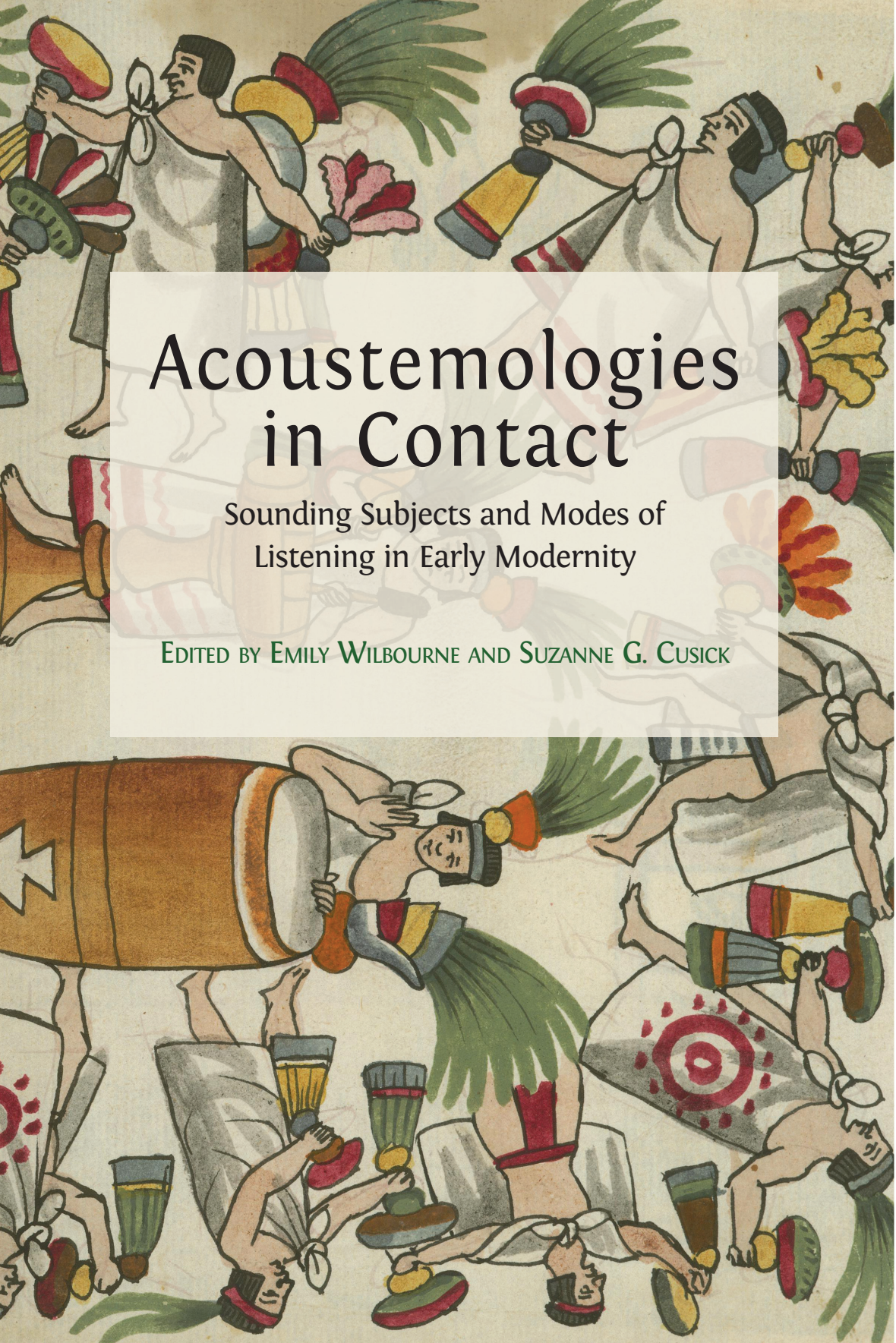

Acoustemologies in Contact

Sounding Subjects and Modes of Listening in Early Modernity

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Introduction

Emily Wilbourne and Suzanne G. Cusick

Acoustemologies in Contact attends to embodied, sensory experience in historical and cultural flux, and to the transcultural relations that flourished in the period that we — for expediency's sake — call 'early modernity' (roughly 1500–1800).[1] In order to think the history of early modernity differently, the authors in this collection have centered sound: auscultating the archive in search of the means by which sounds signified, and to whom they signified, these authors corral a wide range of sonic traces. Importantly, these essays presume no access to objective, unmediated sonic events, but rather understand sound as heard and actively listened to by auditors in historically and culturally specific formations. They share the conviction that sound — as vibrational force — necessitates bodies in

