

# Sketches towards The Study of Sonic (Im)*materialities*

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## INTRODUCTIONS

Ask more of what we make of communing, of coming, of dispersing, of moving, of learning alongside one another. Arrive and arrive again in communion—the only desire I have for this work.

fahima ife, *maroon choreography* (2021)

This work emerges from years of concern, years of study, years of practice, bent towards the question of communion. By concern I mean: what and whom one is responsible for and to; what one is bound up with(in). Throughout this piece, I do hope to offer something “wiser....than an argument,” (ife 2021, xi) because my core concern here is not theoretical intervention but rather, practices of ethical relation with all beings and where that concern meets the sonic.<sup>1</sup> By offering the framework of sonic (im)*materialities*, I consider the complex relationships among multiple

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<sup>1</sup>Throughout this piece, I consider the work of theorizing as a practice which emerges from both intimate experience and close engagement with the authors whose work I am in conversation with. Counter to lineages of top-down theory, I understand theory as a practice which traces (often already existent) language for aspects of experience rendered otherwise “illegible” within the terms of hegemonic discourse, and which seeks not to render those experiences legible within hegemonic terms, but to unsettle and render sensible those hegemonic structures which are sustained by naturalization and invisibilization.

historically situated figurations of matter and immateriality as they relate to fundamental concerns of sound; as well as genres of the human as they connect to the concurrent development of discourses of religion, secularity, sound (and sonic materiality); and finally (and most centrally) the ways in which certain forms of being, hearing, and sounding have been written out of definitions of sound as consequence. In turn, this work critiques the role of theoretical work in ethnomusicology concerning sonic materiality, voice studies, and sound studies in delimiting and shaping these relations. In the course of this work, I offer the outlines of a much larger project, critiquing the fundamental terms of ethnomusicological disciplinary inquiry as predicated on a hegemonic genre of the human as “Man,” (Wynter 2003) which is coterminous with both the constitution of “matter” and the construction of the category of “Religion,” a category which finds its correlate—rather than its opposite—in the “Secular” (Carter 2023, 17). Further, I argue that these elements, which were all formed via racializing processes in direct contradistinction to Black and Indigenous life, underpin contemporary figurations of sound as (at base) acoustic, material, or vibrational, and as such are insufficient to attend to the full richness of human, other-than-human, and more-than-human sonic relations and capacities. Throughout, I consider practices of ethical relation, sensorial politics, and theoretical practice as inseparable. In these considerations, sonic materiality stands as a pervasive concern which, as I will show, cannot be answered by simply positing “immateriality” as a counter. Rather, it is the genre of the human Wynter calls “Man” which I locate as the root issue from which we must disentangle sonic relation and ethnographic practice, allowing the process to unsettle normative disciplinary figurations of the sensorial, sensoria (both human and other-than-human), and “sense.” Emerging from this sensorial and theoretical unsettling, in the final turns of this work I will offer a consideration of epistemic reconfiguration emerging from “Unknowability”; as well as offering the term sonic (im)materialities, where I will begin to flesh out the study of sonic (im)materialities including its ethical and sonic implications.

## ON MAT(T)ER AND ETHNOGRAPHIC DETAINMENT

To begin, I want to center the work of Kathryn Yusoff and J. Kameron Carter, who each critique a particular “imagination of matter” (Carter 2023, 4 [building on Charles Long]), wherein, “[t]he language of materiality and its division between life and nonlife, and its alignment with concepts of the human and inhuman, facilitated divisions between subjects as humans and subjects priced as flesh (or inhuman matter)” (Yusoff, 2018, 15) in the context of the Atlantic slave trade. Both scholars link the constitution of the “inhuman as matter” (in Yusoff’s terms) to the processes of racialization whereby the “inhuman as race” was simultaneously created (Yusoff 2018, 13; Carter 2023, 12). I argue that, given the prominent position of figurations of sonic materiality and of acoustic/vibrational sound in music and sound studies, it is vital for ethnomusicologists to carefully consider the figurations of “matter” which underpin sonic materiality and basic naturalized definitions of sound and sociality, given that these figurations extend to taken-for-granted limits around what beings can “be” in sonic relation, and indeed what beings and sounds

are considered within the realm of the “real.” Yusoff, working within transdisciplinary critical geography, notes that, “...racialization belongs to a material categorization of the division of matter (corporeal and mineralogical) into active and inert. Extractable matter must be both passive (awaiting extraction and possessing of properties) and able to be activated through the mastery of white men” (2018, 12). This figuration of dead matter emerged through the racializing processes of slavery and was equated with dehumanized, de-spirited Blackness.

