



**Dylan Robinson**, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020. ISBN: 978-1-5179-0769-3 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-5179-0768-6 (cloth)

In the HBO hit *Deadwood* (2004-2006), mining magnate and show archvillain George Hearst proudly describes himself as “the boy the earth talks to”. According to his account, Hearst’s preternatural acuity for identifying seams of gold comes from his special rapport with nature, a relationship he obtains through a sonic means. According to some historical accounts, the real-life figure of Hearst received this designation from the Indigenous peoples of the Black Hills region (primarily Lakota/Sioux) where he made his fortune. Regardless of the terms under which it was given, “the boy the earth talks to” points to a reprehensible legacy. Through his “purchase” of the Homestake gold mine (in present-day South Dakota), monopoly over local media (meaning many local newspapers), and collaboration with the US military, Hearst helped to displace thousands of Sioux and Lakota people from their ancestral lands in the 1870s and 1880s. More than 150 years later, many are still seeking restitution from a family empire that has for generations occupied their lands and claimed its wealth as their own.

The Hearst anecdote offers a first sketching of “hungry listening”, the powerful mode of settler-colonial audition elaborated in Dylan Robinson’s (Stó:lō) compelling new book of the same name. “Hungry listening”, Robinson explains, derives from two Halq’eméylem words: shxwłítemelh (“an adjective for settler or white person’s methods/things”) and xwélalà:m (“the word for listening”). While these words “in all likelihood would never be brought together by fluent Halq’eméylem speakers”, Robinson notes, their resonance can be found in the encounter between xwélmexw (Stó:lō people) and settlers during the 1860s gold rush, when thousands of people flooded Stó:lō lands at roughly the same time they were stripping the Black Hills further south. *Hungry Listening* focuses on the powerful echoes that have been felt in the decades since this formative moment. For Robinson, the contemporary conjoining of extractivism and state-led

multiculturalism recommends renewed attention to the sonic dimensions of settler colonialism. While other scholars have conceptualized its aural epistemologies – Tonawanda Band of Seneca scholar Mishuana Goeman’s (2013) “settler grammars of place” comes quickly to mind – Robinson’s interlinking of performance, Indigeneity, sound, and liberal statecraft is singular. Through a comparative analysis of songs, musicals, and ceremonies; official state policies; theatre reviews; and colonial texts, his book seeks to draw its readers’ ears to an “intransigent system of presentation guided by an interest in ... Indigenous content, but not Indigenous structure” (p.6). In this way, *Hungry Listening* provides a novel vantage on the dominant themes exposed by critical geographies of settler colonialism – the proliferation of violent abstractions; instrumental relations to nature; subsuming hetero-patriarchies and racial hierarchies. But *Hungry Listening* is not simply a catalogue of colonialism’s “audile techniques” (Sterne 2003) and the resourcing of Indigenous sounds for a Canadian musical nationalism, in particular. It is also a revisiting of sound’s onto-political potentials, and celebration of modes of listening and sounding that affirm Indigenous values and territorial identities.

To better engage these possibilities, it is helpful to consider some of the material conditions Indigenous musicians find themselves in today. In Canada, the moment is marked by a proliferation of arms-length governmental funding bodies seeking to cultivate increasingly diverse music and arts programming. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Indian Residential Schools, the election of Justin Trudeau (who promised renewed dialogues with Indigenous leaders in his victory speech), and impactful land defences on unceded territories have, in different ways, cultivated new national interests in “conciliatory ... languages and practices” (p.7). But this is only part of the story. One of key arguments of this book is that apparent possibilities for Indigenous sonic expression have been annexed to the discourses of liberal reconciliation that have progressively expanded following Canada’s official enshrinement of multiculturalism (in the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, 1988). Robinson draws heavily from Dene scholar Glen Coulthard’s (2014) influential account of the politics of recognition to suggest

that an officially sanctioned musical culture means to expose Indigenous performers and aural traditions to the assimilative logics of the Canadian state. “Indigenous content” is to be divested of its medicinal, spiritual, and community-constitutive qualities and made to stand purely as an object of aesthetic contemplation. Robinson notes that Canadian music history has long apprehended its “First Peoples” for their apparent fidelities to landscape and nature tropes. In one of the book’s central concepts, “critical listening positionalities”, Robinson builds on Louis Althusser’s (2014) analysis of subjectification and Mary Louise Pratt’s (2008) notion of “contact zones” to present the encounter of Indigenous and settler sound-worlds in terms of “highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (p.11). For Robinson, the complex role “The Arts” play as a mediator of nation-to-nation relationships makes the “contact zone” ever more nuanced and worthy of investigation.

*Hungry Listening*’s contemporary focus is complemented with historical accounts that widen and deepen its main concerns. This first such example is from a landmark late-1980s legal case, *Delgamuukw v. the Queen*, that set new terms for the understanding of Aboriginal title. In Chapter 1, entitled “Hungry Listening”, Robinson considers presiding Justice Allan McEachern’s assertion to having a “tin ear” when confronted with the possibility of hearing Indigenous oral testimony (notably Mary Johnson’s Gitksan “song” in the *Delgamuukw* trial). For Robinson, the encounter – also wonderfully explored in Matt Sparke’s (1998) essay “The Map that Roared” – exemplifies how hungry listening “prioritizes the capture and certainty of information over the affective feel, timbre, touch, and texture of sound” (p.38). In effect, McEachern’s “tin ear” is unable to discern the activation of different knowledge systems brought forth from Johnson’s performance, with direct consequence to his apperception of an Indigenous people’s claims to land and identity.

