially the case on world music compilation albums, which accounted for a significant number of the albums released by the company during my fieldwork.
18. This emphasis happens in the form of framing devices like liner notes, album biographies (one-sheet descriptions of the album written by professional writers), album artwork, websites, and overall marketing campaigns.
19. Though not a Kinship Records release, *San Escapes* was one of many world music records that Cohen played as part-time cohort and world music industry expert on Dayne's nationally syndicated public radio program *The Voyager* (which ended in 2004).
20. This formula is best exemplified by compilations on the Kinship Records travel-themed "Explorer" imprint, for example, *Latin Traveler*, *Arabian Traveler*, and *African Traveler*.
21. For an excellent review essay on this topic, see Steven Feld, "A Sweet Lullaby for World Music," *Public Culture* 12.1 (2000): 145–71.
22. On sampling ethnic sounds, see Paul Theberg, "'Ethnic Sound': The Economy and Discourse of World Music Sampling," in *Music and Technoculture*, ed. Rene Lysloff and Leslie Gay (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 93–108. On world music in advertising, see Timothy Taylor, *Beyond Exoticism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 184–208.
23. Both Susan McClary and Timothy Taylor have argued that in tonal music difference is constituted in the musical composition and arrangement, emphasizing difference as gendered female in the former case, and difference as the colonial other in the latter case. See Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); and Taylor, *Beyond Exoticism*.
24. Although Downey is referring to the ear of a capoeirista, I borrow his term to imagine the listener as an active player in the musical event. See Greg Downey, "Listening to Capoeira: Phenomenology, Embodiment, and the Materiality of Music," *Ethnomusicology* 46.3 (2002): 489.
25. Benjamin Lee and Edward LiPuma, "Cultures of Circulation: The Imaginations of Modernity," *Public Culture* 14 (2002): 191–92. Thanks to Joseph Hankins for the insightful reference.
26. Sterne, *Audible Past*, 158.
27. Lee and LiPuma, "Cultures of Circulation," 193.
28. *Ibid.*, 196.
29. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 8.
30. According to demographic research conducted by Kinship Records during my fieldwork, a majority of listeners were middle-class white women ranging in age from midtwenties to midforties.
31. Feld, "Sweet Lullaby," 147.
32. Ronald Radano and Philip Bohlman, eds., *Music and the Racial Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 37.
33. Thanks to Joseph Hankins for productive engagement on this point.
34. Lowe, *History of Bourgeois Perception*, 85.
35. Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 49.
36. See Feld, "Sweet Lullaby."
37. Bands like Vampire Weekend, Fool's Gold, Yeasayer, and MIA have all claimed world music as a major influence on their own sounds. Additionally, world music hit Broadway in the musicals *The Lion King* and *Fela!*
38. Ihde, *Listening and Voice*, 131.
39. Andrew Hugill, *The Digital Musician* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 103.

40. Charlotte M. Cross and Russell A. Berman, *Schoenberg and Words: The Modernist Years* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2000), 224.
41. See Jacques Attali's analysis of the cultural and ideological distinctions between noise, sound, and music in *Noise* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).
42. David Schwarz, *The Listening Subject* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), 8.
43. But it is ultimately Fanonian psychoanalysis that can get at the complex workings of the aural imaginary within world music because world music is inherently a colonial form. The world can be perceived as musically coherent only when it is constructed in opposition to what it is not: forms that can authentically be traced through a European musical canon, everything from the Western art song to goth. The Fanonian lens enables the analysis of how the unconscious works within racialized logics, or as David Marriott has described it, Fanon helps us deconstruct "the culturalization of the unconscious and the sheer perversity of colonial governance." David Marriott, "Black Cultural Studies," *Year's Work in Critical and Cultural Theory* 17 (2009): 183.
44. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 33; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1991).
45. Radano and Bohlman, *Music and the Racial Imagination*, 5.
46. David Macey, *Jacques Lacan*, trans. Anika Lemaire (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), 60–61.
47. Aural imaginary builds on psychoanalytic film theory to theorize an aside made by Kaja Silverman on sound recording: "Filmic articulation has been traced in part to the complex of machines without which it would remain only an abstract possibility. . . . Since this creative dispersal runs counter to the dominant humanist view of authorship, it is often covered over . . . by a harmonizing representation . . . although films as diverse as *Double Indemnity*, *The Conversation*, and *Blow Out* suggest that the tape recorder can perform a similar function by virtue of its association with human hearing. Together, these two privileged machines make possible a certain anthropomorphism of the cinematic apparatus, its conceptualization in terms of a transcendental viewer and listener." Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 11.
48. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971), 231.
49. Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002), 14. Massumi has further elaborated on this concept in his analysis of the body in motion, "Far from regaining a concreteness, to think the body in movement thus means accepting the paradox that there is an incorporeal dimension of the body. Of it, but not it. Real, material, but incorporeal" (5). For Massumi, bodies experience sensation by virtue of this incorporeality. Through movement, sensations are "doubled by the feeling of having a feeling" (13).
50. Fred Moten, *In the Break* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1.
51. *Ibid.*, 14.
52. R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, Vt.: Destiny Books, 1994), 12.
53. Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other*, ed. Christie McDonald, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 51.
54. Derrida explicates this point by stating, "The ear of the other says me to me and constitutes the *autos* of my autobiography." Derrida, *Ear of the Other*, 51; emphasis mine.
55. In my more expansive manuscript project I elaborate on this process by incorporating Jacques Attali's distinctions between noise, sound, and music, reading production and mixing practices as sites for the determination of and processes of distinction. Attali, *Noise*.
56. Derrida forms a response to the following question posed by Christie V. McDonald: "in the reading or readings that remain to be done of Nietzsche by this deciphering ear, and without letting oneself get caught in the trap of what you have called *gyneog*, does the "I" have a gender [genre]." Derrida, *Ear of the Other*, 49. Derrida's translator Peggy Kamuf notes in the passage and at the bottom of the page that "genre also means 'gender'" (*ibid.*). However, Derrida unambiguously interprets McDonald's question as pertaining to gender. He paraphrases her question in the following way: "The most difficult question came at the end of your remarks. It concerns the sexual gender (and not simply the literary genre) of the 'I' whose grammatical form is indeterminate, at least in the languages we are using here." Derrida, *Ear of the Other*, 52.
57. Derrida, *Ear of the Other*, 52.
58. "I'm listening," for example, can be understood as a performative utterance that confirms what has been doubted by an interlocutor: whether auditory attention has been directed at the speaker. Hear-

ing, on the other hand, seems to generally describe a distinct process from listening, a sensory event in which a body more passively absorbs auditory information. "I hear you" is less a performative and more a declarative statement.

59. Eve Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 17.
60. Antonio Negri, "Foreword: What Affects Are Good For," in *The Affective Turn*, ed. Patricia Clough (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), ix.
61. Negri, "Foreword," x.
62. I elaborate on performing musical otherness in Roshanak Kheshti, "Musical Miscegenation and the Logic of Rock and Roll: Homosocial Desire and Racial Productivity in 'A Paler Shade of White,'" *American Quarterly* 60.4 (2008): 1037–55.