

Exploring Cultural Diversity in Experimental Sound

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Introduction

The genres of computer music, noise, sound art, electroacoustic music, soundscape and improvisation – termed for the remainder of this article as ‘experimental sound’ are overwhelmingly dominated by affluent, White male practitioners. The Black Lives Matter movement has thrown into sharp relief many examples of the injustices that Black people face as a result of institutional Whiteness, and this should catalyze serious investigation and honest critical reflection in our own field. Recent work in diversifying experimental sound practices has focussed on gender and increasing the representation of women (Born & Devine 2015, Lane 2016, and Goh & Thompson 2021). While this work is absolutely vital, there is a need to address other forms of exclusion, such as racial exclusion. This paper serves as an overview of an 18 Month UK Arts and Humanities Research Council funded research project “Exploring Cultural Diversity in Experimental Sound” (ECDES)¹,

beginning in September 2021 (Patel et al 2021). Our research will build an understanding of the experiences of experimental sound composers from Black and South Asian backgrounds, building awareness of the existing cultural diversity in electroacoustic music and sound arts, while also promoting strategies to realize change to support and nurture practitioners from across Britain’s diverse cultures.

Representation, Practice and Engagement

Black and South Asian artists are some of the least represented within the field of experimental sound. Their experiences, therefore, provide a valuable counterpoint to the normalized white majority.² Working and engaging directly with key participants who are Black and South Asian artists will offer up critical reflections on the compositions that they are being commissioned to create; as well as drawing out and unpacking their diverse experiences within the wider field of experimental sound, where their work is mainly situated. As Tim Ingold argues, there is a distinction to be made between ‘knowing about and knowing through’ (Ingold 2013).

Thus, the engagement of practice research and participant observation provides an opportunity to move beyond ethnographic documentation into anthropological knowing, building understanding in dialogue with practitioners themselves.

The South Asian heritage of ECDES's Principal Investigator (PI), and their position as an experimental sound practitioner, is therefore essential in affording cultural specificity for the research question, enabling the PI to engage as an informed observer participant (Kaminski 2004), drawing out responses and reflections with an engaged group of other Black and South Asian composers and musicians, to learn from them via an education of attention (Gibson 1979, 254). As argued by Born, socialities are engendered by practice and experience, as well as by the social and institutional conditions that create the environments for specific types of musical practice (Born 2011). This research focuses on the former via an embodied and material approach, engaging artists who practice across a range of different contexts, both within and outside the academy. The unifica-

tion of practice and experience with reflection echoes the approaches of Steven Feld's "acoustemology", a sonic way of knowing and being in the world, which engages the relationality of knowledge production (Feld and Basso 1996). It is anticipated that complex interrelated strands of identity and practice operate within the key participants of this current research and that Feld's work will therefore be vital in guiding our elaboration, the multivalent and dynamic interplay in the musical and cultural identities of diverse experimental sound practitioners.

A number of recent anthropological research projects have investigated the social and institutional conditions of experimental sound in the UK. For example, Georgina Born's *MusDig: Music Digitisation Mediation project* (Born 2010), combines anthropology, sociology, media, and material culture studies in dialogue with ethnographic fieldwork, to address digital music across a spectrum of creative practices.³ Born's personal investigations into the aesthetics and ideologies within the culture of university-based digital art music in the UK is significant to the current research. The institutional culture is a key access path-

way into experimental sound, and the structure and gatekeepers of the system have a massive impact on the potentials for diversity across the entire ecosystem. These projects critique established social and political frameworks of the experimental sound genre, providing essential context against which the outputs of the current research can be situated, analyzed, and evaluated.

Why Change?

New initiatives challenging the lack of diversity in musical practices have emerged over the summer of 2020 (Decolonising the Musical University conference, Edinburgh University; the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in Music Studies network established by Music HE and the Royal Musical Association) but to date, there has been no response within the area of experimental sound in higher education. New book *Sound Arts Now* (Lane and Carlyle, 2021) has a diverse cohort of voices from artists and academic alike, but while raising underrepresented voices is a positive step, there is a deeper need to fundamentally question the invisible bias' at play within our field, and structural issues need to be ques-

tioned and interrogated.

