



Sonic Realism and Auditory Culture: A Reply to Marie Thompson and Annie Goh

Christoph Cox

The emergence of ‘sound studies’ over the past few decades marks a welcome theoretical development to which the special issue of *parallax*, ‘Sounding/Thinking’ (vol. 23, no. 3 [2017]), offers new contributions. Yet several essays in this issue widen an unfortunate rift that has developed in this new field, a rift between two tendencies that Brian Kane has called ‘sonic ontology’ and ‘auditory cultural studies’.¹ While sonic ontologists claim to investigate the nature of sound itself, proponents of auditory culture explore sound in specific cultural and social contexts. Critics of sonic ontology (including Kane and, in ‘Sounding/Thinking’, Marie Thompson and Annie Goh) argue that there is no such thing as the nature of sound or that, if there is, it is inaccessible to human beings, who always inhabit particular subject positions and are situated within specific auditory cultures that shape and frame what sound is and does.² In an essay published in 2011, I challenged this position and in so doing inadvertently fueled the rift between sonic ontology and cultural studies of sound.³ Here I want to clarify that I conceive ontology and cultural analysis to be complementary rather than adversarial projects.

Yet there are two different ways to construe this complementarity, only one of which I think is viable. One can take the real to be a social construct, thus folding nature into culture, ontology into epistemology; or one can take cultural history to be an outgrowth of natural history, thus folding culture into nature and conceiving human knowing as one natural process among others. The first position has been prevalent in the humanities and social sciences for decades, but it is deeply mistaken. Confounding chronology, it treats us latecomers in the history of the universe as the authors of that very universe. Only the latter position – that cultural history supplements a natural history that vastly preceded it – makes any sense. To clarify and explain why this is so, I offer some remarks on the ‘Sounding/Thinking’ essays by Thompson and Goh, who explicitly criticize it. I will concentrate on Thompson’s essay, which considers my position at greater length and accords with Goh’s in important respects; and I will focus on the broad philosophical concerns that underlie the disagreement.

Both Thompson and Goh criticize the ‘ontological turn’ (in philosophy in general and in sound studies in particular) citing several related concerns: that ontology and metaphysics are inherently problematic; that, if it has any

legitimacy, ontology cannot be disentangled from epistemology; that the turn to ontology amounts to an occlusion of the social and the political; and that new realism and the ontological turn – in general and in sound studies – implicitly naturalize and universalize a historically and culturally specific subject position, that of the white, European man.

For Thompson, the ‘reinvigorated interest in ontology’ is worrisome ‘given the historical complicity of metaphysics in erasing and justifying violence against marginalized social groups’.⁴ This critique is equivocal, and the force of Thompson’s argument rests on this equivocation. In some passages, Thompson seems to reject ontology wholesale, as when she affirms Zoe Todd’s assertion that ‘ontology is just another word for colonialism’ or when she quotes Frantz Fanon’s remark: ‘Ontology [...] does not permit us to understand the being of the black man’.⁵ In the final paragraph of her essay, however, Thompson steps back from this strong position, noting that ‘highlighting the entanglement of whiteness with ontology is not to argue for the dismissal of ontology per se’.⁶ Now, rejection of ontology *tout court* would make no sense at all. After all, ontology simply describes the set of entities one takes to exist.⁷ Ontological commitments are embedded in every philosophical position and, indeed, as Antonio Gramsci points out, in ‘common sense’, religious beliefs, popular opinions, ordinary language, etc.⁸ One cannot avoid having ontological commitments and making ontological claims. It is not surprising, therefore, that ontologies have been articulated, defended, and debated not only in the European philosophical tradition but in African philosophy (e.g., the difference between Akan and Bantu ontologies), Asian philosophy (e.g., Buddhist vs. Brahmanical ontologies), and so on. That some ontologies have been racist, sexist, or homophobic is undoubtedly true. But to reject ontology on that basis is equivalent to rejecting language because racists speak and write, or to rejecting politics because some political projects are repressive. Contrary to Thompson’s insinuation in her gloss on the famous essay ‘The Fact of Blackness’, Frantz Fanon does not reject ontology, a term that, in his text, signifies the *prevailing* ontology of the mid-century Parisian milieu in which he was writing, a Hegelian ontology evident in the work of his contemporaries Jean-Paul Sartre and Jacques Lacan.⁹ At times, Thompson seems to grant this, acknowledging that the problem is not ontology per se but rather ‘the white-defined realm of being’.¹⁰ Yet her equivocation between these two positions (ontology is racist; some ontologies are racist) effects a sleight of hand, casting the renewed interest in ontology as a project of white supremacy. (I might also note that philosophers of color – e.g., Manuel DeLanda, Suhail Malik, Reza Negarestani – have played a central role in the ‘ontological turn’.)

