

Robinson, Dylan. 2020. *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

### Reviewed by Derek Baron

Western ontologies of music, sound, and listening have been constructed as normative and universal, casting all others as deficient, pathological, or primitive. The ongoing history of settler-colonial dispossession of Indigenous land and life has shaped this colonial structure of listening in ways that music and sound studies has yet to fully confront. In his crucial new book, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*, Dylan Robinson addresses these topics through a rich engagement with contemporary musicological discourses, sound studies, and Indigenous knowledge. Perhaps most importantly, this critical interrogation of settler musical and listening structures helps him imagine and identify Indigenous practices of artistic and material justice for aural sovereignty.

Rooted in his own positionality as a Stó:lō person who grew up in the suburbs of Vancouver, Robinson's book investigates "sonic encounters between particular perceptual logics," namely Indigenous and settler listening orientations and their "admittedly uncomfortable pairing" (2). Robinson offers the conceptual hermeneutic of "hungry listening" as a way to describe an extractive settler-colonial mode of perception that persistently misapprehends Indigenous sound as available for dispossession. By theorizing hungry listening and identifying its epistemic violence in action, Robinson makes way for the careful consideration of Indigenous sounding practices that resist its appropriative logics. While the critique of hungry listening is a central concern for Robinson, it is these insurgent Indigenous practices that animate the text. Robinson thereby insists that scholarship need not limit itself to the description of dominant power but can also help us to perceive and imagine worlds beyond ongoing settler-colonial domination.

*Hungry Listening* considers two principal sites for the struggle between hegemonic and insurgent listening practices: scenes of music-making (such as composition, curation, and spectatorship) and scenes of writing about music (such as musicology and sound studies). Opening with an epigraph revealing the deeply entrenched settler bias of celebrated Canadian composer R. Murray

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Schafer, Robinson's identification of settler-colonial listening tendencies in scholarly discourse on music makes *Hungry Listening* a direct and much-needed intervention in the field. Despite the field's growing attention to questions of racial and settler-colonial injustices, music and sound studies discourse remains rooted in Eurocentric ontologies of music, listening, and justice. By contrast, Robinson's text offers theories of listening and critiques of musical discourse that are deeply rooted in Indigenous aural, scholarly, and material knowledges. Rather than simply using Indigenous knowledges to critique Eurocentrism, however, the deeper concern, and possibly the most lasting contribution, of this book is to articulate a positive "resonant theory" that can more adequately describe and respond to practices of Indigenous sonic sovereignty.

The book's chapters are interwoven with shorter performative texts that disrupt the sanitized modes of discourse endemic to music scholarship. Many of these interstitial performative texts, which Robinson terms "event scores," imagine embodied experiments in sonic and aural activity not merely "oriented towards aesthetic contemplation" but rather guiding its performers into experiential practices of an "unsettling" aurality, inviting the reader to "let go your holding-on, let go your safe-keeping, let-go" (41, 147). A short chapter situated after the introduction is explicitly written for Indigenous readers only, while settler readers are encouraged to "rejoin" the text at Chapter 1 (25). This gesture manifests one of the central concepts of the book, namely the defense of Indigenous sovereignty from the surveilling gaze of settler perception. As a white settler reader, I was made materially aware that my engagement with the text can only be rooted in a respect for Indigenous opacity; I was made to realize that I was a guest in the text just as settler society was and remains an (uninvited) guest on Indigenous land. Since I was not invited to read this interstitial text, my experience of the book will be necessarily incomplete, but this is indeed precisely the point of Robinson's gesture, which reveals settlers' assumption of access to information by denying that access. Furthermore, since *Hungry Listening* is addressed to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers (in that order of priority [25]), the settler reader's experience of respecting opacity can be understood as not simply a lack, but as one of the purposeful lessons of the text.

In addition to the book's formal gestures of opacity and its performative event-scores, Robinson also includes a number of transcribed conversations between indigenous artists and scholars, giving the book a deeply multivocal character. For example, the chapters on Indigenous compositional practice contain uninterrupted transcriptions of conversations between Indigenous artists and composers talking about their work. These lengthy transcriptions

eschew the trap of the authoritative voice translating Native thought into recognizable scholarly text. Rather, they manifest the practice of what Robinson identifies as “longhouse work”: a way of “doing sovereignty” that instantiates the “Indigenous methodologies and protocols of gathering” and sharing history, knowledge and song (166). In a final gesture of performative writing, Robinson’s conclusion contains an extended dialogue on the book itself between musicologists Ellen Waterman and Deborah Wong, later joined by Robinson. This gesture of radical hospitality again highlights the collaborative potential of scholarly writing, offering space in the monograph to host a “group improvisation on decolonial listening and action” (235, 240).