In contrast to these figurations of matter and Blackness, religious studies scholar J. Kameron Carter (in conversation with Fred Moten) in turn urges us to consider instead *mater* and “speak of matter as a network of entanglement...think of *mater* as that matrixial, originaive, or exposing touch of alterity that summons things into ex-istence, ceaselessly proliferating ways or forms of ex-istence...” (2023, 131). Understanding *mater* as a living *and* enlivening force, we can begin to imagine alternate *materialities* and (im)*materialities* of sound, necessitating critical engagement with multiple historical and discursive figurations of materiality and immateriality. This understanding of *mater* requires an unsettling of the terms of the discipline of ethnomusicology particularly (but extending to music and sound studies writ large), including the contemporary foundation of secular materiality via solely acoustic and vibrational models of sound, and the ways those terms are maintained through processes by which the terms of “local theory” are kept from unsettling the secularity which has and continues to determine the fundamental terms and theoretical foundations of the discipline. Alexander Weheliye refers to this as “ethnographic detainment,” (2014, 24); and Marie Thompson names it as “white aurality” (2017, 7). In Thompson’s figuration, white aurality filters concepts of sound from an invisibilized and de-ontologized position recognizable by the “implicit slippage between ‘is’ and ‘heard as’...” (Thompson 2017, 7-8)—where “heard as” can be read as one process by which “ethnographic detainment” is effected, creating and siloing ethnographic “others” to the realm of the ethnographically particular (maintaining their status as “others” and “outside”). In contrast, secular whiteness is consistently figured as the unnamed “neutral” filter through which this “local theory” must pass so as not to become generalizable or powerful beyond a narrowly identitarian context (Weheliye 2014, 22-23)—a context formed via the very racializing procedures which the constitution of the discipline aided in creating and thereby continues to maintain.

These considerations lead us to Carter’s discussion of the creation of the categories of Religion and “Black Religion,” both of which were predicated on the formation of a particular genre of the human which is defined in contradistinction to Black life, spirit, and humanness. As Carter discusses, the terms of “Religion” and secularity are linked, rather than categorically split, as secularity, “...is a function of the Christian invention of religion, its binary complement that disavows its fraternal twin.” (2023, 17) He traces the constitution of “Religion” (and secularity) as a humanist/colonialist enterprise, crafted via racializing processes to produce “racial-Blackness,” “the human,” and the bifurcation of the two (where again, the racializing bifurcation is a defining and sustaining feature of this hegemonic genre of the human as such) (Carter 2023, 64). The situation as he details is one where the inclusion of “Black Religions” in Religious Studies as an academic discipline (where the category of “Religion” itself, which made the discipline possible,

was shaped by the primarily ethnographic discipline of Anthropology prior to the formal emergence of Religious Studies) (Carter 2023, 70-71), is paradoxical to the terms of the discipline, where “religion” is predicated on *the human*, but on *a genre of the human which is defined and upheld by its exclusion of Black humanness*, such that the Blackness (as human, as spirited) of “Black Religion” *exceeds the terms of the category of Religion*, while the conjunction of “Black Religion,” as a term siloed within the discipline, upholds the racialization and de-humanization of Blackness which preserves Religious Studies as such (Carter 2023, 65). We can read this as another case of “ethnographic detainment,” (Weheliye 2014, 24) bearing on our understanding of the hegemony of this same vision of the human as Man in ethnomusicology and the constitution and maintenance of our own discipline along the lines of matter, the religious and the secular. Indeed, Carter’s work demonstrates that this invizibilized whiteness is the consistent thread in each case—both religious and secularizing—across disciplinary sites of ethnographic detainment predicated on a particular genre of the human.

