

The academic study of music and sound is facing an array of political and intellectual challenges, prompting a pointed moment of critical self-reflection, what Stuart Hall might call a *break*—a conjuncture in which “old lines of thought are disrupted, older constellations displaced, and elements, old and new, are regrouped around a different set of premises and themes” (1980, 57). Chief among contemporary challenges is a chorus of increasingly urgent calls to reveal and contest structures of power and inequality, to theorize potent, sincere, and comprehensive paradigms of diversity and inclusion (or to move beyond diversity and inclusion altogether), and to challenge ideologies that shape what are recognized as acceptable objects, subjects, subjectivities, discourses, and methods in scholarship on music and sound. Beyond debates over the contents of Western canons, or the inclusion of “non-canonical” musics and musicians to the array of suitable objects of study, these challenges demand an interrogation of the core values, political investments, and material ramifications at the heart of music scholarship. This special issue, *Sounding the Break: Music Studies and the Political*, embraces this moment of institutional and intellectual reflexivity, endeavoring to contribute to an interdisciplinary critical examination of formations of the political embedded within musical thinking in the academy.

The issue begins with three articles that aim directly at political structures within institutional contexts, followed by two empirical studies that point toward new ways of engaging with sonic materials outside more conventional academic frameworks. The first section features Tamara Levitz’s “The Musicological Elite” while the second features William Cheng’s “Black Noise, White Ears: Resilience, Rap, and the Killing of Jordan Davis.” A third section comprises a transdisciplinary collection of writings on voice, gender, and race inspired by readings of Licia Fiol-Matta’s (2017) *The Great Woman Singer*. A stimulating set of book reviews edited by Velia Ivanova adjourns the proceedings.

Tamara Levitz’s opening article, emphasizing that “musicologists need to know which actions were undertaken, and on what material basis, in building their elite, white, exclusionary, patriarchal profession before they can undo them” (43), offers an incisive archival examination of the early

institutional history of US musicology. Levitz shows how contestations over musicological objects of study and professional norms have been conditioned by geopolitical relations, competition with related subdisciplines, and dependence on wealthy patrons, granting institutions, and personal capital. Expressing wariness about a contemporary tendency to “confuse decolonization with liberal critique” (47), Levitz gestures toward a more radical restructuring of scholarly inquiry and a more fundamental rethinking of the ontological foundations of the university itself.

In her article, “Power and Equity in the Academy: Change from Within,” music theorist Ellie M. Hisama focuses on more contemporary concerns. Reflecting on the precarity of her early years as a graduate student and junior scholar, Hisama outlines how, as a woman and person of color working on gender and music, she required an eclectic skillset to navigate power in the academy, especially in a subfield that has exhibited a “sustained resistance to considering issues of gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, and other identifications in scholarship and professional development” (83). Outlining both early-career responses to these challenges and more recent projects as a senior scholar, Hisama’s article provides guidance to junior scholars “who hope to change the balance of power and equity in academic life from within” (90).

Lucie Vágnerová and Andrés García Molina interrogate the intersections of labor, curricula, pedagogy, and institutional power in the next article, “Academic Labor and Music Curricula.” They emphasize the significance of contingent faculty, social movements, and students themselves for moving beyond tokenistic models of “diversity” and “inclusion” toward a decolonizing project that “question[s] the origins of value systems that largely originate in and pertain to white European and North American culture, values, gaze, and listening” (106). Such a project must apply across *all* scholarly disciplines, they argue, not only fields based in the Western canon like historical musicology or music theory, but also ethnomusicology, whose inescapable entanglements with colonialism, evolutionary frameworks, and its own exclusionary logics of canonization are often overlooked or minimized.

Moving outside the academy, William Cheng’s “Black Noise, White Ears: Resilience, Rap, and the Killing of Jordan Davis” presents a chilling account of “white misimagination of black skin, black ears, and black voices” (119) and the violence they engender. Cheng exposes how the unimpeachably valuable discourse of black resilience is troubled by a lamentable corollary: the imaginary capacity of black bodies and communities to endure additional pain. A related “formidability bias” fuels further fantasies of black bodies as unduly threatening, sonically excessive, and

aurally deficient, establishing a fine line between the respectable sound of the resilient black voice and the menacing unruliness of disresponsible black noise. In the murder of Jordan Davis, the perceived noisiness of rap music and the fantasy of black menace in the ears and eyes of gun-wielding software developer Michael Dunn crystallized into “the self-defense justification of *only choice—kill*” (116).

To engage issues of power, diversity, and inequality, Ingrid Monson argues for engaging varied social science paradigms and philosophical resources in her article, “In Praise of Eclecticism: Relational Thinking and Theoretical Assemblage.” Deploying an insightful articulation of the notion of relationality, Monson draws innovative connections between a constellation of theoretical frameworks from the last thirty-five years. Monson also shows the value of allowing a project’s historical or ethnographic materials to lead the way toward the most effective assemblage of theoretical ideas, rather than merely applying preformulated concepts to particular materials. For Monson, the musical work and culture of Malian balafonist Neba Solo leads to a unique articulation of anthropological assemblage theory of morality and ethics that has profound implications for music, sound, and the political.

The next section centers on Licia Fiol-Matta’s (2017) book *The Great Woman Singer* and includes responses by Jack Halberstam, Fred Moten, Arnaldo M. Cruz-Malavé, Alexandra T. Vazquez, Gayatri Gopinath, and Fiol-Matta herself. The book, whose introduction is reprinted here, offers critical biographies of four Puerto Rican women singers. All of them faced gendered genre expectations, changing music industry practices, and a web of political entanglements ranging from Cold War threats of nuclear devastation to contestations over Puerto Rican cultural nationalism. And all of them, in their own ways, “refused the readily legible” (Moten, 229). Challenging the gendered tendency to conceive of singers as empty, unthinking vessels—as “placeholders for someone else’s genius” (Fiol-Matta, 210)—Fiol-Matta explores the intellectual dimension of these women’s voices, what she calls the “thinking voice.” In doing so, Fiol-Matta “rewrites the history of genius that has made grand detours around female figures and rendered them as mouthpieces for a male composer” (Halberstam, 227). A crucial concept is Fiol-Matta’s figure of “the nothing,” a “generative nothingness” (Fiol-Matta, 247) that provided these women with “a queer strategy of fully inhabiting the place of lack, of oblivion, to which one is consigned within a misogynist and homophobic logic” (Gopinath, 244–45). Moten, noting the incoherence of a “queer mother” (230) within the normative discourse of nationhood, speculates: “What if the first move of decolonization is to accept this monstrosity, this disfiguration?” (231).

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Current Musicology presents these pieces not to suggest specific solutions or political programs but to open up and deepen the pressing questions that face the study of music and sound—questions whose importance and urgency will only grow. We hope that these works contribute to a “break” that may, in Stuart Hall’s words, “significantly transform the nature of the questions asked, the forms in which they are proposed, and the manner in which they can be adequately answered,” a shift in perspective dependent not only on “internal intellectual labour, but the manner in which *real historical developments and transformations* are appropriated in thought” (1980, 57; emphasis added).

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