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# Problematizing Sound Methods Through Music Research-Creation: Oblique Curiosities

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## Abstract

In this article, we take up *feminist new materialist* thought in relation to our music research-creation practice to problematize the white, en/abled, cis-masculine, and Euro-Western methodological orientation often inherited with sound methods. We think with our music research-creation practice to activate a feminist new materialist *politics of approach*, unsettling sound studies' inheritances that seek to *separate*, *essentialize*, *naturalize/neutralize*, *capture*, *decontextualize*, and *re-present*. We unsettle these inheritances with six propositions: *imbricate*, *stratify*, *provoke*, *inject*, *contextualize*, and *more-than-represent*. These propositions, and this article's uptake of research-creation, hold implications for scholars interested in critically enacting sound studies research as well as qualitative and post qualitative research in general.

## Keywords

research-creation, arts-based methods, feminist new materialisms, critical theory, methods in qualitative inquiry, performance-based methods

## Introduction

We are *Oblique Curiosities*: a glitch-folk/electronica music duo. As practicing composers, instrumentalists, producers, and academics, we think through theory, method, and art as *research-creation*. In this article, we take up *feminist new materialisms* in relation to our research-creation practice to problematize the white, en/abled, cis-masculine, and Euro-Western methodological orientation often inherited with sound methods. We think through and with our music research-creation practice to activate a feminist new materialist *politics of approach*, unsettling the inheritances of sound studies that seek to *separate*, *essentialize*, *naturalize/neutralize*, *capture*, *decontextualize*, and *re-present* sound. We formulate this politics of approach into six propositions: *imbricate*, *stratify*, *provoke*, *inject*, *contextualize*, and *more-than-represent*. These propositions, and this article's uptake of research-creation, hold implications for scholars interested in critically enacting sound studies research, as well as for qualitative and post qualitative research more generally.

(e.g., Manning, 2016a; Springgay, 2011; Springgay & Zaliwska, 2017; Tallbear, 2017), and multimedia, narrative, and textual registers (e.g., Dokumaci, 2018; Loveless, 2019; Truman, 2016a, 2016b). We have written on research-creation as a method(ology) elsewhere (Truman & Shannon, 2018) and so only briefly summarize it here. Research-creation is the doing of art as research and theory (Truman & Springgay, 2015) rather than the use of artistic methods to disseminate traditional research. Natalie Loveless (in Truman et al., 2019) has described “imbricated relationships between form and content” (p. 230) as central to research-creation. For Stephanie Springgay (in Truman et al., 2019), research-creation “is grounded not in a set of prescriptive criteria but ontological, epistemological, ethical and political attunements to creating a different world” (p. 227). We have previously described research-creation as:

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## Problematizing Sound Methods Through Research-Creation

Research-creation has been well-theorized through visual (e.g., Leduc, 2016; Myers, 2017), performative and gestural

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mov[ing] away from approaches to qualitative research that assume data can be collected, extracted [and] represented, and towards an affective, emergent, relational and more-than-representational approach to doing-research. (Truman & Shannon, 2018, p. 62)

Arts-based approaches to conducting and/or disseminating research are proliferating in qualitative research's uptake of the ontological turn (which includes some of the theoretical resources introduced below as *feminist new materialisms*). This research is often framed as *post qualitative research* (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013; MacLure, 2013). Research-creation emphasizes rigorous transdisciplinarity. Springgay's (2008) notion of *living inquiry* is essential to the rigor of research-creation. To do transdisciplinary work, it is important to be rigorous in each discipline (Loveless, 2019): To do art, you need to be rigorous in your art. It would be unreasonable to suddenly decide to 'do parameciums,' spend a day playing with the centrifuge in a genetics laboratory and then expect to be 'doing biology.'<sup>1</sup> Similarly, taking up an unfamiliar art form in order to conduct or disseminate (post) qualitative research can undermine both artistic practice and research. As Springgay (in Truman et al., 2019) writes, "[t]he arts are typically undervalued in the academy. And yet, they are often appropriated by researchers in order to justify or exemplify 'alternative' practices of doing research" (p. 249). We are experienced artists in our own right and were so before we came to academia. We are not exceptional in that there are many other artists in academia and even more researchers who work with artists to enact artistic research. However, in theorizing our research-creation practice through methodological orientations that are shared with arts-based post qualitative research, we feel it is important to emphasize *artistic rigor* as determinative of both *research* and *theoretical* rigors.