As part of his larger project attending to the “black study of religion” (Carter 2023, 136), Carter builds on Sylvia Wynter’s figurations of “Man 1” and “Man 2” as totalizing genres of the human (*Homo politicus* and *Homo economicus* respectively) (Wynter 2003); he unpacks the intimacy of these hegemonic figurations with an intermediary figure he refers to as “religious Man (*Homo religiosus*)” (Carter 2023, 14-15) who is a, “*Homo racialis* who in his universality is enlightenment philosophy’s transparent subject. That transparency is ‘whiteness,’ which while being understood in the symbolic-epidermal register of skin color must also, perhaps more primally, be understood as a certain ethical-civilizational form and practice made manifest through symbolic-epidermal inscription” (Carter 2023, 14-15). Carter goes on to describe whiteness as “a settler-colonial and capitalist cosmology” (Carter 2023, 14-15) and considers *Homo religiosus* indelibly linked to the secular scientific figuration of Man through what he terms the “*settler colonial religion of antiblackness*” (6) as well as through gesturing towards what W.E.B. Du Bois refers to as the “religion of whiteness.” (18 and 121). Carter states, “To be of this (racial capitalist) world is to be within the invention of religion, within this enclosure invented as part of the enclosing of the earth. It is to be within that anthropological enclosure called Man, perhaps even the human...If anything, it’s precisely this secularist belief in a rational overcoming of religion that further fuels the very invention of religion and its internal imagining of matter and (anti)blackening of the earth.” (17). As such, the framework of sonic (im)materialities must emerge with the intent to unsettle this genre of human as Man in ethnomusicology and its “internal imagining of matter.” (ibid). Importantly, this consideration is not only of concern for scholars of sound and religion, spirituality, or other-than-human sonic relation, but rather, linking the religious and secular as hegemonic and mutually constitutive, necessitates unsettling this genre of the human across the discipline.

## ETHNOMUSICOLOGICAL RESPONSES

Within ethnomusicology, Jeffers Englehardt has questioned if, “other-than-human beings [can] enter directly into ethnomusicology’s record,” or if their presence is relegated to only appear “second-hand through the relational ontologies of humans and other-than-humans” (2024, 196). In response, he offers “entangled ethnomusicologies.” (201). Further, Ana María Ochoa Gautier argues that the current (material) figuration of sound is propped up by a naturalized nature/culture binary where sound is situated as, “the very mediator of the presence or absence of life” (2016, 139). As such, to be capable of pursuing an entangled ethnomusicology, we must follow Ochoa Gautier’s injunction to, “...rethink the acoustic definition of silence as determined solely by human auditory thresholds” (2015, 189). Jeffrey Dyer furthers this work through what he terms “non-acoustic sound” and his critique of secular materiality as part of historicist paradigms in the constitution of modernity (2022, 18). In his work in Cambodia, Dyer routinely encountered engagements with the dead as agentive beings whom the living socialized with, as well as sang and whispered to (247). These relations involved material exchanges with the dead as well as the non-acoustic mode of “speaking in one’s heart” and instances of the dead singing to the living (10 and 27). Addressing these sonic relations, he questions, “...what types of sounds can bring the living and dead together, if speaking in one’s heart with acoustic soundlessness is a mode of voice that the dead can hear, and if a dead mother singing for her daughter registers for other people as silence?” (3) Dyer’s work affirms the need to conceptualize sound beyond solely material, acoustic, and vibrational models.

I turn now to work which further challenges divisions between the material and immaterial and between materiality and spirituality, emphasizing social, political, and ecological bonds in alternate materialities. Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate scholar Kim TallBear, on the urgency of moving beyond a secular or even sacred lifeworld which is *only* figured as materialist (while discussing Sagan’s assessment of “interspecies communities”), notes that to this set of humans and nonhumans she would “have to include an interspecies community or networked set of social-biological relations living beings that are both material and *immaterial*, and therein is a key difference” (2011). David Delgado Shorter (2016, 441) offers a paired consideration which cautions against the consumption of Indigenous immaterialities or “nonmaterialities” while ignoring Indigenous “political, economic, and social materiality” and “Indigenous struggles for sovereignty, water rights, or political recognition.” He also argues that to describe Indigenous immaterialities as “spiritual” is often but not always a settler misnomer where “related” would more aptly imply “a horizontal plane of multidimensionality, inhabited by ‘persons’ of the human, animal, and invisible types” (Delgado Shorter 2016, 449). Relatedly, Solimar Otero (2020, 125), in the context of the *misa* in *Espiritismo* offers further complexity emphasizing that the dead as invisible material beings are also engaged in, “struggles for different kinds of justice and that their pasts are raced and gendered... the dead are watching, listening, and asking us to engage with power, personal and social, in visceral ways” and that “The *trabajo* the spirits come down to do in the *misa* and on earth, which they then asks mediums to engage in during and after the ritual, connects causes and effects on various planes” (127).