In Chapter 1, Robinson further theorizes the concept of “hungry listening.” The term refers to the Halq’eméylem word for settler, *xwelítem*, or literally “starving person” (48). The term calls to mind not only the European settlers’ physical malnourishment when they arrived in America, but also their insatiable hunger for gold, land, and, ultimately, capital and power. The “hunger” of hungry listening transmits this fundamentally expropriative, expansionist, and proprietary logic to the very modes of perception by which settlers encounter Indigenous life. By calling settler-colonialism a “state of perception,” of which hungry listening forms a part, Robinson insists on regarding it as an ongoing “structure” rather than a one-time “event” (10). Thus, Robinson refuses the liberal view of colonial violence as a thing of the past, putting him into conversation with the foundational Indigenous studies work of Patrick Wolfe (1999) and Glen Coulthard (2014). It also allows us to consider the normative force that hungry listening exerts on processes of subjection in the ongoing colonial present. This concept creates space for a crucial intervention on the phenomenology of music and the musicological affect theories that valorize a pre-intellectual space of sonic experience. Robinson argues that even this pre-intellectual space is in part shaped by colonial structures of subjectivity rooted in certainty and possessiveness. This theorization will be crucial for Robinson’s interrogation, in later chapters, of the affective power of “inclusionary performances” involving Indigenous and settler art music, because the emotional responses to such performances are coded as universal and self-evident while they are in fact rooted in hungry listening (202).

To exemplify hungry listening, Robinson discusses *Delgamuukw v. the Queen*, a 1985 land claim trial brought by Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en nations against the Crown, in which Mary Johnson, a Gitksan woman, sang a *limx oo’y* (dirge song) that served as a literal expression—rather than mere representation—of Gitksan law. The presiding judge’s refusal to acknowledge

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the limx oo'y as law lays bare the violence of hungry listening: the very coherence of settler-colonial law depends upon its annulment of the Indigenous ontology of the song "as a primary legal and living document with importance for conveying the embodied feeling of history" (45). Robinson's discussion of this case, as well as his larger conceptual offering, helps us to perceive the relationship between epistemic violence and material violence: the hungry listener's inability to comprehend Indigenous song can often literally facilitate the state violence of land dispossession and legal domination of the dispossessed communities. In opposition to hungry listening, Robinson then considers practices of "resurgent listening" by way of Indigenous artists Peter Morin and Jordan Wilson, whose work "begin[s] not in refusal but instead [in] Indigenous logics" of active sovereignty and responsibility (62, 65). In this way, Chapter 1 models the argumentative structure of the book as a whole: the critical interrogation of settler-colonial aurality as "hungry listening" makes room for the positive elaboration of "resurgent listening" as a practice of Indigenous sovereignty.

Chapter 2, "Writing about Musical Intersubjectivity," explores possibilities for a performative, transgressive writing that would reflect Indigenous conceptions of sound and listening. Beginning with an engagement with Roland Barthes' (1977) classic call for a mode of writing adequate to musical experience beyond mere adjectival description, Robinson then engages with various discourses on musicological style, from Suzanne Cusick's (1994) and Wayne Koestenbaum's (1993) queer experiments in performative music writing to David Levin's (2012) counterinsurgent defense of midcentury stylistic austerity. Robinson's contribution to this conversation involves what he calls an "apposite methodology" that reframes the relationship between writer, music, and space as irreducibly intersubjective and relational due to active subjective agency of sound and space (82). By insisting that the agency of song, sound, and space are fundamental to Indigenous listening practices, Robinson maps the question of musicological style onto the antagonism between settler-colonial listening and Indigenous, sovereign listening. The chapter offers a generative framework from which to consider the conceptual possibilities for a place-based music writing that insists on the subjectivity of the music at hand as much as that of the writer. He illustrates this correspondence by considering the work of Indigenous artists like Laura Ortman (White Mountain Apache), Mike Dangeli (Nisga'a), Mique'l Dangeli (Tsimshian), and Peter Morin (Tahltan), whose performances within museum spaces manifest the intersubjectivity between artist and ancestors. In Morin's 2013 performances at the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver, for example, the artist sang directly to various