1 The term 'early modern' became prominent in Marxist histories of the mid-twentieth century and found wide usage in North-American-based scholarship after it was popularized by scholars such as Peter Burke (see *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978) and Natalie Zemon Davis (see *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975). Intended by proponents as a substitute for overtly elitist and Eurocentric periodizations of human history, such as 'Renaissance' and 'Baroque', 'early modern' incorporates the long transition from communal, religious, feudal, and agrarian societies, such as those that characterized the European 'Middle Ages' and pre-colonial Americas, to an individualist, secularist, capitalist, democratic, and technologically innovative society such as characterized European settlements after the French and Industrial Revolutions; it remains the most widely used alternative to traditional periodizations. The term, however, has been contested by many scholars and remains problematic, not least because it perpetuates a Eurocentric notion of human history. Walter D. Mignolo, in *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonialization*, 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), theorizes the 'coexistence of clusters', linking 'early modern' to the 'early colonial' (see, in particular, pp. vii–xiii); for a particularly cogent and usefully reparative critique of 'early modern', see Jack Goldstone, 'The Problem of the "Early Modern World"', *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 41.3 (1998), 249–284, https://doi.org/10.1163/1568520981436246

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sonic contact; as Olivia Bloechl reminds us in her chapter: the body itself is the most intimate of contact zones.[2] Sounds convey vast amounts of information — information that situates bodies in space, in relationship to others, and in relationship to power. The essays share the assumption that the culturally contingent systems by which sounds make sense may be foreign to each other and to our present moment.

In early modernity, an unprecedented number of people, objects, and ideas moved around the globe, often in involuntary and uninvited ways. Yet traditional histories, including those of sound, music, and performance, have largely focused on regional repertoires bounded by linguistic or political borders. Until recently, the study of historical sound amounted to the study of historical music-making. Too many histories have prioritized the notated repertoires that were prized by elite Europeans in courts and churches, as if these venues, their music-makers, and their listeners were not confronted on a daily basis with people, objects, and ideas in migration.[3] Whether these repertoires were performed in Europe or in a colonial setting, their written histories have valued the kinds of musical aesthetics that best flourish in notated genres (such as precise repetition, composerly gestures, developmental complexity, and self-referential musicality). These same histories have all but ignored the relationship of those repertoires to other intentional sound-making that some listeners might have deemed

2 The term comes from Marie Louise Pratt, 'Arts of the Contact Zone', *Profession*, 1 (1991), 33-40. See also, Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, eds., *Bodies in Contact: Rethinking Colonial Encounters in World History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), pp. 405–423, https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822386452. It was Olivia Bloechl who first introduced the term in the conversations that led to this book.

3 Several important exceptions include Richard Cullen Rath, *How Early America Sounded* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2003); Olivia Bloechl, *Native American Song at the Frontiers of Early Modern Music* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and Gary Tomlinson, *The Singing of the New World: Indigenous Voice in the Era of European Contact* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009). We would also like to acknowledge a number of recently completed or forthcoming publications and conferences that — like this book — move towards thinking the history of sound differently, including the 'Race and Empire in Global Music History (1500–1800)' conference, 30–31 March 2018, University of Pittsburgh, organized by Olivia Bloechl and Molly Warsh; the special issue 'Music, Indigeneity, and Colonialism in the Americas', ed. by Jessica Bissett Perea and Gabriel Solis, *Journal of the Society for American Music*, 13.4 (2019); *Seachanges: Music in the Mediterranean and Colonial Worlds, 1550–1880*, ed. by Kate van Orden (Florence: I Tatti Studies, forthcoming); and Kate van Orden, *Songs in Unexpected Places* (forthcoming).

meaningful — even musical — and have neglected the importance of sound for the recognition of the familiar and the foreign. To privilege European and European-descended acoustical practices is to contribute to the colonial fantasy that European notions of sound, music, and listening are universal, and thus to also contribute passively to ongoing notions of European — white — cultural supremacy.