### Feminist New Materialisms

Our theoretical orientation to sound-based methods (i.e., our methodology) is informed by feminist new materialisms, a group of theoretical orientations collated post hoc from feminist thinkers in a variety of intersecting materialist fields including feminist science and technology studies, environmental humanities, the life sciences, affect theories, gender and cultural studies, and, more recently, qualitative research methodologies (Truman, 2019). Drawing from Snaza et al. (2016) and Sarah E. Truman (2019), we conceptualize the feminist new materialisms through six interlocking aspects:

- expanding our definition of agency to include humans, nonhuman animals, nonanimal life, and nonliving matter (e.g., Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010; Chen, 2012; Keeling, 2019; Kim, 2015);
- understanding entities, including humans and human subjectivity, as materializing from an entanglement of bodies and forces (e.g., Barad, 2007);

- considering theories of affect (e.g., Ahmed, 2004; Chen, 2012; Ngai, 2007);
- drawing from theories in the physical and life sciences (Barad, 2007);
- decentering language and the linguistic representation of research findings (e.g., Barad, 2007; McCormack, 2008; Vannini, 2015);
- attending to the materiality of marginalization, including racializing, dis/abling, classing, gendering, and queer-phobic processes (e.g., Chen, 2012; Garland-Thomson, 2011; Mitchell et al., 2019; Weheliye, 2014).

An increasing body of social science research draws from feminist new materialisms. As theoretical orientations, feminist new materialisms—and the associated ontological and posthuman turns—carry implications for how research is enacted (i.e., methodology). Scholars interested in this theoretical turn have argued that sedimenting method and analysis before entering the field assumes an independent data that is “out there,” waiting for researchers to “discover” it, while also predetermining what the results of that inquiry could be (Manning, 2016b; Springgay & Truman, 2018a); such an approach to research is incommensurate with a methodological orientation that considers entities (including the researcher) as emerging in the research milieu. This incommensurability has charged qualitative researchers to reconsider what data do, how they are generated, and how they are represented (Weaver & Snaza, 2017). However, Springgay and Truman (2018a) suggest that this incommensurability need not be met with “different” or a doing away with of methods; rather, it is the orientation—what Springgay and Truman call the *(in)tension*—to method, including “the *logic of procedure and extraction*,” that should be undone (p. 204, italics in original).

Some applications of the ontological and new materialist turns in qualitative research have also been critiqued (before they even turned) for their erasure of race and investment in a pre-social and pre-prejudicial materiality that seeks to ignore patterns of marginalization (Jackson, 2013, 2015; Weheliye, 2014) and erase the already-erased (King, 2017, 2019). We follow others (Colebrook, 2014; King, 2017, 2019) in arguing that turning to the more-than-human should not manifest as turning *away* from marginalizing processes of racism, ableism, misogyny, and queer- and transphobia but rather as the decentering of the capitalist-era ‘human,’ or what Sylvia Wynter (2003) calls “the overrepresented modality of being human” (p. 317). As such, we follow many others in suggesting that scholarship that draws from feminist new materialisms must attend to intersectional feminisms or else risk recentering white, en/abled, cis-masculinity (Åsberg et al., 2015; Gerrard et al., 2017; Jackson, 2015; Snaza et al., 2016; Springgay & Truman, 2018b, 2019; Thompson, 2017b; Truman, 2019).

### Sound Studies

Recent years have seen a rapid proliferation of qualitative research that employs sound-based methods. This scholarship has made multiple contributions through its disruption of Euro-

Western ocular centrism (e.g., Gershon, 2017; Moten, 2003, 2018; Pickens, 2019; Weheliye, 2005). Concomitantly, this has contributed to the legitimizing of sensory ways of knowing (e.g., Feld, 1996; Pink, 2009) as well as politicizing the ‘wrong side’ of epistemological binaries (Steingo & Sykes, 2019).