headdresses and statues, understood not as reified cultural artifacts but as the non-human forms of Morin's ancestors (88-89). Museums, in misapprehending these ancestors as artifacts to be displayed in glass cases, reduce them to mere objecthood, imposing onto them a representational logic that inflicts real psychic and spiritual harm on Indigenous people. Museum-based performances by Indigenous artists, in refusing the objectification of the non-human ancestors, provide Robinson with ways of conceptualizing a music writing in which the writer is one subject among others in a relational field of sound, action, and responsibility. Like the headdresses and statues on display in the museum in Vancouver, music and sound are not abstract cultural objects but living, agential beings that demand a mode of music writing that respects their agency. An important emphasis here is on the agency of the space itself. This calls to mind Coulthard's and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's (2016, 254) concept of place-based "grounded normativity" that resists the geographies of settler violence by identifying practices that are "based on deep reciprocity" and rooted in non-exploitative and "respectful diplomatic relationships" between Indigenous and non-Indigenous nations. In this way, Robinson's concept of a writing practice apposite to the agency of sound and space interlocks with place-based theories of Indigenous political practice.

Between the second and third chapters, Robinson offers a poetic meditation on Diné artist Raven Chacon's *Report* (for firearm ensemble), interspersing English and Halq'eméylem phrases that guide the reader towards an unsettled listening beyond the "accumulative desire" for possession and certainty (109).

Shifting focus to the ongoing history of colonial listening, Chapter 3, "Contemporary Encounters Between Indigenous and Early Music," identifies the tendency in the Canadian historical imagination to bundle together Indigenous and early modern European musics as part of Canada's collective cultural heritage. The chapter proposes four models of aural encounter between Indigenous and settler societies, presenting both historical precedence and contemporary enactments of each. In the first model, the sonic encounter is figured as "integration," or the extraction of Indigenous song from their context and into Western ontologies of music (119). The "integration" paradigm encompasses a broad range of encounters, from the seventeenth-century French missionary Gabriel Sagard's transcriptions of Mi'kmaq song to the twenty-first-century public intellectual John Ralston Saul's description of Canada as "a Métis nation" (121). Through their intercultural translations and universalizing pretensions, both of these instances reveal what philosopher Denise Ferreira da

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Silva (2007) calls the “strategy of engulfment” in which the violent incorporation of Indigeneity becomes fundamental to Canadian national identity (and the national identity of other settler states).

The second model of encounter is the “nation-to-nation exchange,” which Robinson argues presents the fantasy of settler-Indigenous contact as consisting of a peaceful sharing of musical gifts (133). Indeed, this “exchange” model can become so ideologically inverted as to present the Indigenous society as the “visiting” nation that bestows its cultural gifts to its settler hosts. These two models combine in Robinson’s third model of engagement, which figures an equanimous exchange of music as a precondition for subsequent integration. The case study in this model is settler composer Mychael Danna’s *Winter*, an adaptation of Vivaldi’s “L’inverno” which incorporates recordings of Inuit throat singing, written for early music ensemble Tafelmusik’s 2014 concert, *The Four Seasons: A Cycle of the Sun*. Robinson shows how *Winter*’s incorporation of Inuit throat song reveals a “semiotics of inclusion” that unavoidably reduces the Inuit tradition to a conquered object forced to serve the composition’s vision of a Canadian multicultural universalism (140). Though Robinson’s focus here is directed on contemporary Canadian art music, his theories of encounter speak to the broader dynamics of neoliberal multiculturalism that Jodi Melamed (2011), in a different context, has identified as “represent and destroy.”<sup>1</sup>