The next chapter, “Writing about Musical Intersubjectivity”, employs sound to bridge discussions between non-representational and new materialist theory and Indigenous knowledge regarding nonhuman relations. Robinson’s important point here is to argue that prevailing

Western models that frame sound as inert and static are insufficient to a discussion of Indigenous performance works. Through his discussion of the work of artist Peter Morin (Tahltan), he shows how Morin solicits connections to ancestral lands within unlikely gallery settings – specifically through sonic agencies constituted from the “lived experience of movement across our lands” (p.53). Morin’s conjoining of different temporal frames is important here: Robinson challenges early and more recent critics of Indigenous works (Marius Barbeau and Christos Hatzis, respectively) for applying Western teleological schemes in relation to Indigenous sound performances. Echoing a point differently made by Anishinaabe scholar Leanne Simpson (2017) and Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson (2014), Robinson contends that non-Indigenous listeners must restrain the impulse for clear explanation and acknowledge unfamiliarity: “Critical listening positionality ... understands that in entering Indigenous sound territories as guests, those who are not members of the Indigenous community from which these legal orders derive may always be unable to hear these specific assertions of Indigenous sovereignty” (p.53).

A particularly compelling aspect of *Hungry Listening* is its concern with the institutional aspects of Indigenous art and musical performance. Many of the works Robinson discusses – from Jordan Wilson (Musqueam) and Sue Rowley’s “*čəsnaʔəm, the city before the city*” (p.69-70) to Raven Chacon’s (Diné) “Report” (p.110-112) – reflexively engage with the purported confines of the acceptable (e.g. hegemonic) rules for creative expression. Investigating such spaces allows Robinson to explore how “venues for performance structure hungry listening” (p.61) – in everything from sheet music to the art gallery’s infamous “white cube” layout.

Robinson, a co-curator of the longstanding Indigenous art exhibition “Soundings”, finds that it is essential to recognize “spaces of visiting” as distinctive from settler cultures of display (e.g. galleries, museums), and as defined by different forms of protocol and community preference (p.170). One of the book’s later chapters, “Feeling Reconciliation”, presses this dynamic across a broad swathe of settler civic spaces (courtrooms; performance stages; the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics), where “openness” to Indigenous voices belies an assimilative

logic. Through his exploration of “Beyond Eden”, a musical exploring the 1957 removal of totem poles from SGang Gwaay (Haida Gwaii), Robinson considers the ethical dilemmas of “inclusionary performance” and wonders at the self-satisfactions of liberal audiences brought to tears by a work about injustice in the context of a contested 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics. “The affective component of reconciliation engenders great hope”, Robinson notes, “but may do so as an end in itself” (p.231).

Another notable feature of Robinson’s book is its capaciousness. Interspersed among the chapters are “event scores” – poetic passages both prescriptive and exploratory, and which concretize some of the book’s central concerns around representation, protocol, and systems of exchange. The book is laden with concepts – “sovereign listening”, “song cleansing” – which will be of keen interest to geographers working at the intersection of representation, media, and social difference. All of this affirms Robinson’s ethical impulse to offer with *Hungry Listening* “an act of gathering, of ... acknowledging Indigenous voices and bodies, rather than acting as a container of Indigenous content” (p.25). Returning to Hearst, I would have been curious to see him turn his musical ear to extractivism’s contemporary socio-technics – the seismic profiling sounds and machine listening tools that draw minerals from Indigenous territories, with considerable impact on the songs of whales and the imputed composition of the earth. But this is just one of a multitude of directions work building on Robinson’s might wish to venture.

Despite the many caveats it places on the exchange of sounds across Indigenous and settler cultures, *Hungry Listening* is a constitutively generous work. It does not seek to diminish in any way the many achievements Indigenous performers have had in “The Arts” over the last decade – in Canada or elsewhere. But to call a listening act “generous”, this book advises, it is necessary to first pause, and wonder at the relation not only “to whom”, but also “where”, “when”, and “with what purpose”. For Robinson, shifting contexts of inclusion and exclusion are the necessary bases for more ethically attuned and ultimately decolonial listening acts. And while needed, collaboration between Indigenous and settler performers is not always possible

(relatedly, *Hungry Listening* has an entire chapter presented solely for Indigenous readers; as such, it is not covered here). But the book's "Conclusion", a dialogue held between Robinson and two musicologists (Deborah Wong and Ellen Waterman), ends on an inviting note. In stark contrast to "hungry listening", the dialogue trades across moments of vulnerability and fellowship; with each respected scholar wondering at the questions Robinson poses and considering their colleague's words for guidance. If moves towards "perceptual restriction" (p.258) are necessary for moves toward "decolonial listening" (p. 181), they do not forestall the capacity, or the need, to locate generative openings.

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