Long-standing critical uptake of sound has theorized processes of sonic marginalization along lines of race (e.g., Douglass, 1845/2004; Eidsheim, 2011, 2019; Hill, 2013; Stoeber, 2016), gender (e.g., Thompson, 2016), and (dis)ability (Friedner & Helmreich, 2012; Friedner & Tausig, 2019; Kafer, 2013). More recently, sound scholars have drawn from the theoretical possibilities of the feminist new materialisms (e.g., Thompson, 2017b). Concomitantly, a broader interest in the ontological turn has explored sound as affective (e.g., Clough, 2013; Gallagher, 2016; Gershon, 2013; Henriques, 2010; Thompson, 2017a; Thompson & Biddle, 2013); more-than- (e.g., Truman & Shannon, 2018) or nonrepresentational (e.g., Gallagher & Prior, 2014); in excess of, or more-than-, human (e.g., Scrimshaw, 2013); and as ontological vibration (e.g., Gershon, 2017; Goodman, 2010).

In this article, we will contend that there remains an uncritical methodological legacy too easily inherited with sound-based empirical methods. These *inheritances* rely on a logic of extraction, sapping the sonic of its unique analytical potential and reinscribing colonial and representational orientations to method. Scholarship that draws on these inheritances misses out on many of the analytical advantages afforded by sound, through reinscribing the oft-critiqued researcher–researched relations constitutive of the ocular Euro-Western philosophical method; in other words, such research *might as well be visual* for all the difference sound makes. We find that feminist new materialist methodologies productively problematize these inheritances, precisely because there is a broad *incompatibility* between the ocular-centric inheritances of sound-based methods and feminist new materialist methodologies.

We consider methodology here as a *politics of approach*. A politics of approach is the ethico-political perspective a methodology implies. Careful uptake of that methodology should bring that ethico-political perspective to bear as an orientation—or (in)tension—to method (Springgay & Truman, 2018a).

We wonder here what politics of approach the feminist new materialisms imply, not just in their feminism but in their *materialism*. The sonic inheritances we highlight are insidious. As we will come to argue, their approach to method seems self-evident in many sonic methods, in addition to manifesting as material features of phonographic technology. As such, it is easy to tumble into taking them up. And—because of their close interrelation—if you take up one of them, you take up all of them. Through our thinking and composing (i.e., researching-creating) as *Oblique Curiosities*, we have theorized six contingent and interlocking inheritances in sound methods, which we will spend the remainder of this section unpacking. These inheritances encourage the sonic researcher to:

1. *separate* the researcher from the researched sonic experience;
2. *essentialize* sound as something that preexisted the research encounter;
3. *naturalize/neutralize* the sonic environment;
4. *capture* the most pristine possible rendition of the sonic experience;
5. *decontextualize* sound from other, non-sonic features of the sonic experience; and
6. *re-present* the sonic experience.

While specifically framing sound method(ology) with these inheritances, we consider them equally relevant to some applications of post qualitative research. In other words, while our primary concern in this article is with sound methods’ methodological inheritances, other researchers may find that these same inheritances haunt (some) post qualitative uptakes of the *feminist* new materialisms, as unpacked above.

*Separate*. Sound method can situate the researcher as separate to the recorded soundscape. While noted sound studies scholar Jonathan Sterne (2003) posits that “hearing is a sense that immerses us in the world, while vision removes us from it” (p. 15), many approaches to recording sound hold the sonic world “at a distance” from the researcher. In such approaches, the recordist-researcher uses a microphone to *capture* whatever sound can be found in a location. The auditory presence of the researcher in these recordings is associated with the failure of the researcher to pristinely *capture* and *represent* an already *essentialized* sound. As such the recordist-researcher is notably silent (Gallagher, 2015; Wright, 2017).

Thinking with the feminist new materialisms would understand the sonic milieu as an ever-expanding reverberation of bodies-affecting-bodies (Evens, 2005); “the sound of the body is the sound of the other but it is also the sound of the same” (Kapchan, 2015, p. 33), across which the “agency” of the sound is distributed (Ceraso, 2018). We suggest that this inextricable entanglement of researcher-and-researched, foundational to new materialist thought, is not compatible with approaches to sound that *silence* the researcher. For instance, Karen Barad’s (2007) *agential realism* describes the ‘intra-action’ of multiple parts of an entangled whole rather than the interaction of separate, bounded individual researchers and research subjects. Similarly, theories of affect—in which each actant is constantly, simultaneously affecting and being affected (Lara et al., 2017; Massumi, 2015)—or Rosi Braidotti’s (2013) ‘web of interrelations’—which “mark the contemporary subjects’ relationship to their multiple ecologies” (p.98)—describe the impossibility of a separately constituted researcher or researched. In other words, then, a feminist new materialist approach to sound emphasizes the nonvisual, inseparable co-constitution of researcher and researched.