Since the turn of this century, the study of historical sound has expanded beyond the study of what Europeans called 'music'. Classic texts of historical sound studies, such as Bruce R. Smith's *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England* (1999), Deborah Howard and Laura Moretti's *Sound and Space in Renaissance Venice* (2009) and Niall Atkinson's *The Noisy Renaissance* (2016), have added enormously to understanding the ways that material technologies of sound and listening shaped theatrical, religious, and sociopolitical experience in the early modern era.[4] Yet neither these nor Veit Erlmann's provocative genealogy of 'modern' listening practice, *Reason and Resonance* (2014), attend to the ways that sound (including but not limited to music) was understood and directed to sociopolitical ends in cultures beyond Europe.[5] Nor did they attend much to the ways that material technologies of sound and listening were implicated in this era of unprecedented transcultural contact. The essays in *Acoustemologies in Contact* share a desire for the sometimes elusive practice of what Peter Szendy has called 'listening to listening', excavating sound from various forms of writing, including musical notation, descriptive texts, poetry, and visual imagery.[6] Here scholars listen for the impact that sounds make on individual bodies, and for the extent to which such responses were naturalized by cultural formations that gave the relationship between sounds and their meanings a seemingly monolithic veneer of truth.

4 Bruce R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Deborah Howard and Laura Moretti, *Sound and Space in Renaissance Venice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); and Niall Atkinson, *The Noisy Renaissance: Sound, Architecture and Florentine Urban Life* (State College, PA: Penn State Press, 2016), https://doi.org/10.5325/j.ctv14gp0cj

5 Veit Erlmann, *Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality* (Cambridge: Zone Books, 2014). A recent exception is Francesca Orsini and Katherine Butler Schofield, eds., *Tellings and Texts: Music, Literature and Performance in North India* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2015), https://doi.org/10.11647/obp.0062

6 Peter Szendy, *Listen: A History of Our Ears* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

The power of sound to move the body extends from the pleasurable labors of dance, through learned responses to commands or to one's name, to the involuntary (sometimes only momentary) terror of the startle, caused by an unexpected bang or frightening noise. Acousmatic sound, sight unseen, insistently presses its way into the body — vibrating through the ears and through our flesh — fraying our attention and demanding a narrative explanation:[7] 'What was that? Where is that noise coming from? Is there anybody there?' If Descartes's famous dictum, *cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am) locates subjectivity within the internal (metaphorical) space of the mind, then the faculty of hearing locates the subject quite literally within space and in relation to an other: 'I hear something (or someone) therefore I am not alone.'[8]

Through exposure and experience, reassuring and disturbing noises teach the listener how to parse sound, identifying others who move around, past, and into and out of proximity to the listener. In response, the auditor develops what J. Martin Daughtry has called 'virtuosic listening', or the capacity to discern threatening sounds amongst the mundane noises of everyday life.[9] In this listening that sorts and storifies we can come to understand our place in the world and our position (of subjection) in relationship to power.

Not coincidently, the import of sound is central to many accounts of subjectivity. In Louis Althusser's famous account of interpellation, for example, the subject recognizes themselves as caught up in and intelligible according to the law, only in the moment in which they are hailed by another and the hail is heard.[10] A related sonicity is at work in Julia Kristeva's semiotic, in which the infant babbles to and with her

7 On acousmatic sound, see Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) and Brian Kane, *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Listening in Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199347841.001.0001

8 Deaf studies have mounted a spirited critique of intellectual traditions that stigmatize the Deaf and hard of hearing, a tradition that can be traced back at least as far as Aristotle. Though this collection foregrounds sound, we do not mean to imply any loss of subjectivity or agency for Deaf individuals.

9 J. Martin Daughtry, *Listening to War: Sound, Music, Trauma, and Survival in Wartime Iraq* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199361496.001.0001

10 Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)', in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Verso, 1971), pp. 85–126.