What Thompson objects to, it seems, is not ontology per se but *realist* ontology, the claim that there is a way that the world really is. Against such realism, she adopts a deeply European philosophical position prevalent from Berkeley and Kant through poststructuralism, namely, the variant of antirealism that Quentin Meillassoux calls ‘correlationism’, according to which being and knowing are inextricably correlated with one another.¹¹ Thomp-

son embraces this position, which she calls ‘onto-epistemology’, a term that captures ‘the entanglement and co-constitution of ontology (questions of being) and epistemology (questions of knowledge)’.¹² Here, too, Thompson’s argument rests on an equivocation. From the claim that we can know things only insofar as they are cognized through our conceptual schemes, this fallacious argument concludes that we cannot know things as they are in themselves (or that there are no things in themselves). Thompson’s version of this argument moves from the claim that *ontology* is a cultural enterprise (a product of human knowing and conceiving), to the conclusion that the *things to which ontology refers* are products of human perception and conception. As she puts it: ‘[Perceiving] is an effect and vehicle of sedimented contextual knowledges, which “constitutes” that which it presumes to merely apprehend’.¹³ The scare quotes around ‘constitutes’ suggest an awareness that this is a dubious claim, which equivocates between *things as perceived or conceived* and *things themselves*. *Knowledge* of the fact that water is H₂O requires concepts and language; but that water *is* H₂O is independent of any human knowledge or apprehension.¹⁴ A confusion of ontology with epistemology fuels this fallacy, which David Stove famously parodied via a restatement that reveals its absurdity: ‘We cannot eat oysters as they are in themselves, because we can eat oysters only insofar as they are brought under the physiological and chemical conditions which are the presuppositions of the possibility of being eaten’.¹⁵ Onto-epistemology supposes that the material real offers no ontological resistance, that it can be carved into whatever shape suits a subject, culture, or language. It is onto-epistemology, then, not realism, that supposes a passive nature – contrary to Goh’s claim.¹⁶ Rejecting this hylomorphism, materialist realism affirms the self-organizing power of material processes, of which human knowing is but an instance.

To claim that perception and conception constitute their objects is to adopt the radically idealist and anthropo-narcissist position that human beings literally generate the world and its contents – a latter-day creationism that replaces God with human beings.¹⁷ Indeed, like creationists, correlationists and onto-epistemologists cannot make sense of the statements of natural science, for example, the recent discovery by an astrophysics team led by Jorge Zavala and Min Yun of a galaxy 12.8 billion years old – that is, a galaxy that emerged one billion years after the Big Bang and 12.6 billion years before the emergence of human beings (and thus human knowing, perceiving, and conceiving).¹⁸ The onto-epistemologist can respond to such claims in one of three ways: (1) she can accept that they describe a world prior to human construction and thus abandon the doctrine of onto-epistemology; or she can adopt one of two creationist alternatives: (2) the outright rejection of these scientific claims, or (3) the assertion that human beings retroactively generate the prehuman past along with its events and objects. Only the first path has any intellectual credibility. Nonetheless, Thompson adopts (3), that is, the second creationist alternative, referring to ‘ancestral’ claims concerning the existence and nature of the universe prior to the emergence of human beings as ‘an origin myth’.¹⁹ Ancestral claims, she notes, citing Jordana Rosenberg, amount to “‘primitivist’ fantasies’ akin to

those of settler colonialists who imagined the New World as a ‘terra nullius’. This effort to undermine established scientific knowledge via spurious comparison with a racist political project is reminiscent of the mental gymnastics required by Christian creationists to account for fossil evidence that discredits their fantastical story of the world’s origins.

