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Unsettling Sound: Some Traces

SARA JANE BAILES, ALEXANDRINA HEMSLEY, ROYONA MITRA, RAJNI SHAH, ARABELLA STANGER AND JEREMY TOUSSAINT-BAPTISTE

Unsettling Sound *examined the at once destabilizing and liberatory experiential dimensions of sounding through three dialogue-events, opening up possible meanings, sensations, ideological and bodily potentialities of the sonic, and the sonic potentialities of bodies. This series of conversations, co-devised by Sara Jane Bailes and Arabella Stanger, took place remotely and online. Here, traces of the events are gathered into print. Alexandrina Hemsley reflects on their exchange with Seke Chimutengwende and Xana in the midst of creating an audio version of the stage show,* Black Holes *(2018). Rajni Shah and Royona Mitra share voice letters on the impossibilities of anti-racist institutions and dreaming new worlds. Jeremy Toussaint-Baptiste shares a new conceptual score,* Étude for Not Knowing #1 *(2021).*

Introduction

SARA JANE BAILES AND ARABELLA STANGER

Unsettling Sound was a series of conversations between artists and scholars, co-hosted online in autumn 2020 by Sussex Performance Events and Research (SPEAR) and the Attenborough Centre for the Creative Arts (ACCA) at the University of Sussex, UK.[1] Embarking from the uncertainties and dissonance produced by remote exchange during the COVID-19 pandemic, the series took the unsettled experiential dimensions of composing, talking, listening, hearing and sounding online as a chance to explore the various meanings, sensations and ideological potentialities of the sonic in the context of sound composition, dance, visual art and performance. Over three Fridays in November, conversations were convened across continents and time zones around three discrete but interconnecting exchanges among these performance makers and researchers.

In *Healing the Static: Orbiting The Sonic* (6 November 2020) dance artists Seke Chimutengwende and Alexandrina Hemsley and sound designer Xana discussed ancestry, archive, accessibility, anti-racist politics and their current individual and collective practices in the midst of creating an online, audio version of the stage show *Black Holes* (2018).[2]

In *Quiet Is an Action: On Being Silent and Other Lies – Listening In with Jeremy Toussaint-Baptiste* (13 November 2020), New York based artist–composer Toussaint-Baptiste and performance scholar Sara Jane Bailes discussed several of the

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FIG. 1 **Jeremy Toussaint-Baptiste, still from *9 a.m. (Eternal)* (2020). Photograph by the artist and Issue Project Room.**

artist's recent works that centre interiority, quiet and opacity as alternative propositions to the overdetermination of routinized, racializing surveillance. Works included were *9 a.m. (Eternal)* (part of *Isolated Field Recordings*, April–July 2020 – Fig. 1), *Evil Nigger Part IV: A Five Part Performance for Julius Eastman* (2017)[3] (both for ISSUE Project Room, NY) and *Get Low (Fades To)* (Martos Gallery, 2020, NY). The conversation extended to a shared listening activity, during which its live, online audience were invited to turn off their cameras and darken their screens while continuing to look into framed darkness, as ten minutes of Toussaint-Baptiste's composition *Epistemophobia* (2018) played.[4] In this way, Toussaint-Baptiste and Bailes presented an opportunity for a brief, collective re-attenuation towards socio-aesthetic devices that labour in service of a broader liberatory cultural praxis: not-knowing together.

In *Building the Impossible Bridge: Voice Notes on Anti-racism and/in Institutions* (20 November 2020), an audience gathered to listen to a pre-recorded exchange between Rajni Shah and Royona Mitra, reflecting on the different kinds of impossibilities involved in doing anti-racist work inside racist institutions, and the relationships between anti-racist practices and dreaming new worlds.

Below are traces of these events. In the first, Alexandrina reflects on their conversation with Seke and Xana. In the second, Rajni and Royona reimagine their

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opening voice notes for the page. Finally, a new conceptual score by Jeremy (spring 2021), in the wake of these conversations and the uncertainty of the present moment.

NOTES

1 Thanks to Laura McDermott, Creative Director at the Attenborough Centre for the Creative Arts, who was instrumental in curating the events underpinning this contribution.

2 For this project's page, see www.blackholes.co.uk, accessed 14 April 2021.

3 It is Toussaint-Baptiste's practice to reproduce this work's title in full, as an artist exploring another artist's work and legacy (composer Julius Eastman) in the context of the Black radical tradition. In consultation with the artist, the title is reproduced here in full. Toussaint-Baptiste discusses his engagement with Eastman's work in the following interview: Nicole Kaack, 'Jeremy Toussaint-Baptiste in Conversation', *Sound American*, 21 (2019), at https://soundamerican.org/issues/change/jeremy-toussaint-baptiste-conversation, accessed 29 March 2021.