Pivottally, the work of Otero, Delgado Shorter, and TallBear all engage (im)material

networks of social and political labor, where the effects amid (im)material worlds and beings are intertwined in concern and responsibility, offering instances of alternate materialities and *mater*. Along with and building on these scholars' work, I critique the secular foundations of ethnomusicological conceptions of sound (Englehardt 2024, 198; Dyer 2022, 32-33). But further, I see the fundamental issue as that of a hegemonic figuration of the human which shapes ethnomusicological conceptions of sounders and knowers, and which requires more than the addition of the "immaterial" and spiritual materialities, but rather, following Yusoff and Carter, it is not an additive question at all. Any such "addition" would constitute primarily a move of *inclusion into* or at most *expansion of* the discipline, such that it is intellectually "radical" but only to the extent that it *advances rather than unsettles the discipline*. This leaves intact the onto-epistemic scaffolding which causes and preserves the exclusion of non-acoustic sound and "immaterial" beings in sonic relation. Thus, risking the absorption of these complex sonic relations and beings into mere ethnographic theory<sup>2</sup>—nominally effecting radical sonic-theoretical and ethical shifts while in effect, preserving and widening the borders of disciplinary epistemic conquest. Rather, this issue necessitates continued careful consideration of lineages of matter, Religion, and spiritual materialities including the invisible but material. From this, it is clear that any truly expansive conception of sound and of the human beyond Man, must account for historically situated figurations of mat(t)er where: matter, *mater*, immateriality, and (im)materiality are attended to, otherwise the same relation of matter as such holds. By offering this brief initial presentation of sonic (im)materialities, I hope to begin to flesh out extensively both a flexible framework to attend to the interplay of these figurations, their sonic implications, and some considerations for ethical approach to the study of sonic (im)materialities.

## ON UNKNOWABILITY

From this and moving towards the study of sonic (im)materialities, it is vital to take a moment to consider the role of the "Unknowable." First, it is necessary to distinguish different uses of this term which perform distinct epistemic operations. In my own use of the term "Unknowability," I draw on Erin Manning's distinction between the "Unknowable" and the simply "Unknown"; where, as Manning argues, the State only recognizes the onto-epistemological possibility of the latter—presuming and claiming totalizing knowledge or else the rhetoric of inevitable conquest of all knowledge and beings (2007, 53). For Manning, the Unknowable functions as a vital category which is excessive and threatening to the State and its apparatuses (including the academy within the colonial institution of the University), and it is this sense of Unknowability which I center here. Manning's category of Unknowability is resonant with Marisol

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<sup>2</sup>By the phrase "'mere' ethnographic theory," I intend to provincialize and critique a hegemonic strain of top-down theoretical work which flattens the complexities and nuances of being and experience into a product of sonic curiosity for disciplinary consumption and continuation. In doing so, I hope to work towards a practice of theorizing which works against any incorporation of theoretical knowledge into the discipline which would leave its hegemonic terms and structures intact.

de la Cadena's figuration of "not knowing," which "...means that what you know (or might eventually know) might be exceeded by that which what you know (or might eventually know) cannot contain (both, as in comprise and control)" (2021, 254); where, Unknowability in Manning's sense can be linked to that which cannot be "contained." This should be understood in contrast to a certain usage of "unknowability" (sometimes linked with "speculative" work) in scholarship, which is characterized by an appeal to "unknowability" when one is met with experience and knowledges which exceed the terms of one's own un-situated paradigm and which functions as an epistemic-ontological disclaimer by the terms of disciplinary inclusion and filtering.<sup>3</sup> Describing the process of epistemic reproduction, Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser note, "What the community of knowers does not recognize as knowledge is displaced along with its reality-making possibilities" (2018, 6-7). As such, through this process of filtering and displacement, the ontological borders of this disciplinary ground (which is also a space for reality-making) are violently maintained; and what is displaced is not only knowledge, but beings and knowers.