*Essentialize*. As described in the previous section, feminist new materialisms emphasize the emergent entanglement of researcher-and-researched, with neither preexisting the

research encounter as a discrete entity (Manning, 2016b; Massumi, 2002). This *separation* of the recordist-researcher from the recorded soundscape *essentializes* sound. We understand this essentialism as inscribing a sound with distinct properties that preexist the research encounter. We have already problematized this essentialism for materially *separating* researcher from researched. Here, we discuss its concomitant *politics of approach*: specifically, its colonial, “anthological” (Vazquez, 2013) understanding of sound, and its aural inscription of inessential traits of race and gender.

Writing specifically on voice, Nina Sun Eidsheim (2019) argues that there is no essential, knowable quality to the ‘thick event’ of sound before its reception; rather, sound is a “vibrational practice, a practice that is materially dependent and contingent” (loc. 870). For Samantha Pinto (2016), there is a colonial masculinism to sound method that assumes the sonic field as discrete and therefore master-able. In emphasizing music, Pinto instead takes up Alexandra T. Vazquez’s (2013) call to “listen in detail” to a more limited range of sounds; this is in opposition to what Vazquez dubs the colonial “anthological impulse” (p. 59), which seeks to extract and collect as much of the field as possible. We might also suggest that it is the oft-critiqued citational legacy of sound studies—frequently and uncritically drawing from largely white, male and en/abled theorists (Ceraso, 2018; Stadler, 2015; Stoever, 2016) despite the long engagement with sonority in the work of BIPOC<sup>2</sup> and female<sup>3</sup> scholars—that informs this brand of phonographic flaneurism (Lashua, 2006), or what Sterne (2015) calls sound studies’ “creeping normalism” (p. 73).

The essentializing of sound is unmaterialist because it ignores the ways in which sound and listener are always already co-constitutive. For scholars such as Eidsheim (2011, 2019), Jennifer Lynn Stoever (2016), Regina Bradley (2014), and Marie Thompson (2016), this essentializing is also unfeminist; understanding sound as essential facilitates the extension of inessential racializing—and gendering—processes from the skin and onto the voice; in other words, blackness or femininity can be heard as sounding ‘like’ one voice or set of sounds and ‘unlike’ another. Despite not being a new argument—Franz Boas (1889, cited in Sterne, 2015, p. 72) suggested that European anthropologists could not understand *how* to hear Indigenous languages 130 years ago—essentialism remains a persistent feature of sonic inquiry. In this way, the politics of approach drawing on the feminist new materialisms should seek to unsettle rather than *naturalize/neutralize* this understanding.

**Naturalize/neutralize.** Arguments have long reverberated within sound studies over the neutrality, or otherwise, of sound and its reception (e.g., Chandola, 2012). This reverberation is amplified within the move to decenter the anthropocentric listening subject in new materialism-informed sound scholarship (Thompson, 2017b).

The flattening of voice and music into a wider, anthological, neutral sonic is distinctly unfeminist due to the ways in which it ignores the sonic backgrounding and foregrounding of

populations (Hill, 2013; Tchumkam, 2019). For Shannon (2019), “turning the attention of the ear (or the microphone) away from music and voice, and towards the sonic, relies on a universalist assumption that white aurality is capable of hearing whatever a neutral sonic might sound like” (p. 98); in other words, to *essentialize* the sonic is to *naturalize/neutralize* it as always objective and nonpolitical. Yet for Allie Martin (2019), subjectivity matters to sound method, as no microphone positioning could *ever* be neutral; she situates soundwalking as a Black feminist method specifically because of the ways in which subjectivity determines sound method. Thus, a claim to sonic neutrality is a deliberate elision of the material manifestation of subjectivity in sound method. Relatedly, then—as Thompson (2017b) argues specifically of sound studies, and as others have argued more broadly (Truman, 2019)—the feminist new materialist move to decenter the human can recenter the natural/neutrality of the white, en/abled, cis-masculine auditioning human: There is nothing neutral about a neutral sonic.