However baseless, Thompson’s critique here clarifies that her objection to realist ontology is primarily political. Throughout the essay, she notes that the turn to realism is an attempt to erase or disavow the realm of politics and social life while at the same time naturalizing a particular political or racial position. While it’s true that, like all scholars, ontologists sometimes narrow their focus to particular issues and questions, temporarily setting aside other important concerns, Thompson ignores the fact that the realist turn has spurred a profound reinvigoration of left political thought. Thompson cherry picks a quotation from the realist philosopher Nick Srnicek that serves her rhetorical purposes but avoids mentioning the two books in which he articulates a postcapitalist alternative to the morass of ‘folk politics’ in which the left has been mired for decades.²⁰ She lauds ‘the speculative tendencies of various feminisms’ but ignores the incisive speculations of the ‘xenofeminist’ collective Laboria Cuboniks, who reconstruct intersectional feminism on rationalist, universalist grounds and argue that to view science, reason, and universality as inherently patriarchal or European is to concede defeat.²¹

These realist projects make it evident that Thompson’s political project is incoherent. The critique of ‘white aurality’ and, more broadly, of white supremacy presumes a conception of racial justice that Thompson’s onto-epistemology cannot support. For the onto-epistemologist, claims about being, knowledge, the true, and the good must be ‘situated’, relativized to particular perspectives, subject positions, and cultural frameworks. Yet justice demands abstraction from or transcendence of particularity, the ability to consider the other, despite differences, as politically and morally equal, a subject owed all the dignity and respect one accords oneself and one’s local group. Or, conversely, given a history of discrimination on the basis of difference, justice demands affirmative action or reparations. Either way, justice is a matter of abstracting from particularity, of bracketing narrow interests and desires. By contrast, the onto-epistemologist remains mired in the particular, unable to transcend her own context and thus incapable of coherently challenging alternatives to her own contingent position, which, according to her own doctrine, can command no necessity or obligation on any other. Thus, to the extent that Thompson offers a critique of white supremacy, she affirms an implicit realism that undermines her own commitment to onto-epistemology.

Both Thompson and Goh consider such realism and universalism to be peculiarly European or white. This is a thesis that, in classic Orientalist fashion, combines ignorance about non-European intellectual traditions with the fantasy that the racial and cultural other harbors mysterious sources of

knowledge. It's as though there exist no Chinese astrophysicists, no Sri Lankan analytical chemists, no Nigerian engineers, no Dominican mathematicians.²² The onto-epistemologist might arrogantly reply that these intellectuals promulgate European colonial knowledge or merely describe their local cultural contexts rather than the world as it really is. In truth, throughout history and all over the world, particular human subjects have consistently taken themselves to describe the nature of reality, which is to say that realisms dominate every philosophical and scientific tradition. When, for example, Nāgārjuna claims that all phenomena are empty and interdependent, when Śamkara declares that the self (*ātman*) is identical with the absolute (*Brahman*), and when Akan philosophers defend an interactionist psychophysical dualism, they take these claims not to be culturally relative but to describe the way things really are. One may contest these claims; but they suffice to point out that the association of realism and universalism with European thought is absurd.

This brings me to the core aesthetic claim of Thompson's essay, the claim that my sonic philosophy is predicated on a 'white aurality', that is, on 'a racialized perceptual standpoint that is both situated and universalizing'.²³ Thompson's argument goes like this: Cox claims to pursue the nature of sound itself. But there is no such thing as the nature of sound itself; there are only specific sonic and musical contexts, traditions, and histories. What Cox claims to be universal, then, is really just a specific history, namely a European history, which is a history of white supremacy and colonialism. Therefore, Cox's sonic ontology implicitly naturalizes and universalizes a particular racial standpoint, namely that of whiteness. I have already pointed to the flimsiness of this argument's core components, namely, the rejection of universalizing knowledge and the claim that universalist positions are peculiarly European. 'Situated yet universalizing' is simply a description of knowledge itself, as opposed to mere belief, opinion, or ideology. Of course it is true that scientists, historians, and moral theorists are particular human subjects situated in particular social and cultural contexts; but these subjects regularly make claims that transcend this particularity, offering evidence and arguments that establishes their conclusions as knowledge – knowledge compelling not only to themselves and their local group but to anyone who follows the chain of reasoning and evidence. This knowledge is fallible, of course, subject to critical examination that may reveal it to be unsubstantiated, incomplete, biased, provincial, etc. But such correction is always in the service of knowledge that has a better claim to truth and justice. As I've pointed out, Thompson's own argument pursues this sort of knowledge. She criticizes my position on the grounds that it demonstrates an implicit racial bias and thus points toward a more adequate position that takes a broader range of racial perspectives into account in the service of racial justice. The problem is that Thompson's charge of racial bias has little to do with my position in particular, instead resting on the claims that *all* universalizing knowledge is white, European, and imperialist and that only situated, local, and relative knowledge claims are valid. In classic relativist fashion, Thomp-

son thus undermines her own position, making a universalizing claim that rejects universalizing claims.