The historical canon of experimental sound is a stark representation of privileged normalization, with the overwhelming preponderance of White males a reflection of the exclusive contexts within which this practice evolved through the 20th century. Ethnic minorities are automatically marginalized by contexts and institutions which are overwhelmingly white, indeed the whole sector is normalized around its (invisible) Whiteness (Dyer 2002). As Lipsitz put it: "Whiteness is systematically embedded in all institutional facets of our society" (Sue, 2016, 23). Such normalization are clearly evidenced in the conference and special Journal issue on "Alternative Histories of Electroacoustic Music" (Organised Sound 2017) which made no reference to ethnic diversity or alternative perspectives of diverse cultures, but featured an overwhelming number of references to the White canon, including over one-hundred-and-twenty references to Pierre Schaeffer, one of the main veritable figures of electroacoustic music.⁴

We have to start moving away from the historical canons, and realign

the focus to include those who have been traditionally the “other”- to give voice to diverse musicians and practitioners and fundamentally question what is accepted and what is qualified as experimental sound practice. An additionally insidious challenge, highlighted by Born and Devine, is that the genre is

“a cultural–educational domain that is generally understood as ethnically unmarked or ‘non-raced’ – as representing the musical-universal, the ‘commonality of humanity’ in music – [but which] is actually experienced as ethnically White and as linked to an invisible politics of Whiteness” (Born and Devine 2015, 139).

An argument strongly expressed by Nate Holder in his poem “If I Were A Racist” includes stanza “If I were a racist, I’d have posters of me on the walls and in the books. No black or brown faces, Just my own”, and equally powerful “If I were a racist, I’d know that, Even though the notes may be black, The spaces would remain white”, thus highlighting the invisible bias in music education (Holder 2020).

We need to challenge barriers and borders, classifications and categorizations, groups and genres. White people cannot do this on their own,

but they can offer a seat, and reach out to diverse communities. Computer music has the ability to transform and diversify, but to do so it must seek to reach broader audiences, connecting with new voices and new people, to foster a culture of opportunity. Not by eradicating the experimental music’s past, but by forming exciting inclusive situations, whereby historical figures can sit alongside ethnically diverse sound artists. The call of this paper addresses the need for diversifying the field of computer music, but the irony is that this call is directed towards a generally closed and isolated group of our own academic computer music community. To realize true diversification, it is imperative that we utilize the manifold opportunities around us to connect via online networks, communities, and social media – to join ourselves to the incredible far reaching and diverse communities that are engaging with creative practice in sound via digital means.

Conclusion

Experimental sound occupies a position at the forefront internationally, an avant-garde elite of artistic

practice. In such a context, it becomes even more important to ensure that this practice is truly reflective of the cultural diversity within society as a whole. To blindly limit the scope of these avant-garde and elite practices, risks reinforcing them as another tool for the manifestation of neo-colonial White supremacy. Uncritically considered research in the field of experimental sound risks actively reinforcing neo-colonial perspectives through the plundering of sound materials from distant cultures, abstracting them from source culture for purified presentation in Western Art settings, applied as tokenisms and cultural fetishisms.

As such, engagement with this topic has the potential to benefit not just marginalized practitioners but the wider experimental sound community. Without focussed attention to catalyze action, the wider genre and its practices are unlikely to engage meaningfully with its Whiteness nor benefit from the results. If we can diversify this art form, acknowledge the innovative potential in diversity, and engage constructively with identifying the Whiteness of the genre through recognizing and

valuing the aesthetics and creativity of Black and South Asian composers, then we can begin to position this avant-garde art form as, not simply breaking boundaries, but leading the push to diversify elite artistic practices in a way that can set an example for wider musical and artistic communities.

Notes

[1] This research project is hosted by the Sound/Image Research Group at the University of Greenwich, London. The co-investigators are Dr Andrew Knight-Hill and Prof Tracey Reynolds. Special thanks to Dr Andrew Knight-Hill for his support and key instigator for helping me to formalize this personal idea into a co-authored research grant to make a difference and transform change.

[2] As Paula Rothenberg notes in her introduction to her edited volume on White Privilege, even racism has its inequalities, "Hispanics and Asians, occupy the complex space of not being White but maintain some racial privilege by virtue of not being black" (2002: 3, P. S. Rothenberg (Ed.), *White Privilege*. New York: Worth).

[3] This research is due to be published in a forthcoming volume called *Music and Digital Media: A Planetary Anthropology*.

[4] The word 'diversity' occurs three times in the edition: two occurrences refer to different perspectives (which are

not so relatively different) and one to gender. While, in contrast, this edition focussing specifically on “alternative” histories, references Pierre ‘Schaeffer’, the absolute canonical figure of electroacoustic music, 128 times.

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