For Stoever (2016), whiteness is notorious for assuming its own neutrality, while Poppy de Souza (2018) describes the willful dis-capacity of “white ears” to attend to the “acoustic violence of racism” (p. 464); hearing through the listening ear is assumed to be a neutral process, naturalizing the racializing and gendering assemblage as *essential* features of the racialized body (Weheliye, 2014). Similarly, Vazquez’s (2013) “anthological impulse” relies on the capacitation of the (white, male) sound studies scholar, not just to master and collect (i.e., colonize) the entire sonic field but to do so from a neutral, objective perspective. We would further suggest that this flattening ignores the ways in which white non-neutrality and colonialism is already a material feature of place, or what Cam Scott (2018) critiques as the assumed “silence, vacancy, or isolation” that precedes colonial involvement (para. 13). A feminist new material politics of approach would take up the ways in which oppression is a material feature of both the sonic field and the phonographic apparatus; in other words, a move to de-anthropocentrize sonic inquiry should not justify ignoring the non-neutrality of anthropocentric listening.

**Capture.** *Essentializing* sound drives a technological fetishism in some sound studies scholarship, whereby the essentialized sound could be *captured* and preserved if only the microphone was sophisticated enough. For Julian Henriques (2011), sound is a “transitory event in time, rather than an often more permanent mark on a visual surface” (loc. 200). Alexander Weheliye (2005) describes phonographic practices as an attempt to make a sounding outlast the sounder. Some phonographic practices, then, seek to arrest the sonorous fleeting event so as to capture it; the recordist imperiously (Drever, 1999; Wright, 2017) enters the field intent on quelling motion and capturing sound in fulfilling the “anthological impulse” (Vazquez, 2013). This intention can lead the sound-based researcher to a fetishistic interest in phonographic fidelity (Drever, 2002; Gallagher & Prior, 2014): The more competent the microphone, the more capable it is believed to successfully—anthologically—capture the *essentialized* sonic ‘out there’ even as it tries to unfaithfully

uncapture the *separated* recordist. This presents two impossibilities. First, nothing is actually captured: The sound is still out there, but a trace has been taken. The other is that what is “captured” (or traced) is still contingent: As Joshua Glasgow (2007) writes, “Transparency is *impossible*, irrespective of technological achievement” (p. 163, italics in original). This technological emphasis relies on a globally Northern perspective (Steingo & Sykes, 2019), where such technological provision is, for the moment at least, more readily available.

The coal is not the mountain. In failing to capture the milieu in its entirety, it is changing the milieu; this is, as Loveless (2019) summarizes, not a failure that “adequate perspective—the capacity to somehow *see [or hear] better*—might correct” (p. 26) but rather the guaranteed outcome of extractive approaches to research (Springgay & Truman, 2018a). The politics of capturing the “pristine” as an ontological possibility relies on a *separation, essentialism, and neutralizing* of sound, the same extractive processes that envisage the *terra nullius*—or pristine landscape—that is available to be occupied, captured, and colonized (Scott, 2018). We will move on to suggest that this extractive capture conflates sonic experience with the reception of vibratory sound, *decontextualizing* it of the more-than-sonic features of sonority.

Phonographic technology, as with all research methods, develops within a material-semiotic framework: Particular orientations to method are material features of sound technology as deployed in sound studies. As argued above, we suggest that a *careful* engagement with the feminism and the materialism of the *feminist new materialisms* may predispose the researcher to a *politics of approach* (although we are not so naïve as to suggest at the impossibility of “removing politics”: Poor reading is always possible, and whiteness often finds a way). We consider a politics of approach here to suggest that the repetition of logics of sonic extraction is not only unfeminist and not particularly new, it’s also not materialist. Weheliye (2005) describes the ways in which Black music has driven the development of phonographic technology. When co-opted as a research method in the social sciences and humanities, however, this technology morphs into alignment with the inherited methodological framework that we are critiquing here. This then allows the reinscription of the inheritances we critique throughout this article. In other words, inherited orientations to method appear as natural-seeming features of the research tool.