(or his) mother, absorbing the prosody and intonation of language as a life-sustaining and explicitly audible element of the maternal bond, which, in the absence of semantic meaning, defers the separation of mother and child into distinct subjectivities.[11] Jörg Jochen Berns, too, marks subjectivity as auditory in his formulation of the 'acoustic cocoon' of early modern sovereignty.[12] Berns argues that to control what one heard was the ultimate display of princely power. In early modernity, to control sound was to fill up even the immaterial spaces between the objects under one's dominion, demonstrating power over a faculty (that of listening) largely understood as involuntary. Berns traces the presence of controlled sounds of various types, including the fake bird calls and obediently gurgling waters of the princely estate and the ceremonial sonic aura of the trumpet and the drum. If Berns's sovereign is immune, in his 'acoustic cocoon,' to the interpellating hail, then the non-sovereign listener is rendered subject precisely in the moment of overhearing sovereign sounds.

In each of these examples, the subject hears the other and recognizes their own vulnerability in a powerful moment of self-awareness and simultaneous political subjection. Yet the essays in this collection are equally, or, indeed, more concerned with the ways in which subjectivity is ascribed to an other who is heard or overheard: not only the recognition of one's own subjectivity in response to sound, but the ways in which the sounds of others — principally but not exclusively vocal and musical sounds — are understood to police the borders of subjectivity.

The intelligibility of sound has oversized consequences for the identification of friend and foe, and for the correct interpretation of meaning (aptly demonstrated in more recent times by the use of emojis in text messages and new punctuation norms that attempt to compensate for the absence of sound in short-form written communications). We regularly listen for indices of physicality (such as age, gender, and good health), for the historical residue of lived experience (such as regional

11 Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

12 Jörg Jochen Berns, 'Instrumental Sound and Ruling Spaces of Resonance in the Early Modern Period: On the Acoustic Setting of the Princely *potestas* Claims within a Ceremonial Frame', trans. by Benjamin Carter, in *Instruments in Art and Science: On the Architectonics of Cultural Boundaries in the 17th Century*, ed. by Helman Schramm, Ludger Schwarte, and Jan Lazardzig (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), pp. 479–503 (p. 493).

accent, linguistic fluency, social class, or education), and for emotional cues (such as sorrow, joy, guilt, or sincerity). The coherence of this system relies on an acoustemology that naturalizes the association of certain sounds and certain types of bodies. Who gets to be understood as eloquent? Who instead is brutish? Who subtle and poised, versus faltering, incoherent, or hysterical? Who correctly processes sonic signals and survives or thrives? Who dies?

The various modes of interpreting and living in sound that are articulated in these essays can be described with the term *acoustemologies*, coined by the anthropologist Steven Feld in 1992.[13] 'Acoustemology', Feld writes, fuses 'acoustics' and 'epistemology': 'it inquires into what is knowable, and how it becomes known, through sounding and listening'. Taking the physical energy of sound as evidence of its capacity to be 'instantly and forcefully present to experience and experiencers, to interpreters and interpretations', Feld posits that sound and listening are 'a knowing-in-action: a knowing-with and knowing-through the audible'. In the end, 'acoustemology figures in stories of sounding as heterogeneous contingent relating: stories of sounding as cohabiting; stories where sound figures as the ground of difference — radical or otherwise — and what it means to attend and attune; to live with listening to *that* [emphasis in original]'.[14]

To live with listening to *that* is the experience of listening that characterizes what Mary Louise Pratt famously called a 'contact zone'.[15] Pratt defined contact zones as 'social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their

13 Steven Feld, 'Voices of the Rainforest: Politics of Music', *Arena*, 99.100 (1992), 164–177, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/545aad98e4b0f1f9150ad5c3/t/54670be2e4b0a915edff0627/1416039394252/1992+Voices+of+the+Rainforest.pdf. Paul Jasen prefers the word 'acousteme'; see his 'Acousteme: How Does Sound Shape Knowledge?', in Paul Jasen, ed., *Surrounding Sound — An Electric Fields Symposium* (Ottawa: Art Engine, 2013), http://www.surroundingsound.ca/essay-three.htm. See also Paul C. Jasen, *Low-End Theory: Bass, Bodies and the Materiality of Sonic Experience* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), https://doi.org/10.5040/9781501309960

14 Steven Feld, 'Acoustemology', in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. by David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), pp. 12–21, https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822375494-002

