



Conference Report: “Ruptures and Convergences: Music Studies and the Anthropocene”

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[1] Music theory’s prevailing ontology has been one in which music is intangible, ineffable, and unplaced—a long holdover from nineteenth-century European Romanticism. Yet, as music scholars increasingly engage with issues of decolonization and social justice, many of us are eager to transform our conceptual commitments. A promising contribution to these conversations comes from the newly formed Music Studies in/of the Anthropocene Research Network (MSARN), whose inaugural conference, *Ruptures and Convergences*, took place in spring 2022.⁽¹⁾ Organized by Andrew Chung, Gabrielle Cornish, Megan Steigerwald Ille, Kirsten Paige, Lee Veeraraghavan, and Gavin Williams, the conference was held in hybrid format at UC Berkeley on May 21–22, 2022. Building on the momentum of several other music-related projects addressing the Anthropocene, the MSARN asks that we reevaluate music studies’ central questions in light of encroaching ecological disasters and the extractive practices of racial capitalism and colonization.⁽²⁾ At this point, *MTO* readers might be asking themselves, “What is the Anthropocene, and what does it have to do with music theory?” It’s a fair question, as music theorists have been largely uninvolved in discussions of music and human impacts on the environment, such as anthropogenic climate change. At a conference of roughly forty attendees, the only music theorists to participate were co-organizer Andrew Chung, Alexander Rehding, and myself. This conference report, then, invites music theorists into the Anthropocene discourse and the research questions it presents to a rapidly transforming music studies.

[2] Understanding MSARN’s desired intervention requires knowledge about the history of the Anthropocene concept and about prior scholarship on music and the environment. “The Anthropocene” names our current geological era in which climate change, and the human activities that caused it, are measurable in the earth’s crust and ice cores (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000). The fact that nature has not been autonomous or self-regulating but rather shaped by human activity has far-ranging implications. Philosophers note that the Anthropocene disrupts the subject-object binary, troubling the premise of objectivity that shapes natural science while enabling a new ethics of interdependence between humans and non-human things.⁽³⁾ Later waves of scholarship have argued that the Anthropocene must be understood in tandem with histories of race, enslavement, and colonization.⁽⁴⁾ A similar critical turn occurred in music studies in the subfield known as “ecomusicology.” As defined by Aaron Allen in a 2011 *Journal of the American Musicological Society* colloquy, ecomusicology “considers the relationships of music, culture, and nature” (Allen 2011, 392). Five years later,

ethnomusicologist Ana María Ochoa Gautier (2016) critiqued ecomusicology for its recourse to an already-formed idea of nature at a time when other disciplines were questioning the normative Western nature-culture binary. Aligning themselves with Ochoa Gautier's critique, the MSARN conference organizers hope to bring histories of colonization and racial capitalism to bear on ecomusicology, unsettling music studies' epistemic tenets in the process.

[3] The conference's mission to disrupt the traditional order of things was evident from its innovative format that emphasized process and collaboration. (The full conference program is provided as an [Appendix](#).) The conference began with "Paper Partner Sessions" that gave pairs of participants a chance to engage with each other's work in greater depth; these discussions fostered a sense of ease and mutual support between participants that raised the level of discussion in subsequent sessions. Rather than delivering twenty-minute papers, conference participants pre-circulated their work; each of the four panels began with two discussants responding to three or four papers at once, with the remainder of each 90-minute panel devoted to free-flowing discussion among everyone present. Papers were almost entirely authored by graduate students and early-career scholars, with more established scholars acting as discussants.

[4] Designed to provide participants with a common theoretical basis for the Anthropocene, the conference's reading session involved discussion of three key texts from outside music studies. The first two well-known articles reframed the Anthropocene within histories of colonization and racial capitalism (Davis and Todd 2017; Vergès 2017). Although it does not directly engage the Anthropocene discourse, the third text, Olúfemi Táíwò's 2022 book *Reconsidering Reparations* should be required reading for anyone interested in social justice, race, or climate change. Working from the pragmatist standpoint that political institutions are most likely to implement radical changes like reparations when elite interests are aligned with marginalized ones, Táíwò aligns the need for immediate climate action with antiracist and anticolonial organizers' calls for material redistribution. Táíwò demonstrates that countries that were and were not previously colonized "live in different environmental realities," experiencing vastly different levels of air pollution and vulnerability to climate disasters (Táíwò 2022, 165). As such, Táíwò frames climate change as a manifestation of "global racial empire" (Táíwò 2022, 5).