4 *Epistemophobia* (2018) utilizes a range of bass and sub-bass tones, which are barely audible through laptop speakers but 'hyperaudible' through headphones or with help from a subwoofer. For Toussaint-Baptiste, hyperaudibility refers to sounds that are physically and noticeably felt within the body that may provoke feelings of pleasure, pain, gratification or longing. His physically resonant compositions are concerned with the dual capacity of bass to force bodies into submission or excite them into propulsion – how bass may be used as a tool both for liberation and for subjugation. He has titled this piece *Epistemophobia* after the fear of gaining too much knowledge or the wrong kind of knowledge.

SARA JANE BAILES *is a writer, theatre artist and scholar. She holds a position as Reader in Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Sussex and collaborates as dramaturg and creative advisor on performance projects. Publications include* Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure *(2011) and* Beckett and Musicality *(ed.) (2014), and she is currently working on a book on non-human objects and agency in performance. She publishes internationally in print, live and Web-based contexts.*

ARABELLA STANGER *is Lecturer in Drama: Theatre and Performance at the University of Sussex. Her work moves across dance and performance studies, and her book* Dancing on Violent Ground: Utopia as Dispossession in Euro-American Theater Dance *is forthcoming with Northwestern University Press in 2021.*

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Healing the Static: Orbiting the Sonic with Seke Chimutengwende, Alexandrina Hemsley and Xana[1]

ALEXANDRINA HEMSLEY

Pulsing

Our conversation bubbled up immediately. We had prepared questions and outlined our responses but it was almost as if, with that work of seeding done, we could nurture our own offshoots and departures. I remember feeling buoyant from the comradeship built up over the years of collaboration which supported these leaps. My list of notes afterwards read:

Archive
Ancestors
Connection
Accessibility
Tell everyone you know
Everything at its peak
Expansive
Joyful
Processing and develop
-ing a language
– Build things or destroy them – → past → speculation – ancestors – proximity + grief
*imagination
Worlds for ourselves

- Dream space

The rights of stars
Beaming sounds to stars
*artists have been doing this

- Geological time
- Audiobook
- Nonlinear
- Structure

→ Invoicing details and copy
Different streams of time tension experience
I cannot go back

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The practices of each of us – Seke, Xana and myself – are interdisciplinary; morphing in some way as modes of survival. The morphing between genres is almost the after-effect, or inevitable outcome, of believing in and creatively expressing embodied multiplicities. These are called on to replenish the extraction of Black lived experiences by the *faux* neutrality, the singular (universal) 'whole' white Western narratives of history. *Black Holes* is nothing so neat … nothing so privileged as a history (and present) which omits forced dislocation, scattering and erasure … and although there are threads of dystopia, the work offers nothing so bleak as to continue the subjugation and assimilation, the disavowal of authorship, the calculating dismissal (murder) of Black life.

How could we have co-created anything other than multiple landscapes evoked within a script that continually redefines the often weaponized, burdensome or blanket term 'we', and reorients relationships to origin stories?

We – the galaxies – had to make sense of our own arrival. We existed but the tides of the birthing universe had broken all connection to the wheres and hows of how these clouds of stars came to be …

Shapeshifting

Black Holes has almost too much text.

We – the nothing – are undiluted sulking. Hobbling through a woeful landscape. A space full of unseen potential.

We – time–space – become the hadal zone, a wet, vast underworld of all that has been lost. We are and it is, lost.

We – the universe – come up for air from the dank cavern of non-existence. Awakened by an impossible shockwave, after lying in dormant darkness. We – the universe – are gasping.

We – the pocket of air – are an accident.

Through pink dust clouds we – time – fly and are made.

We – the mess – begin.

We – the Gods – stepped into our space boats and began our intergalactic voyages

We – the creators – sketch out our universe.

We become the newborn galaxies.

We are floating now. Infinity roaming in the black oceans.

We fell out of time into the era of swing.

We – the moon children – wish we knew enough about our histories in order to be truly original. Secure in our realities. Secure in our points of departure rather than floating around in fragments, in imagination or in genetically inherited trauma-tides.

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We – the universe – are an accident. A random gesture. We – the universe – take shape. We – the universe – drop shape. What we thought were our outsides become our insides as more and more matter starts to matter, and sticks to us.

We will sleep well tonight for we have no more capacity for fear.

It's beyond black. We're playing dark history. We're dealing with the dark things of the cosmos.

Fragments

Anyone else feeling scattered these days?