Following this, one of the presumptions of the study of sonic (im)materialities is that it is possible for aspects of experience to be multiply knowable/known/potentially knowable/unknowable/potentially unknowable/unknown to various "knowers," and that no aspect of experience can be fixed as only one of these. In this study, it is not necessarily the case that all aspects are simultaneously present, but that a) movement among categories for a single knower is generally presumed as possible and likely [What was once unknown may become known, and what was once thought known may be unsettled and shift into the domain of the unknown, etc.]; and b) knowledges or experiences can be multiply classified simultaneously [What is unknown to one subject may be known to another, or what is considered unknowable to one subject through lack of training, initiation, attunement, or consent may be potentially knowable to another, and still further, known to another human or more-than-human being (where that knowledge is unrevealed to humans or else unperceived).] Pivotaly, by "unknowability," I do not only mean the possible literal knowability of an experience, but also that Unknowability should be centered in the study of (im)materialities via what Mohawk scholar Audre Simpson terms ethnographic refusal (2007). As Stó:lō scholar Dylan Robinson has argued, building on the work of Simpson, this process of refusal in the context of ethnomusicology would necessitate at times stepping back from pursuing a particular line of research as well as refusing to share certain aspects of knowledge and experience that come up in the study of sonic (im)materialities—where what is knowable should not necessarily be shared beyond certain communal spaces (Robinson 2020).

Taken together, I appeal to a reorientation towards sonic (im)materialities in which Unknowability, as that uncontainable excess to the terms of state and disciplinary knowledge, is centered in a move which calls for a fundamental unsettling of the terms of ethnomusicological

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<sup>3</sup>In this usage of "unknowability" which I am critiquing and distinguishing from Manning's sense of the word, the unknowable tends to be deployed as a dismissive "catch-all" category, for phenomena considered unreal or unverifiable by a given scholar without critically interrogating the various terms of epistemic verification which may be at play. This can function as another form of ethnographic detainment.

knowledge and practice. Such that, rather than appeal to the siloed unknowable (situated as excess at the edges of disciplinary terms of epistemic recognition), the most generalizable conception of sound would rather emerge from whatever is Unknowable. In other words, sonic (im)materialities must be at least as expansive as that which is most uncontainable.

## SONIC (IM)MATERIALITIES

To begin, I want to first make clear that the notion of sonic (im)materialities is not meant to search for, define, or serve as any singular definition or presumed shared basic unit of sound. As Matthew Rahaim writes on the search for singular conceptions of voice, “[V]ocal ontologies each offer something quite different in turn to a situated actor, but never all at once. There is no reason to expect that there will be a shared essence, or a lowest common denominator among these innumerable realnesses—not materiality, not vibration, not divinity, not individual personhood” (2019, 27). Following Rahaim and extending his logic to figurations and ontologies of sound (and necessarily silence), sonic (im)materialities as a framework is intended to be capacious enough to attend to these multiplicities, their frictions, and the (sound)worlds and attendant ethical formations they bring into or cut out of being, with (im)material consequences. Here, by placing parentheses around “sound” in the composite “(sound)worlds,” I seek in to avoid privileging sonic theoretical intervention apart from or above lived (im)material social and political worlds which are sonically lived and generated, but which exceed the terms of sound and sociality as presently accepted by disciplinary norms.

Second, as may be clear by now, the parenthesis within sonic (im)materialities implies not a de-privileging or siloing of “the immaterial,” but a visualization of (sometimes invisible) points of contact, interaction, and suffusion of (im)materialities. Here, I am not using this term to simply combine “immateriality + materiality” or even “immateriality + *materiality*,” but rather to figure their conceptual and visceral inseparability, to imagine (im)materialities anterior to their violent separation (which was also their creation as individuated concepts and opposites such that an additive function could even be thought). This inseparability does not imply that they are necessarily always figured as holistically present, but it does insert the absent presence of the processes of their separation.