**Decontextualize.** When sound is *essentialized* and then *captured* (or traced) with phonographic technology, it is *decontextualized*: stripped of the “more-than-sonic” properties that shape sonic experience. These features might include political context. For instance, Michael Quintero (2019) considers the Afro-Colombian practice of playing music at ear-splitting volumes as a “kind of counterrepertoire to spoken language” (loc. 516), “a stopgap measure” (loc. 3456) in the face of institutional violence directed toward a community “placed at the limits of speech” (loc. 3458). The counterrepertoire complicates the affects circulated by the music in ways that cannot be traced

phonographically. As *Oblique Curiosities*, we have elsewhere (Truman & Shannon, 2018) theorized the ways in which sound might coalesce with other environmental, social, and emotional factors: “*That which exceeds audition is constitutive of auditory experience*” (Steingo & Sykes, 2019, loc. 503, italics in original). Similarly, Monique Charles (2018) considers musical genre from multiple vantage points as musicological discourse analysis (MDA); through MDA, Charles suggests that genre is a ‘constellation’ of intersectional histories, narratives, and institutionally, technologically and sociopolitically mediated soundscapes.

The doubling of inaudibility that *neutralizes*, then, is further compounded by disregarding the more-than-sonic: “this inaudibility, which is beyond the capacity of even the most sophisticated phonographic technology to register in the soundscape, remains audible” (Shannon, 2019, p. 101).

**Re-present.** Marinos Koutsomichalis (2013) wonders how accurate *captured/decontextualized* phonographic research methods can be as *representational* artifacts when they cannot “preserve the original semantics and subliminal significances of someone’s encounter with an acoustic environment” (para. 11). As Owen Chapman (2015) posits, the reductionism of sound method “is not an essential quality of the practice or technology involved, but rather a question of disposition and attitude around the thing produced” (p. 11).

Yet the problematic and politics of representationalism—which situate the researcher as removed from what they have researched, and in many ways create the conditions of possibility for all of these inheritances—are commonplace in sound studies as well as qualitative research more broadly (e.g., MacLure, 2013). This problematic is also constitutive of centuries of white (mis)representations of marginalized populations. For instance, popular media portrayals of Indigenous sound, or what Dustin Tahmahkera (2017) critiques as the “*made-up*” stuff of non-Native imaginaries that all too often *makes up* the popular ‘sonic wallpaper’ of Indianness” (para. 8, italics in original).

## Summary

We began this section by embedding our own practice as *Oblique Curiosities* within research-creation. Through this practice, we have troubled how sound methods often rely on inherited orientations to method(ology), or what we call “inheritances”. These inheritances are frequently inspired by colonial legacies and a white, cis-masculine epistemological emphasis. We have problematized these inheritances with reference to feminist new materialisms, which we have defined in this article as de-privileging the human, attending to the relational and affective, engaging with the physical and life sciences, and decentering language and representation, while maintaining a feminist approach that attends to race, ability, gender, and class. We have elucidated six of these inheritances as (in)ten-sions to method that: *separate, essentialize, neutralize, capture, decontextualize, and re-present*.

Our research-creation practice, then, adopts feminist new materialism as a methodological orientation to sound-based methods in order to conduct research that eschews the *procedural* and *extractional*, produce research outputs that are *more-than-representational*, and to align our work with an anti-racist, anti-ableist, and anti-misogynist politics of approach. In the next section, we offer propositions formulated through our research-creation practice to explicate doing sound differently.

### Oblique Curiosities: Extreme Explications

(Don't separate) : Imbricate!  
 (Don't naturalize/neutralize) : Provoke!  
 (Don't capture) : Stratify!  
 (Don't extract) : Inject!  
 (Don't decontextualize) : Contextualize!  
 (Don't represent) : More-than-represent!