Anyone else Black feeling undermined because white supremacy sees us as at a deficit, at a loss?

Black Holes' excess has an element of spilling/filling up the deficit and challenging the negations within identity traits, which the conditions of systemic capitalist, ableist heteronormative oppressions name for us, e.g. not male, not white, not straight, not well; permanently placing us in relation to its own entrenched centre. This filling up on words can be seen as *softening* the double, triple or quadruple negations so many of us live with.

André M. Carrington notes the work of Michelle M. Wright in tracing the responses of the Black diaspora, deploying strategies to negate 'the negations through which White supremacy defines Blackness'.[2] She and others present instead Black subjecthood as intrinsically valuable.

In the creative process of writing the *Black Holes* text, Seke and I literally cut up the script, frequently changed the order and swapped words that one had written to put them in the other's mouth instead; the urgent need to reassemble our own tales was intrinsic to the process.

Black people – in this case artists – move beyond what white supremacy imagines us as: presenting our own motivations, desires and narratives; the expansive creativity of afrofuturism, speculative fictions, biomythographies and capturing the formative processes of dancing. We insist on being over time … through multiple timestreams, universes and bloodstreams.

Seke: *This really is a wasteland, I heard you think. We are on the cliff edge. Ready to drop. Ready to fall. We thought. But there is no time here. We dream-shouted. We read each other's vacant minds before we fell asleep.*

They say it is coming. It distributes good things, appears in the east and belongs to the element water.

It is also sky and light, earth and root. It is unique and singular.

It has no ancestors, no past or future. It pervades the whole of creation.

Alarm woke us up – for the first time. We had overslept.

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We unpacked our empty suitcase, got dressed in nothing, ate nothing and stared silently at the future.

Alexandrina: *We unpacked our empty suitcase, got dressed in nothing, ate nothing and stared silently at the future.*

Seke: *The future stared back at us. (For the first time.)*

Orbiting

Seke and I wrote *Black Holes* script between 2016 and 2018, and personally, in 2021, it has been so grounding to appreciate the ways our instincts related to concepts of non-linear or cyclical time within the traditions of Yoruba peoples and wider African metaphysics.[3] Knowing there are knowledges in perceiving and experiencing the past–present–future as an orbit alive and in flux, has supported me in braiding together the nurturing and reparative reasons why afrofuturism and speculative fiction have been such fruitful sites of imagination politics.

When thinking how to write this reflection, I called in Malidoma Patrice Somé's telling of the connections between ancestral guidance and the spiritual link between a grandfather and their grandchild:

'Elders become involved with a new life practically from the moment of conception because that unborn child has just come from the place they are going to. The living must know who is being reborn, where the soul is from, why it chose to come here …'[4]

Information is gleaned through a 'hearing' ceremony where the whole body of the unborn child speaks through the mother with the grandfather as witness and listener.[5] The porosity of this exchange holds multiple embodied knowledges within several different realms and generations; each relating in vital proximity. In felt exchange. In connective potential.

We go on healing the static.

Whistling our merry tune – in spite of it all. How does it go again?

We fly and we are made. Assimilating the pre-matter into our present bodies. Bodies of dark matter. We – the resistance – begin.

NOTES

1 Author's note: direct quotes from the *Black Holes Text* (2016–18) are presented here in italics. *Black Holes* was created between 2016 and 2018 and premiered at The Place, London, on 21 June 2018. It was written by Seke Chimutengwende and Alexandrina Hemsley with dramaturgy by Season Butler.

2 André M. Carrington, *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), pp. 91–2.

3 Emma Dabiri, *Don't Touch My Hair* (London: Penguin, 2019).

4 Malidoma Patrice Somé, *Of Water and the Spirit; Ritual, Magic, and Initiation in the Life of an African Shaman* (New York: Penguin, 1994), p. 20.

5 Ibid., p. 20.

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ALEXANDRINA HEMSLEY'S *creative practice lands in the fluid spaces of dance, choreography, writing, facilitating and advocacy. Their interests are both enduring and in expansive states of flux – or just in connection/relation to the processes within life and within living. They turn towards the sensorial, the bodily, the multiple subjective positions of self – and self in intimate relation to self and other selves – as ways to find breath and voice amidst the unjust and inequitable. Alexandrina has recently founded their own organization, Yewande 103, formalizing their 10+ years of work in contemporary dance as a choreographer, performer, writer, mentor and educator. Yewande 103 lives as compassionate, embodied advocacy in action, through choreography, writing, production, artist support and mental health discourse.*

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Building the Impossible Bridge: Voice Notes on Anti-racism and/in Institutions

RAJNI SHAH AND ROYONA MITRA

Between 14 October and 6 November 2020, Rajni Shah and Royona Mitra had a slow and wandering conversation about the destroying, creating, dreaming and surviving involved in anti-racist work across geographical distances and national borders. In an exchange of voice notes, they held this conversation by listening to each other's voices. Here, the beginning of that exchange is reimagined for the page.