True to his interest in Indigenous refusals of hungry listening, Robinson’s terms his fourth model of colonial encounter “the agonism of non-integration” (143). This model bypasses the aesthetics of representational reconciliation and holds the antagonistic forces of the colonial scene in an unresolved tension. Considering Mohawk cellist Dawn Avery’s *Sarabande* (2007)—in which a suite for solo cello by J.S. Bach is performed alongside a traditional Buffalo performance—Robinson shows how the refusal to “integrate cultural aesthetics” may sound unsettling for the analytically-oriented listener, but effects a defense of Indigenous sovereignty (143). Because the logic of inclusion fundamentally serves the hegemonic (aesthetic and political) structures in which a piece appears, Avery’s composition troubles the ideological smoothness of settler “inclusion” frameworks. Robinson’s four models of encounter are highly generative for tracking politics of musical composition involving unequal power differentials. These models, Robinson argues, are not merely reducible to formal archetypes; rather, they are deeply internalized and affectively coded scripts for racial knowledge that, in all cases but the last, reinforce white settler fantasies of universality. In this way, music scholars and artists alike may find Robinson’s taxonomy a welcome occasion for critical reflection on their own work: his

taxonomy interrogates the power dynamics underlying the affective codes by which a given music may make itself felt and understood as meaningful.

Chapter 4, “Ethnographic Redress, Compositional Responsibility,” takes up the history of ethnographic collection of Indigenous song and the legacies of this history in both settler and Indigenous composition. While this topic is a central theme in discourses on the history of ethnomusicology, Robinson raises the stakes of this critique by framing the collection of Indigenous song in the context of the criminalization of potlatch from 1880 to 1951 (150). The forcible suppression of Indigenous practices of sharing songs, histories, and other forms of knowledge provides the political context for the ethnographic song collection project not as merely a matter of archival representation but as inextricable from histories of settler violence. Furthermore, the subsequent use of these songs as raw material in the work of settler composers such as Ernest MacMillan and R. Murray Schafer reveals the brutal coordination between state-sanctioned dispossession and hegemonic cultural production. This chapter considers the violence of the archival protocols of Indigenous song collections, in particular the tendency to identify the settler ethnographers who collected the materials and erase the Indigenous peoples from whom they were extracted. State archives then justify their colonial holdings as geared towards education and “public benefit,” erasing the specific protocols of knowledge sharing in the Indigenous communities (158). This specious justification mobilizes a notion of a universal “public,” to whom all knowledge supposedly belongs, in order to further stigmatize Indigenous activists who refuse this false universality and argue for the return of propriety materials and knowledges to those who rightly claim them as their tribal heritage.<sup>2</sup>

Examining the contemporary resonances of this history, Robinson considers the “song cleansing” practices of composers Peter Morin and Jeremy Dutcher (Wolastoqiyik), according to which “songs that have been kept in drawers, boxes, and servers of online archives [are] ‘brought to life’” (167-68). Robinson compares Morin and Dutcher’s practice with settler composer Alexina Louie’s *Take the Dog Sleds* (2008), which takes as its subject matter the slaughter of many hundreds of Inuit sled dogs by Canadian mounties in the mid-twentieth century as a technique of forced acculturation. Through this juxtaposition, Robinson critiques musical representations of anti-Indigenous violence not because they are misrepresentations, but moreover because of their very nature as representational. Beyond the “spectacle of sound tourism” that Louie’s piece enacts (188), the very translation of Indigenous life into the reified realm of the aesthetic, Robinson argues, is already a misappropriation of Indigenous song:

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Indigenous song, he argues, cannot fit into the representational frame of Western art music without significant ontological deformation.<sup>3</sup>

This deformation is at work not just in Louie's piece, but in Western art music in general, and in particular in the celebrated "soundscape" compositions of R. Murray Schafer, whose work is discussed throughout Robinson's text. The work of Morin and Dutcher provides a counter-discourse in that their reanimation of cultural knowledge stored in colonial archives manifests real sovereignty rather than merely representing and depoliticizing past traumas. Following this chapter, Robinson offers an "Event-Score for Responsibility" that inverts the framework of Louie's blundered mishandling of Indigenous material by imagining her piece as an instance of archival violence that can be "cleansed," *à la* Morin and Dutcher. This text-score not only enacts a mode of composition and performance irreducible to settler representationalism but also opens new avenues towards understanding and critiquing Louie's work (191).