In this section, we think through the above propositions for unsettling the inheritances of sound method. We do so through our music research-creation practice as glitch-folk/electronica band *Oblique Curiosities*. We have played music together since 2011. However, we created the band during *Queer the Landscape*, a 100-km walking-composing project between Melrose, Scotland, and Lindisfarne, England, in the summer of 2015, during which we wrote songs as *more-than-representations* of the experience of undertaking a long walk in the English countryside. As *Oblique Curiosities*, we continue to research with the original walk and compositions as well as with the wider cultural milieu. Our practice is research-creation; it is creative practice for its own sake but is also qualitative research into the wider cultural milieu that we find ourselves in. We write lyrics, apply melodic, harmonic, and temporal structures, and arrange, program, record, and perform them in *Digital Performer*.<sup>4</sup>

Through conducting this project, we also found ourselves researching research-creation: As well as a method of creative practice and qualitative research, research-creation also researches method and methodology. Specifically, in this article, we find ourselves researching the methodology of sound studies and how the practice of a method (e.g., songwriting) *researches* that research method.

Here is a link to three of our songs. *Wouldn't That Be Sexy?* is from our walking-composing research project *Queer the Landscape*; *Alpha Centauri* and *Propel* are from our ongoing practice as *Oblique Curiosities* (our glitch-folk/electronica duo, which emerged through *Queer the Landscape*). You're welcome to listen to others. We don't expect these songs to be heard neutrally: They will, obviously, be heard differently by different listeners. That is part of the point (and value) of more-than-representationalism.

<https://soundcloud.com/oblique-curiousities/sets/ijqm>

Lyrics for each song are included through the link. We also include a written description for d/Deaf readers or readers with sensory processing differences.

### Extreme Explications

We conceptualize our practice in this context (i.e., an academic paper) as a set of *extreme explications*. We are *not* suggesting that all sound scholarship should be music research-creation, which relies on (in this milieu) our privilege: skills, time, and economic privilege, not to mention the cis-white privilege of being able to safely tumble about the countryside while composing. Rather, by stretching these propositions to their most extreme manifestation in music research-creation, we theorize how sound method inheritances might be unsettled. Other scholars and/or artists indirectly invoke these propositions in relation to sound research, in different registers and through different theorizations. A selection of this scholarship is referred to in illustrating each proposition.

#### (Don't Naturalize/Neutralize): Provoke!

Rather than repeating the sonic backgrounding of already inaudible populations, we hope to provoke the politics of who or what gets foregrounded. Our music composition practice provokes the wider social—racist, ableist, misogynist, queerphobic—milieu into the sonic field (where it always already was anyway).

Martin (2019) explores how the gentrification of Washington, DC, silences and displaces, having the effect of making the space “louder,” through the expansion of entertainment facilities, yet “quieter” through noise abatement policies that target Black bodyminds. She does so through phonographic field recordings, which must also contend with her own attempts to keep herself safe as a Black woman—an ‘expert listener’ to anti-Black racism (de Souza, 2018)—walking alone. Martin's work, while adopting some of the most commonplace sound methods, does so to provoke consideration of the ways in which sound is always (non-neutrally) generated in, and heard through, systems of oppression, white supremacy, and violence. After Springgay and Truman (2018a), Martin's (in)tension toward a well-worn method (i.e., sound walking) activates a politics of approach consistent with a feminist new materialist methodology.

Alternatively, other sound scholars provoke patterns of marginalization by unsettling them. Music collective *We Levitate* (Brown et al., 2018) celebrates Black girlhood. Through their music, they seek to make “Black girlhood differently than what systemic oppression calls for” (p. 396). Meanwhile, our own song *Alpha Centauri* seeks to provoke a different sonic futurity; We draw from the (re)surgence of anti-trans and queerphobic abuses in Brexit-era Britain to speculate on the audibility of a queer-affirmative galactic confederacy.

#### (Don't Capture): Inject!

Our song *Wouldn't That Be Sexy?* was composed during a long walk. While some of our songs include repurposed recordings from the walk, most (including *Wouldn't That Be Sexy?*) don't. Yet we don't think that *Wouldn't That Be Sexy?* sounds any less

like the countryside than a recording of bird songs and boot-crunches, no matter how good the microphone we used was. As we have argued, this is because we think you can never truly extract and capture what the countryside ‘sounds like.’