Rajni:

So,

I've been feeling kind of nervous

about sending the first message

because I realized that this format is so
intimate
and
I tend to use it in a very spontaneous and
intimate
way and well we
don't know each other that well,

and … but I didn't want to prepare something to say to you so I've done a deal with myself which is that this, this first message, and maybe indeed however many messages as we need to,

they can be like the **first pancake**

and they can just be there to be the first one

and then we can throw them away if we need to

[LAUGHING]

So, that's what's making it possible for me to leave this message.

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I'm looking at our …
the text that we wrote about this
and the idea of building the impossible bridge

and I guess I'll just begin by saying a little bit more
about where that idea came from for me

which is you know

I feel in some ways
this great solidarity with you and with the work that you're doing

and I'm really glad for you,
I'm really glad for you

and I know that for myself I couldn't …

I don't think I could survive, or be doing the work
that I need to do if I was inside an institution

but I know it's important and you know, I know it's really important to be doing that work from the inside, and at the same time, for me, in order to be able to even …

I want to say in order to be able to …

survive, and offer out from where I am

I have to not only be outside of the institution, but I have to …

live as if … it didn't exist.

and so, I think this idea of the impossible bridge was one where from my end

I have to imagine that your world doesn't exist in order to do the work that I'm doing.

I'm curious about how that impossibility of – the thing that's an impossibility for me – how that sits with you and also how you feel in relation to the work that I'm doing, because I think there might be a similar …

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it's not a negation, of that work, but almost like

I wonder if

you almost have to …

deny the possibility of the world that I exist in, in order to just be able to function and do the work that you need to do from where you are?

It sounds kind of cruel what I'm saying, and I don't actually think that I'm articulating it very well, but I am really curious and I do think there is –
I just think there's something really interesting in there

about what we can imagine and from where we can imagine it.



Fig. 2 **Image by Rajni Shah.**

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Royona

It's been four days since you sent me the first voice note for our series
and
I think
you know
the neo-liberal institutions' demand for fast and prolific response rates
was where I first turned to.

And then,

I forced myself to slow down
and I listened to your message
many, many times.

To really think through the tensions that you actually so clearly articulate.
I know you said that you thought you weren't being clear,
but
you
so vividly
described
the tensions between our respective relationships to institutions.

As Maggie Berg and Barbara K Seeber remind us in
The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy[1]
the task

of reforming institutions from within,
a task
that I think I identify with closely
requires
withstanding
institutional pressure
to always deliver at great and relentless speed.

And so I slowed right down.

I ignored that panicking voice within which was saying
'but if I take too long, what if we don't get enough voice notes by the deadline that we have set ourselves?'

and then the slowness that I was trying to embrace, made me think
'fuck the deadline'.

The only way
to respond to the questions that you raised in your voice note
was to really sit down with the challenges that you posed
and that took me
to a pretty difficult

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and
uncomfortable
place.
which is great.

it's great to sit in those places of
discomfort

and think through,
and reinforce
why we believe what we believe,
why we do what we do,
why we have chosen the pathways that we have for ourselves.

So you know,
I fully understand that in order to do the work that you are doing
you
have to imagine
that my world
the world of the institution and the academy
does not exist.

In fact
my world *cannot* exist
in order for you to carry out the work that you're doing.
I can understand
how
that is exactly what you need to be doing
in order not only to survive but to thrive in your work.

Survival.
survival within
white
patriarchal
heteronormative
ableist
cis-gendered
institutions such as the academy

is just so immensely hard
for so many.
the onslaught is daily and relentless.

I can understand you wanting to negate the existence of this world
my world
in order to thrive in yours.

You ask though
if the converse is also true

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that
whether
in order for me to do what I do,
I need to somehow negate the existence of your world.
and I'm not so sure that that is the case for me.

Perhaps
it's the healing offered in the knowledge
that other modes of existences are possible
beyond my world,
beyond the academy.
Perhaps
when my burnout is beyond repair
I know that there is somewhere to escape to.
to heal.

But for now
I dwell on the fact
that the academy also operates on the basis that many of us will escape
that many of us will be pushed out
that many of us will realize
it was not actually meant for us in the first place.

And to live with this crushing reality
is just unbearable.