Robinson's final chapter, "Feeling Reconciliation" probes into the libidinal economy of settler aesthetics with an opening meditation on the tears shed by the audience of Bruce Ruddell's rock musical *Beyond Eden* (2010) loosely based on the life of Wilson Duff, a Canadian anthropologist who oversaw the removal of twenty-three Haida memorial and mortuary poles in 1957. Robinson writes, "Perhaps you yourself have witnessed intercultural music featuring Indigenous performers and felt moved; [...] perhaps you have cried. But what, exactly is at the heart of all this crying?"

Questioning performance studies scholar Jill Dolan's valorization of the "shared affect" or the *communitas* of musical experience, Robinson draws our attention to the way that "intercultural music" may elicit radically different responses from audience members depending on one's listening positionality (202). Ruddell's own reference, in an interview, to his audience's tears signifies the affective success in representing reconciliation, friendship, intercultural exchange and redemption, ultimately activating a framework of racial sentimentalism that operates like a closed affective circuit for the white spectator who enjoys the aesthetic resolution of irresolvable real-world antagonisms.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, Robinson's own tears, shed in response to the same performance, arose from his resentment of colonial affect, along with his refusal to participate in the standing ovation and tears of affirmation of the audience around him. He uses this contradiction to cut through the normative conception of intercultural music (what he calls throughout the text "inclusionary performance") as an innate good, born out by "the overwhelming presupposition of music's positive efficacy" (226).



Music's affective power, he argues, is often coded to create a sense of resolution and reconciliation that, in the context of intercultural performances involving Indigenous musics or performers, aims to provide the listener with a fantasy of peaceful reconciliation and "settlement" that covers over the ongoing structures of dispossession in the present (229). An alternative to this harmful mystification is proposed in the concept of "empathetic unsettlement," a rubric for music composition that would refuse the conciliatory engulfment of Indigenous music into settler structures, requiring the listener to dwell in the discomfort of this refusal. This alternative may raise the question of why "empathy" is a candidate for recuperation after being so thoroughly critiqued throughout the chapter. That is, why not point to "resentful unsettlement" as a new model for anti-reconciliatory composition, since resentment is such a key hermeneutic throughout the text? It is a testament to this book's orientation towards collaboration and reciprocity, however, that the conceptual offerings made by Robinson serve as occasions for further engagement, rather than rigid theoretical categories.

*Hungry Listening* offers wide-ranging interventions on Indigenous music studies that scholars from each of the musical subdisciplines and beyond will be compelled to consider. The arguments of the book also leave room for further engagement, collaboration and dialogue. At issue for Robinson is not just the coloniality of ethnomusicology's origins, historical musicology's canonicity, or music theory's analytical tools. Rather, Robinson requires us to perceive the potential coloniality of musical experience itself, pointing the reader towards contemporary work that either reinscribes or refuses the settler "narratocracy" of reconciliation.<sup>5</sup> Robinson's scholarship is supplemented by rich curatorial work for Indigenous art music and performance, modelling an engaged academic-activist practice that refuses to separate between the scholarly, artistic, and social conditions for Indigenous resurgence.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Melamed's text focuses on the relationship between economic formations in post-World War II capitalism and literary studies in the United States. However, the logic of state-sanctioned racial liberalism and the depoliticization of race-radical critique is just as much at issue in Robinson's discussion.

<sup>2</sup> In *Represent and Destroy*, Melamed identifies the stigmatization of the insufficiently global citizen as one of the primary ways that neoliberal multiculturalism enforces its ethics of universality.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Nichols (2020) has recently articulated a notion of dispossession that attends to the seemingly paradoxical temporality of settler colonialism. Rather than indexing a form of simple theft, in which a dominant settler culture steals the (tangible or intangible) property of the Indigenous society, dispossession actually brings the very ontology of property into being; by stealing land, music, or artifacts, settler society forces a logic of property onto those holdings that they did not carry in advance. This retroactive propertization, which can help us rethink the dominant conversation on “cultural appropriation,” is at play in Robinson’s discuss in this chapter.

<sup>4</sup> The literature on the racial politics of sentimentality and sentimentalism is vast. On the American nineteenth century, see Cruz (1999) and Schuller (2018).

<sup>5</sup> Robinson mobilizes Davide Panagia’s concept of narratocracy as “the organization of a perceptual field according to the imperative of rendering things readable” (Panagia 2009, 12). Robinson’s use of the concept links this imperative to the felt experience of settlement and resolution in the works under discussion.

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