15 Pratt, 'Arts of the Contact Zone', 33. See also Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203932933

aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today'.[16] *Acoustemologies in Contact* recognizes the world of early modernity as a set of contact zones. Listening through archival evidence from New France, New England and New Spain, the slave ships of the Middle Passage, England, Italy, France, and China, these authors hear cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other by listening to each other through distinctive acoustemologies. These acoustemological meetings, clashings, and grapplings can, in turn, be heard to produce rage, sympathy, pain, wonder, resistance, self-satisfied fantasies, and mutual misunderstandings that threaten deadly consequences, to colonize bodies as well as territories, and to lead to sonic practices of transculturation.[17] Concerned with the sonic consequences of contact, these essays explore how the structural configurations of sound within cultures in contact impacted communication, comprehension, and the categorization (of people, animals, gods, and other-than-human kin) in the past and during its long (and still unfolding) aftermaths.

It is acoustemology that assigns culturally, geographically, and historically situated meanings to the bodily sensations of contact and difference produced by acoustical energy. Acoustemologies can produce ways of categorizing audible acoustical energy into such categories as speech, song, music, voice, noise, and prophecy, and ways of categorizing human acoustical behaviors in such terms as sound-makers or listeners. Each of these categorizations maps easily onto categories of both social difference and power, as they did, for instance, in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Essai sur l'origine des langues*.[18] As Lester Hu's chapter indirectly reminds us, Rousseau asserted that human song, with its capacity to express emotion, preceded human speech,

16 Pratt, 'Arts of the Contact Zone', 34.

17 Pratt, defines transculturation as 'the process whereby subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture' (ibid., 36). For an exemplary application of acoustemological thinking to contact zones and nation building, see Ana Maria Ochoa, *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

18 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages and Writings Related to Music*, trans. and ed. by John T. Scott (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998). See also Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chravarty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); see also Tomlinson, *The Singing of the New World.*

which developed later as a way to add the precision on which rational discourse depended. For Rousseau, song was the more natural medium of human pleasure and self-expression, and cultures rich in song — such as those, in his view, of 'the South', were to be envied for the natural expressivity they retained. Speech, by contrast, was a medium from which pleasure and emotion had been drained for the sake of the clarity and reason that he believed to characterize those from colder, 'northern' places. It takes little imagination to understand how this one distinction between song and speech, when mapped onto places warm and cold and affective stances of self-expressive pleasure and clear reasoning, would eventually resonate with the attitudes that justified 'northern' (European) domination and the racialization of the vast areas of our planet now called 'the Global South' in the era now called 'modernity'.

The authors in this collection probe the seams of received meanings, they listen for moments of misunderstanding, and they think through the consequences of sonic incoherence. When the sounds of others are heard as testimony to their civility or intelligence and interpreted according to an epistemology that is foreign to their personhood, it is terrifyingly simple for listeners to mishear or misunderstand, while simultaneously mistaking the terrain of their listening practice as neutral or objective.

These essays offer examples of very different situations in which sound produced and articulated relationships of human contact that required everyone present to manage shared corporeal feelings of tension, vulnerability, misunderstanding, exchange, complementarity, self-flattery, instrumentalization, resistance, appropriation, mockery, contempt. Each essay recounts ways in which real and imagined differences among human beings — differences of language, belief system, ritual practice, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, status, skin tone, and ability — intersect and collide with each other in the medium of sound. Each strives to distribute complex subjectivity equally among the real or represented human actors who figure in their narratives. And each treats sound as a contact zone already created by the property of acoustical energy to literally invade, move, and change the bodies within the range of its expansion through the air. For these authors, acoustical energy (sound) becomes a medium in which the social differences of experienced contact play out in the sensing bodies of the social actors involved — sometimes as pollution, sometimes as resistance, sometimes as violation, sometimes as love, sometimes as war. These essays show readers (and other writers)

how we might hear beyond either 'hungry' or 'inquisitorial' listening, eager in the first instance to consume sonic experience, or in the second to identify sound objects (this song, or that rhythm) and assign to them fixed meanings.[19] Instead, these essays collectively show how we might begin to listen consultatively, through one another's acoustemologies, and thus attribute meaning to the necessarily elusive relationships of contact that are produced in moments of sounding. As Bloechl argues, to listen thus is to make listening a contact zone, too — a contact zone in which we can know, through thinking about sound, relationships of difference that are more complicated than we can know from texts to which we have not listened so well.