But knowing that the world-making you are a part of
outside the institution,
the academy
gives me so much hope.

It gives me hope that
this bridge
that we've been talking about
this bridge
that seems impossible to build
between our respective worlds and world-making
is indeed worthwhile pursuing,
even as we recognize
the impossibility of bringing those existences together.

So, it's become my life's commitment
to take on the role as
Sara Ahmed
has described
of the plumber within institutional structures.[2]

The plumber who can create blockages,
or the plumber who can create floods,

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in order to
stall
and
disrupt
the practices and operations
that institutions take for granted.

That uphold injustices.

It feels as though
it's in these disruptive possibilities
that there lies hope
towards

building this impossible bridge.

* * *

Rajni was recording their voice notes from the unceded lands of the Gadigal people in so-called Australia. Rajni moved there from London about five years ago, though they have journeyed over and lived on other lands during this time. Their family of birth is from Nainital in India, though Rajni has never lived in India.

Royona sent her voice notes from the UK, which is now her home, having moved here over two decades ago. Her family live in Kolkata in India and they share ancestries with both sides of Bengal (West Bengal and Bangladesh). Together with her Scottish-American partner, she has a daughter who is grounded in her Bengali-Scottish-American heritages.

NOTES

1 Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber, *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016).

2 Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 32.

RAJNI SHAH *is an artist whose practice is focused on listening and gathering as creative and political acts. Key projects – always created alongside and in collaboration with others – include* hold each as we fall *(1999),* The Awkward Position *(2003–4),* Mr Quiver *(2005–8),* small gifts *(2006–8),* Dinner with America *(2007–9),* Glorious *(2010–12),* Experiments in Listening *(2014–15),* Lying Fallow *(2014–15),* Song *(2016),* I don't know how (to decolonize myself) *(2018),* Feminist Killjoys Reading Group *(2016–20) and* Listening Tables *(2019–20). In 2021 Rajni will publish a monograph and series of zines as part of the Performance Philosophy series, titled* Experiments in Listening.

ROYONA MITRA *is Reader in Dance and Performance Cultures at Brunel University London, where she is also an Associate Dean of Equality and Diversity. Her book* Akram Khan: Dancing New Interculturalism *(2015) was awarded the de la Torre Bueno First Book Award by the Dance Studies Association. Her scholarship contributes to discourses on new interculturalism, antiracism and decolonialities in dance and theatre studies. She is a member of Revolution or Nothing, a network for Black and Global-Majority scholars in UK dance, theatre and performance studies, and an advocate for coalitional approaches towards anti-oppression in the academy.*

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Score for *Étude for Not Knowing #1*

JEREMY TOUSSAINT-BAPTISTE

JEREMY TOUSSAINT-BAPTISTE is *a New York-based artist and composer. His practice considers notions of errant relations and imperceptibility structured through the utilization of, for example, sub-bass and darkness. Toussaint-Baptiste received a Bessie Award (2018) for Outstanding Music Composition and Sound Design. He has recently completed a Jerome Foundation Airspace Residency at Abrons Arts Center (NY) and a Rauschenberg Residency 381 (2019). He is a founding member of performance collective Wildcat! and frequently collaborates with other performers and visual artists, including Will Rawls, Yanira Castro/a canary torsi, Tiona Nekkia McClodden and André M. Zachery.*

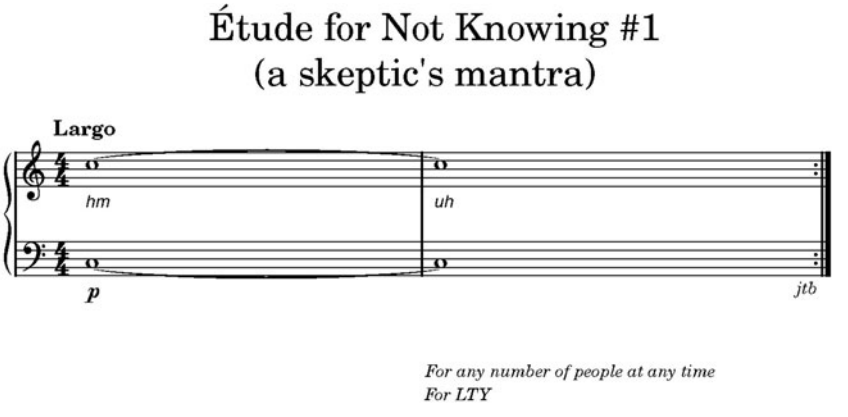


FIG. 3 **Jeremy Toussaint-Baptiste, score for *Étude for Not Knowing #1* (2021).**

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