[5] The four panel themes articulated central research areas for a music studies in/of the Anthropocene. In the first panel on "Non/Human" encounters, Cana McGhee's paper found reparative forms of listening and quiet interaction in online Black plant-care cultures, and Annie Garlid's analysis of human/geologic comparisons in the music of Elysia Crampton revealed that "the line between rock and skin is more porous than we think."⁽⁵⁾ The discussion asked why we perceive plants as silent, fairies as small, and rocks as static, and imagined how non-human encounters can help us retheorize our sensoria. In a panel on "Time/Scales," participants addressed musics as diverse as the Brazilian popular genre carimbó, Lully's *Atys* (1676), and Jennifer Walshe and Timothy Morton's opera *Time Time Time* (2019). Discussion from this session drew upon Karl Polanyi's (1944) notion of "enclosure" as a capitalist technique. Key questions included the following: How does the temporal enclosure afforded by the work concept and some types of musical performance produce a political space in which racial and colonial ideologies were consolidated, or in which we might productively reflect on time and timescales? Does scholarship oriented around discretized objects of study participate in a politics of enclosure?

[6] A panel on "Audible Anthropocenes" examined the ways sound and music bring space and time into the body. Following my own paper on online musical tourism through "relaxing" ocean wave sounds and two others on sonifications of climate change data and soundtracks to climate research in the Chilean Antarctic, we discussed how music "gives voice" to nature in ways that often occlude human accountability.⁽⁶⁾ An example of climate data sonification used in Bailey Hilgren's paper is provided in **Video Example 1**. We asked the following questions: What can sound studies offer to discourses in which nature is alternately envoked and "silenced" by humans (as in Rachel Carson's 1962 *Silent Spring*)? What reparative potential exists in music's power to both describe and produce environments? A final panel on "Challenging Music Studies" exposed the difficulties of coalition-building at a global scale. In two exceptional papers, Luka Amber Leleiga Bunnin argued that Pasifika climate activist musics adopt a colonial politics of respectability by using globally legible tonal idioms and excluding Pacific Indigenous musical styles, and Tyler Yamin showed that in gibbon shelters (gibbons are a kind of ape known for their complex vocal duets), plans to preserve the species pressured human caregivers to endanger individual animals.⁽⁷⁾ Discussion in this session centered on our limited

capacities to change Anthropogenic conditions and on developing strategies for living with the disjunction of our individual sites of intervention and the broader scale of climate change.

[7] The standout event of the conference was a music performance that foregrounded a reparative approach. Marcelo Garzo Montalvo and Keith Brower Brown performed a *Bio-Ofrenda* that helped us to “re-member Other ways of knowing and being in, but not of, this place and time.”⁽⁸⁾ Both scholars and musicians (Garzo Montalvo in ethnic studies and Brown in geography), their performance animated the conference themes, introducing music as a healing, non-human agent and drawing on a formalism of cycles and spirals to structure an ambient texture of gradually transforming motives. While Brown modulated these ambient sounds, Garzo Montalvo sung and recited words of gratitude to the earth and our more-than-human kin against a shifting Zoom background depicting natural scenes like forests, wheat fields, and thunderstorms. The half-hour performance began with a consonant drone that, through looping, distortion, and other effects, accumulated into a towering resonance underscored by a slow but inevitable harmonic cyclicity. This was not a dramatization of idyllic nature succumbing to climate crisis but an expression of the deep power and persistence of geological timescales. The program notes explained that, in the performance, Garzo Montalvo was inhabiting the character of a “future ancestor” engaging in “ancestral healing modalities that prefigure decolonial futures.” This healing performance reminds us that the stakes of our work as scholars and humans go beyond discussions of disciplinarity, and beyond even paralyzingly grandiose specters of climate disaster, to the ways we can access our pasts and futures through sound.