I fully grant that, like any product of scholarship and argument, my sonic ontology may be incomplete, biased, parochial, etc. But one would need to show that this is specifically true instead of simply offering a self-refuting argument against realism in general. The charge of white aurality would also need to contend with the fact that my philosophical account draws substantially from ontologists and sonic ontologists of colour. My key ontological concept – the concept of the ‘sonic flux’ – simply extends the realist ontology of the Mexican philosophical autodidact Manuel DeLanda, whose brilliant book *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* gives the lie to Thompson’s claim that ‘the transdisciplinary return to ontology and the concomitant return to realism and materialism [...] tunes out key questions the social, economics, and history’.²⁴ My sonic supplement to DeLanda’s account of the real as flux draws not only from white artists such as John Cage, Max Neuhaus, and Christina Kubisch but from queer Tejana composer and theorist Pauline Oliveros’s conception of the sonosphere; percussionist polymath Milford Graves’s account of cosmic vibration; and the long Indian philosophical tradition that considers the world to be fundamentally sonic.²⁵ As these and other theorists show, the concept of the sonic flux emerges out of specific cultural traditions but also communicates beyond them, describing sound’s universal becoming.

To return to my starting point, DeLanda’s book offers a compelling demonstration of how to treat the products of culture (language, money, social norms, etc.) as elements of natural history. For DeLanda, ‘reality is a *single matter-energy* undergoing phase transitions of various kinds’; and ‘structures as different as sedimentary rock, animal species, and social classes may be viewed as historical products of the same structure-generating processes. (Or more accurately, of different concrete processes embodying the same abstract machine or engineering diagram.)’²⁶ This project also serves as a model for how to fruitfully combine sonic ontology and auditory culture. Sonic ontology could offer a philosophical account of the sonic flux in general, its capacities and tendencies, and the mechanisms that capture, filter, and structure it. Operating at a different scale, auditory cultural studies could provide more detailed empirical accounts of the flows of sound through particular linguistic, musical, and social communities. Instead of cordoning off sound studies as exclusively the province of cultural theorists, this project would manifest the truly interdisciplinary possibilities of the field, engaging scholars in the humanities, arts, social sciences, and natural sciences to explore how the sonic flux is shaped by natural and social forces alike – by the physics of sound, the materiality of bodies and musical instruments, by social and political forces, and so on. Without doing so explicitly, many scholars working on sound – Jacques Attali, Alain Corbin, Chris Cutler, Ana Maria Ochoa Gautier, Steve Goodman, Kodwo Eshun, Mara Mills, Fred Moten, Tara Rodgers, Aura Satz, Jonathan Sterne, Emily Thompson, Gary Tomlinson, and Alexander Weheliye, to name just a few – have already contributed enormously to

the project of tracking the sonic flux in all its generality and specificity. Rejecting onto-epistemology or correlationism, this conception of sound studies would acknowledge that the sonic flux is immemorial, preceding and exceeding human contributions, but also that it is profoundly shaped by cultures, societies, languages, and politics.²⁷

Notes

¹ Kane, "Sound Studies Without Auditory Culture".

² See Thompson, "Whiteness" and Goh, "Sounding Situated Knowledges."

³ Cox, "Beyond Representation and Signification."

⁴ Thompson, "Whiteness," 267.

⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, 267–268.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 278.

⁷ Cf. Barad: 'However strong one's dislike of metaphysics, it cannot be banished, and so it is ignored at one's peril'. *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 205.

⁸ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 323 ff.

⁹ See Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness."

¹⁰ Thompson, "Whiteness," 268.

¹¹ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 5 and *passim*.