Third, sonic (im)materialities is a framework which cuts across the discipline and is not only for scholars of sound and spirituality, religion, or relation with other-than-human beings. Indeed, this study is vital for a fuller understanding of multiple materialities and secular formations of worlds. The term is composed so as to emphasize the centrality of mat(t)er and genres of the human to sonic relation, such that analysis of any figuration of sound would need to take into account how that particular figuration is situated and shaped by historical lineages of mat(t)er and genres of the human, and in turn how that figuration of sound interacts with other sonic (im)materialities across worlds of sound, being, and sociality. In this process the term necessitates engagement with the overwritten modes of the (im)material, alternative materialities and immaterialities, and Carter’s *mater* discussed earlier in this work as well as critical engagement



with hegemonic figurations of immateriality and materiality. As such, this framework is intended to always speak to social and political worlds and agents and interactions which flow between (im)material beings so as to emphasize the very real effects and consequences of these (sonic) relations across worlds. As a theoretical tool it is capacious enough to name and analyze those sonic relational phenomena, which are figured via the linked category of “religion”/“secularity” and its attendant genres of the human, all while historicizing, situating, and critiquing those figurations.

Fourth and finally in this initial sketch of sonic (im)materialities, sonic (im)materialities do not necessarily always prioritize or rely on sonic mediation via any genre of the human. As such, sonic (im)materialities would also be concerned with sonic relations amid other-than-human and more-than-human beings and take seriously the variously and multiply constituted sensoria and sensorial capacities of these beings (as variously knowable/unknown/and unknowable). From this, consideration of sonic (im)materialities implies that sound, silence, and (human) sensoria would have to be understood as contingently linked but multiply so. This asks not for moving simply “beyond the human sensorium,” but to also complexify the normative limits of “the human” sensorium (which currently do not attest to human sonic capacities, but to the sonic capacities of a limited hegemonic genre of the human as Man as I’ve argued.) By this I mean that a given sonic event might and does occur between (im)material beings with variously constituted sensoria and sensorial capacities, where both participants then have different thresholds for each link in this trio and different (im)material constitutions to account for. From this, a given sound or sonic event can be both unfolding temporally and atemporally; both situated in space and not; both non-acoustically sounded and silent, where that silence may be not necessarily a hegemonic silencing of certain modes of hearing and sounding, but which may at times be privileged, strategic, and valued. This also leads to fuller consideration of the socialities of non-acoustic sounds.<sup>4</sup>

In fahima ife’s usage of “(im)materialities” (as part of her broader study of *anachoreography*), she describes the process of (im)material saturation and study as emerging from contemplation of her intimate relation with Levada, her grandmother, even in death. Her work emerges from the desire to get closer to that relation and “to get more precise in practicing and articulating the imprecise (im)materiality of our shared air,” (ife 2021, xi); elsewhere she describes part of this process: “i sat and breathed in the sentient energy of all those former bodies (those temporary flesh realities) ...my work became a creative-intellectual practice of pneumatic cross-pollination.” (ife 2021, 81) In both moments, ife’s “(im)materiality” can be understood as the condition of always already shared material, energetic, and spiritual movement across states of living and death, and touch which create sensible openings where these bordered states of (individuated) being loosen. In this way, the saturation of sonic (im)materialities speaks to the nonutopian intimacy of these connections, which can imply both the imposition of (im)material violences and violation as well as modes of (im)materially tending to one another amid, through, and against such violences. As such, Carter’s *mater* might be thought with ife as “the matter that

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<sup>4</sup> See Dyer 2022 especially for discussion of some of these considerations.

moves us beyond the academy, beyond the fields...” (ife 2021, xi) towards creative anti-disciplinary practice like ife’s. Emerging from this core, what I’ve offered throughout this discussion may read as staunchly anti-disciplinary at times. To this I would close by saying that this work seeks, with hope, ways of both being *and* doing study well together—in already existent pockets of movement and liberatory intellectual practice within the not only historically but presently violent instantiation of the Academy—beyond those disciplinary borders which limit thought and language for the many ways we already are and might yet be, together.

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