[8] The conference concluded with a roundtable of scholars from fields outside music studies, including anthropology, applied ecology, and comparative literature. In addition to a prodigious reading list, the roundtable generated insights about the conceptual and institutional pressures of the Anthropocene felt across disciplines.⁽⁹⁾ As music theorists and historians increasingly study listening practices rather than musical objects, roundtable participants reflected that their own disciplines are also reframing their traditional objects of study as dynamic processes. This shift from object to process can help scholars address theorizations of the Anthropocene that emphasize temporal and historical transformation while destabilizing the subject-object binary. The panelists also argued for the importance of Anthropocene-themed scholarship that is slow, rather than urgent, and vouched for the utility of critical university studies to help us understand our entanglements with racial capitalism as practiced by neoliberal universities.⁽¹⁰⁾ The work that the Anthropocene requires—rethinking our foundational epistemic principles, practicing forms of “radical indiscipline,” and forming more equitable research relationships with Indigenous communities—will take time, even as grant cycles and tenure clocks discourage slow scholarship.

[9] Many research areas in music theory already engage with questions related to the Anthropocene, of which I outline several here. Once aware of these connections, many music theorists might find benefit in greater engagement with theories of the Anthropocene and collaboration with the MSARN. On the topic of “non/human” encounters, Vivian Luong (2017) and Gavin Lee (2019) draw on queer and feminist theory to model the relationship between music and the human analyst.⁽¹¹⁾ Similarly, our tendency to invest music with non-human agency by projecting human sensations and actions onto music has been a significant topic in music theory research, such as in Cora Palfy’s work on music’s “virtual agency” (2022) and Arnie Cox’s “mimetic hypothesis” (2016).⁽¹²⁾ How might music theory’s anthropomorphic engagements with “the music itself” help us model better relations with non-human actors? Additionally, music-theoretical explorations of music’s ontological and formal properties lend themselves to the Anthropocene’s emphasis on “time/scales.” Daniel Chua and Alexander Rehding’s new book *Alien Listening* (2021) is a delightful example of work in this vein. Chua and Rehding “retheorize music from its minimum conditions” as a dot that blinks on and off, arguing that music is fundamentally “a making of time and space” (Chua and Rehding 2021, 24). On the topic of “audible Anthropocenes,” historical work relating the Anthropocene to centuries of enslavement and colonization provides important insights for the history of music theory. This work can connect ideas of nature in historic music theory texts with the colonial programs and plantation economies of their times.⁽¹³⁾ To extend the arguments of geologist Kathryn Yusoff (2018), when music theorists wrote about nature, they were also writing a racialized, colonial construction of the human into being. Confronting the racial ground beneath the human-nature dyad and epistemologies of scientific objectivity in music theory could substantially disrupt music theory’s accepted epistemologies.⁽¹⁴⁾

[10] The Society for Music Theory indicated openness to this kind of epistemic shift when it gave Dylan Robinson’s *Hungry Listening* (2020) the Wallace Berry Award at the 2022 Annual Meeting. Beyond

recognizing the excellence of Robinson's field-changing work, this award should symbolize a commitment from non-native music theorists to engage meaningfully and enduringly with non-white ontologies of music. This means collaborating with and platforming Indigenous and Black music scholars, not just citing their writing. A similar caution applies to the MSARN: while the organizers defined the Anthropocene in relation to histories of race and colonization, they could have gone further to center Indigenous and Black scholars' perspectives at the conference (Cana McGhee's review of the same conference eloquently analyzes her experience as a Black-identifying participant). Perhaps in future years, MSARN can reference race and Indigeneity in the titles of their events and materials and recruit Black and Indigenous scholars to leadership positions. As Dylan Robinson and his colleagues in Indigenous sound studies inform us, many Indigenous musical cultures theorized connections between music, land, and more-than-human kin before the term "Anthropocene" was invented (Bissett Perea 2021; Reed 2019).⁽¹⁵⁾ If we focus exclusively on the Anthropocene—or how our current climate disaster took shape—we can fail to see the brilliant reparative work being done in minoritarian communities and scholarship. Perhaps we would do better, as Marcelo Garzo Montalvo and Keith Brower Brown suggested in their performance, to think of ourselves as "future ancestors" with a responsibility to create the future scholarship, and future planetary relations, we want to see. Envisioning ourselves in this way should clarify our agency, priorities, and responsibilities as we think together about sound, climate change, and global futures.