¹² Goh concurs, affirming Donna Haraway's 'ethico-onto-epistemological project' (283) and Karen Barad's 'onto-epistemology' (287), 'the intertwining of knowing and being' (288), 'the inseparability of ontology and epistemology' (292). Kane also agrees, noting that sonic ontology is always 'ontography', that is, simply 'the description of the ontological commitments and beliefs of particular subjects or communities'. Kane, "Sound Studies Without Auditory Culture," 16.

¹³ Thompson, "Whiteness," 273.

¹⁴ The example is from Ferraris, *Manifesto of New Realism*, 19.

¹⁵ Stove, "Idealism," 161. Ray Brassier has remarked on Stove's noxious political views, warning against the *ad hominem* conclusion that realism is necessarily allied with such views. See Brassier, "Concepts and Objects," 57.

¹⁶ Goh, "Sounding Situated Knowledges", 292.

¹⁷ The work of Donna Haraway, my former professor, is a key resource for Thompson and Goh, who would do well consider Haraway's affirmation (against such creationism) of the four blows to human narcissism promulgated by modern

science: Copernicus's discovery that the earth is not the center of the cosmos; Darwin's discovery that humans are simply animals among other animals; Freud's decentering of conscious thought; and the informatics revolution, which erased the boundary between organisms and machines. Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 11–12.

¹⁸ See Lathrop, "Using a Powerful New Telescope" and Jorge A. Zavala et al., "A Dusty Star-Forming Galaxy."

¹⁹ Thompson, "Whiteness," 267. Cf. Goh, "Sounding Situated Knowledges," 285.

²⁰ See Srnicek and Williams, *Inventing the Future* and Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*. See also Avanessian and Mackay, *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*. Manuel DeLanda points out that, historically, left political thought has been staunchly realist and materialist, dedicated to addressing the real, material needs and conditions of oppressed and marginalized people by making concrete interventions into reality, and that, by contrast, correlationism and onto-epistemology retreat into an idealism that is profoundly conservative. DeLanda, "Materialism and Politics."

²¹ Laboria Cuboniks, "Xenofeminism." On the importance of Donna Haraway's work to the xenofeminist position, see Sollfrank and Baker, "Revisiting the Future."

²² Thus the Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu writes: 'A department of physics or engineering in an African university is unlikely to be asked to teach African physics or African engineering. What they may legitimately be asked to do is to apply the disciplines to African conditions'. Wiredu goes on to argue that, though developed in specific and distinctive cultural contexts, African philosophy must not remain bound to those contexts but should strive for universality. *Philosophy and an African Culture*, 26ff. In a later essay, Wiredu writes: 'It is thought to be a mark of tolerance and broad-mindedness to view the allegedly disparate standards of reasoning as all equally valid within their own cultural habitat. But

in spite of the recent resurgence of sympathy for relativism, its inconsistency remains as glaring as ever'. Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, 27.

²³ Thompson, "Whiteness," 266.

²⁴ It's worth noting that, far from 'sidelining [...] indigenous cosmologies', as Thompson asserts of new realist and materialist philosophies, DeLanda's staunchly scientific realism was fostered through an apprenticeship with a female Mazatec sha-

man. See Davis, "DeLanda Destratified" and Si-Qin, "Manuel DeLanda in Conversation."

²⁵ See Oliveros, "Auralizing the Sonosphere"; Cox, "Milford Graves"; Beck, *Sonic Theology*; Lee, *Spiral: The Sound Issue*; and Cox, *Sonic Flux*.

²⁶ DeLanda, *A Thousand Years*, 21, 215.

²⁷ I make a modest start on this project in the second chapter of *Sonic Flux*.

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Christoph Cox is Professor of Philosophy at Hampshire College. He is the author of *Sonic Flux: Sound, Art, and Metaphysics* (University of Chicago, 2018) and *Nietzsche: Naturalism and Interpretation* (University of California, 1999) and co-editor of *Realism Materialism Art* (Sternberg, 2015) and *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music* (Bloomsbury, 2017; Continuum, 2004). The recipient of an Arts Writers Grant from Creative Capital/Warhol Foundation, Cox is editor-at-large at *Cabinet* magazine. His writing has appeared in *October*, *Artforum*, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, *The Wire*, *Journal of Visual Culture*, *Organised Sound*, *The Review of Metaphysics*, and elsewhere. He has curated exhibitions at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, The Kitchen, CONTEXT Art Miami, New Langton Arts, G Fine Art Gallery and other venues. Email: ccox@hampshire.edu