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# Listening Otherwise: Relationalities of the Othered

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Article abstract

In this forum piece, I explore the potential of listening as a performative act by focusing on the experiences and skills essential to the practice of DJing. I find the field of remix studies a fruitful arena to expand and explore the possibilities of music studies beyond the silos of contemporary musical analysis and scholarship.

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## Listening Otherwise: Relationalities of the Othered

Mark V. Campbell

Listening is one of the directions in which I find practice-based research offering some stimulating scholarly directions; this has me both excited and cautious. The recent collection of essays *Remixing Music Studies: Essays in Honour of Nicholas Cook* (Aguilar et al. 2020) is an interesting intervention, bringing a concept from popular music (the remix) into conversation with fields such as musicology. As the title of this book makes clear, its essays all engage with the scholarly works and legacy of Nicholas Cook; unfortunately, it is not at all engaged with remix studies. The editors state their desire to “attempt to address all musics on an equal basis, without splitting ourselves in advance into subgroups of ‘musicologists,’ ‘theorists’ and ‘ethnomusicologists’” (i). The use of Laudan Nooshin’s term *music studies* in the title of the book signals the possibility of a less divisive scholarly practice of studying music (Nooshin 2008). As a practising DJ, and as a scholar within the field of remix studies, I find the desire to break down the rigid subgroups and their active policing of boundaries a welcome breath of fresh air. Although the citing of remix studies scholars is sparse in *Remixing Music Studies* and there is an absence of some of the key thinkers in the field, such as Eduardo Navas or Owen Gallagher, I remain hopeful that the desire to break down disciplinary rigidities leads to a robust engagement with the field of remix studies. My hope is practice-based research can contribute to this much-needed effort.

From where I am positioned in the Global North, as a child of the AfroCaribbean diaspora, much of the quibbling within music fields has done little to stimulate or attract new scholars and ideas to the urgent issues of our disciplines, nor to address the multiple crises of our contemporary moment. Areas of interest in my research trajectory are remix music cultures and hip-hop studies, but my overall commitment is to the field of Black studies. This means my ideas and concerns are always intimately tied to justice, antiracism, and the flourishing of Black life. When practice-based research yields nothing generalizable, as is sometimes the charge, the desire for generalizable knowledge should be under the same scrutiny as the work of practice-based scholarship. In this short piece, I locate myself to both signal the communities to whom I am accountable and to make unequivocally clear my rejection of the continual valorization of neutrality littered across academic disciplines.

The exciting work of Dylan Robinson (2020), Georgina Born (2010), and John Rink (2017) stimulates my desire to explore practices of listening, both in preceding creation, but also in audience consumption of sample-based hip-hop. For DJs, a significant portion of our creative practice is listening, both otherwise and relationally. This means listening to music to select for an audience, listening to a track’s tempo in order to mix songs and, in the realm of music production, also listening to music to sample. Listening otherwise is a practice of imagining an alternative sonic representation, an envisioning of how a track might be remixed or sampled. Such an act of listening is part of the sonic, as a “constellation of acts,” also involving critical listening, an act that can decolonize our listening habits, as Robinson (2020) urges. My excitement is piqued when we begin to spend time exploring the various ways acts of listening diverge from the seemingly natural and

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linear way we are trained to listen in conservatory settings. DJ cultures, including the act of remixing, exemplify a kind of listening that is more than just “otherwise,” but is also relational, particularly during live performances. In a move that might interest reception studies scholars, DJs always remain attuned to live audience feedback, which in turn influences the textures, shape, and duration of songs, mixes, and remixes. The concerns of those interested in relational musicology then can easily see the importance of the social as an intrinsic participant in the performative possibilities of DJs.

An effective remix captures nostalgia, balances the new with the old, and commits itself to sonic innovation in relation with an audience. The kinds of relational musicological practices called for by Nicholas Cook (2013) and Georgina Born (2010) appear plausible paths for beginning to bridge the vast valley between fields in music studies, and especially the embracing of remix studies. DJ mixes, especially the practice of remixing, require a kind of contrapuntal listening that is always attuned to audience and musical genre. Dancing audiences burst forth with whistles of appreciation, soul claps double timed to the DJ’s beat and, in some scenarios, lighters flickering and hands slapping walls. These activities of appreciation are listened to and observed by the DJ as a kind of participant observation while in the midst of a performance. The listening practice of the DJ then exists in a set of plural relations, intimately intertwined within one moment of time and space with the live audience. This is a sociality that cannot be separated from the playing of the music, the DJ’s own selectivity, and their mixing techniques. A move toward understanding the performative strategies of remixers and DJs helps us move past a desire for musical meaning and toward a deciphering of what music does (Wynter 1992). The interiority and intimacy of the DJ’s own listening practice, laid bare for audiences to enjoy, is an exciting direction for practice-based research to explore. In fact, there is a pre-performance act of listening, when selecting which tracks to play, that can nicely contrast to the improvisatory and relational aspects of live performance.

If we extend these concerns of listening otherwise, both relationally and contrapuntally, to the hip-hop producer, whose disregard for copyright laws at times parallels the remixer, the practice of sampling is a potentially ripe arena to gather insights about listening as a practice. Since the landmark 1991 legal case of *Grand Upright Music vs. Warner Brothers Music*, in which hip-hop artist Biz Markie’s sample-heavy album lost its case for the creative use of music by Gilbert O’Sullivan, sampling has experienced increased levels of scrutiny and prohibitive levels of licensing fees. Prior to 1991, few music scholars, not even those in popular music studies, were interested in how producers such as the Bomb Squad or Marley Marl listened to the music they sampled. A practice-based research inquiry opens up the sociological, musicological, and ethnomusicological imagination to hip-hop’s subcultural music creation practices. Works such as Anthony Kwame Harrison’s “What Happens in the Cabin. . .? An Arts-Based Autoethnography of Underground Hip Hop Song Making” (2014) are promising avenues by which to advance a practice-based research discussion in hip-hop studies.

In John Rink’s 2020 keynote address at the Helsinki Music Centre, “Between Practice and Theory: Performance Studies and/as Artistic Research,” what became clear to me is that many of my existing concerns around the interiority of Afrosonic life and the indivisibility of researcher and performer are potentially in conversation with those outside of Black studies. Rink argues for an “equality, diversity and inclusivity agenda within performance studies,” which if not reproducing the pitfalls of the diversity, equity and inclusion industry, might provide interesting pathways beyond the rigid disciplinary boundaries and the policing of music fields (2020). If indeed a desire for the artists’ own intimacy with their creation process can fuel new research questions, reconsider discourses, or

interrupt colonially inherited and harmful ideas, then the possibilities to find ethical and justice focused research trajectories in music studies appears promising. With the human at the centre, the human in all of its multiple formations, beyond “Western Man,” practice-based research offers a sustainable pathway to continue to keep the human and human agency at the centre of our scholarly efforts. With a focus on introspection, reflection, and interiority, one can imagine a future of robust, inclusive, and impactful studies of music.

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