Appendix

Conference Program

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Footnotes

1. The conference website can be found at <https://www.musicstudiesanthropocene.com/> (accessed April 18, 2023).
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2. Music scholarship on the Anthropocene includes special issues in the *Yale Journal of Music and Religion* (Galloway 2019) and the journals *Popular Music* (Ribac and Harkins 2020) and *19th-Century Music* (Paige 2021), and landmark articles from ethnomusicologist Jim Sykes (2020) and musicologist J. Martin Daughtry (2020).
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3. Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects* (2013) lays out the philosophical and ontological challenges posed by the Anthropocene to humans' presumed status as inhabitants, rather than shapers, of the natural world. Early contributions to Anthropocene and posthuman ethics include Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (2009), Rosie Braidotti's *The Posthuman* (2013), and Bruno Latour's engagement with the Gaia hypothesis (2017).
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4. Many scholars have critiqued earlier writers on the Anthropocene for casting humanity as an undifferentiated whole, erroneously suggesting that all of humanity is equally responsible for causing climate change, and equally at risk from it. See Malm 2016; Moore 2016; Davis and Todd 2017; Yusoff 2018; Karera 2019.
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5. See an example of Black queer plant care culture here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cxhw_pakiC4 (accessed April 18, 2023); and listen to Elysia Crampton's song "Lake" here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=onQcB4O2EPI> (accessed April 18, 2023).
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6. Listen to an example of relaxing music with ocean sounds here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QR3lp0ptpy8&t=5055s> (accessed April 18, 2023) and a soundtrack to climate change research here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8u3PR7WJ4fg> (accessed April 18, 2023).
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7. Listen to an example of gibbon duetting here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JL0n8F0p96s> (accessed April 18, 2023).
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8. Documentation from a similar performance by Brown and Montalvo can be viewed here: <https://vimeo.com/209800475> (accessed April 18, 2023).
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9. The reading list is published here: <https://www.musicstudiesanthropocene.com/reading-group> (accessed April 18, 2023).

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10. See Duke University Press's "Critical University Studies Syllabus" here: <https://dukeupress.edu/Explore-Subjects/Syllabi/Critical-University-Studies-Syllabus> (accessed April 18, 2023).

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11. To put it more precisely, their work builds on queer and feminist music theories from the 1990s that engage music as an agential non-human actor (Maus 1993; Cusick 1994; Guck 1996).

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12. Joseph Straus's (2011) work on music theory and disability similarly finds comparisons between music and the body vital to the history of music theory, from the organicism of Schoenberg and his contemporaries, to the "experientialist" music cognition of Lakoff and Johnson.

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13. Studying the role of nature in historical works of music theory has previously led to critiques of how power operates in these texts. Suzannah Clark and Alexander Rehding's 2001 essay collection *Music Theory and Natural Order* identified theorists' invocations of nature as a source of divine and/or scientific authority. A more recent article from Rehding (2021) engages theories of the Anthropocene to question music theory's self-fashioning in the form of natural science. Forthcoming work from Andrew Chung draws connections between the Anthropocene, colonization, and early modern music theory.

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14. Ochoa Gautier (2016) offers extended consideration of how a deconstructed nature/culture divide would challenge and reshape each of the music subdisciplines.

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15. For Indigenous commentary on the Anthropocene discourse see Whyte (2016) and Davis and Todd (2017). Elsewhere, Zoe Todd (2016) critiques "how a Euro-Western audience consumes Bruno Latour's [Gaia] argument (and the arguments of others writing and thinking about the climate, ontologies, our shared engagements with the world) without being aware of competing or similar discourses happening outside of the rock-star arenas of Euro-Western thought" (8).

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