This project originated at a meeting between Suzanne and Emily over beers at the Cubbyhole, and developed over a long series of text messages; in those first conversations we imagined contributing to the literatures that historicize listening, sound, and the sonic construction of subjectivity (mainly historical sound studies and musicology); we believe we have. Just as crucially, we envisioned our work as an intervention into the patterns of mature academia, seeking to unsettle a model of polished academic products and a process of antagonistic critique. We wanted the contributions in this volume to speak to each other, yes, but just as importantly, we wanted the contributors themselves to speak to each other: to exchange ideas, to learn from and teach each other, to read each other carefully — both for what we might 'scavenge,'[20] to (re)use in our own work, and for what we might give, by spotting each other's blind spots, and pointing out the various ways in which we have failed. Such reading and such conversations require vulnerability and generosity. They require time, presence, and careful — even virtuosic — listening. They require a mutual recognition of the subjectivity of the other. In Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's terms, this would be a reparative listening, eschewing the paranoid.[21]

19 Dylan Robinson coined the phrase 'hungry listening;' see *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020). Olivia Bloechl uses the term 'inquisitorial listening' on p. 17 below.

20 'Scavenge', in the sense used by Greg Dening in *Readings/Writings* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1998), p.20.

21 Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably think this Essay is About You', in *Touching, Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 123–152, https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822384786-005

To produce a volume that would itself model collaborative, mutually resonant difference — of perspective, positionality, methodology, and subject matter — we conceived a two week long encounter in Florence, Italy, in late May 2018. We invited participants who (we hoped) could articulate a variety of approaches, a variety of geographical and linguistic competencies, from various disciplines and various career stages. The resulting contributions are shaped by who we asked but also by who turned us down (scholars who knew us were much more likely to agree to what was, in the early stages, an experimental and vaguely defined ask). Some authors knew each other personally or by reputation, and some arrived knowing no one else present; some knew Florence a bit, and spoke Italian, some not at all. Each author was invited to circulate in advance a first draft of their proposed essay, to be workshopped by the group, and each was further invited to propose a theoretical reading they would like to discuss with the assembled group of strangers, colleagues and friends. Over ten long workdays of workshopping and discussion, the authors shared perspectives, ideas, relevant bibliography, and candid questions about the premises of each other's disciplinary approaches to sound. Some authors went on to collaborate privately after the workshop ended, others not; but the experience of grappling together with the germs of our own and others' draft essays, our own and others' theoretical concerns, produced an uncommonly rich, collaboratively constructed theoretical foundation — and changed the proposed essays dramatically. We believe that readers who choose to listen to the whole collection will find the authors straining to have listened to each other well, and to write for and to each other in a textual contact zone dominated by no one disciplinary, methodological, or theoretical perspective.

Opportunities for such collaboration and reflection have become rare and precious in our world. All of us who participated in this volume are grateful to New York University's Villa La Pietra campus, whose director Ellyn Toscano and staff supported the project generously, particularly Elisabetta Clementi and Lucia Ferroni, as did Paul Boghossian and the staff of the New York University Global Institute for Advanced Study and Maja Jex and staff at the NYU Global Research Initiative. We would also like to thank Ana Beatriz Mujica Lafuente, Samuel Teeple, and

Evangeline Athanasiou in the graduate program at the CUNY Graduate Center, for their willing and able assistance with various editorial tasks.

The precarity of contemporary academic life leaves few of us with the resources (mental, physical, or financial) to take our time with our own work, let alone to regularly devote time to the work of others in any sustained fashion. The project as we imagined it was deliberately utopian: a collective effort in which the goal was as much the process as the product. We hoped to generate scholarship as praxis. Rather than a theoretical manifesto urging specific types of future scholarship, this volume offers a set of examples of what it might look like to do this kind of work and a range of different answers, provocations, and queries that might (and can) emerge when the listening ear of the scholar strains to catch the echoes of past acoustemologies. As praxis, none of these essays makes a claim to complete knowledge; even taken collectively they make no claim to totality — politically, stylistically, or geographically. We hope the variety herein will reverberate among an ever wider variety of scholars, encouraging them to work alongside, with and against us, multiplying the work we can read and cite, and generating richer histories of early modern sounds, the people who made them, listened for them, were moved by them to attribute meaning, and the various ways in which sound was understood to narrate.