Sound designer and audio engineer Paola Cossermelli Messina’s (2019) phonographic walking project explores how the microphone’s elision of gender, race, and queerness *naturalizes/neutralizes* the performance of “sonic citizenship.” For Messina, a microphone is inadequate to the task of capturing these more-than-sonic features of sonority. She gives the example of a sudden encounter with CCTV cameras: Finding herself the subject of surveillance is “quite inconspicuous” on the soundwalk’s audio recording (para. 14). Messina’s commentary and choices as a recordist inject the lived experience of gender, race, and queerness and their “complication” through “fear, segregation, and vigilance” (para. 2), into the audio recording. The result is a collection of walks that map, but also optimistically seek to “bridge,” her uneven sonic citizenships.

### **(Don’t Essentialize): Stratify!**

Writing on d/Deaf music, Jeannette Jones (2016) asks: “If listening is more than what happens with the ears, what does it entail?” (p. 67). We consider the sonic ‘thick event’ of sound (Eidsheim, 2019) as strata: different registers of audibility and inaudibility layered on top of one another. Rather than seek to essentialize any one layer (specifically that which is capturable with a microphone) as ‘the’ sound, we stratify the thick event as multiple layers of sonic and more-than-sonic sonority. In stratifying—rather than essentializing—sonic experience, the songs sound like us doing a walk. They sound like us composing with the cultural milieu of Brexit, Boris, and Trump. They sound like us composing with “already-felts” (Manning, 2016b; Truman & Shannon, 2018): the baggage of ex-relationships, dog shit smells, creepy doilies, charred ferns, and our mutual obsession with *Doctor Who*. In other words, *these considerations all weighed heavily on our minds; we’re embedded in our own inheritance*.

Another example of stratification can be found in Michael Reiley McDermott’s (2019) sonic art-research project; *Echo-zoo* combines cryptozoology, field recording, sound design, and deep listening to “reimagine” the sounds of extinct species. Through the project, McDermott speculatively renders species that have been inaudible for centuries audible once more.

Artistic forms of sound research might seem uniquely suited to stratification as we have proposed here. Indeed, all of the propositions included here are typical features of music composition. However, other sound scholars attend to stratification in their research using nonartistic methods through their (in)tension to method: for instance, Martin’s (2019) phonographic walks, which *provoke* the multiple sonorities of capital-fueled displacement, aural racism, and anti-Black and misogynist violence as directed toward her (and which might be missed in an uptake of sonic method that aimed for *neutrality*).

Theorizing this process of stratification, we found ourselves researching research-creation. Specifically, the practice of method researches that method: In this case, songwriting researches songwriting but equally the practice of conducting, for instance, field recordings can also be research into that method. By doing this research, we found out that songwriting draws from different strata, such as those suggested above. Strata also include skills, into which other strata are slotted: *Which harmonic sequence does this affective intensity imply? Which instruments? Which effects plug-ins?*

### **(Don’t Decontextualize): Contextualize!**

Stratification opens up sonic experience as the ‘thick event.’ Incorporating multiple strata into an audio recording *contextualizes* the sound through making audible more of the more-than-sonic features of sonic experience. Our song *Wouldn’t That Be Sexy* incorporates repetition, screams, and a Theremin to contextualize our walk across the north of England.

Our practice is an extreme explication, in which context ‘takes over’; the affective and inaudible dominate the recording, at the expense of the audible. However, other scholars have combined sound-based methods that accentuate context with traditional phonographic practices. For instance, Brett D. Lashua (2006) conducted phonographic walks with Indigenous Canadian teenagers: Their audio recordings of space are contextualized by including rapped lyrics, which recount each participant’s experiences of racism and homelessness. Like Messina’s (2019) injections of sonic citizenships, these contextualizations undo elisions on the audio recordings by making audible what otherwise could not have been conveyed.

### **(Don’t Represent): More-Than-Represent!**

Intending to represent the sounds of space can neglect the *nonrepresentational* properties of sound recording (Gallagher & Prior, 2014). For Phillip Vannini (2015), the “non-representational answer to the crisis of representation lies in a variety of research styles and techniques that do not concern themselves so much with representing life-worlds as with issuing forth novel reverberations” (p. 12). In other words, non-representational properties might initiate an affective response in the listener (McCormack, 2008). In this way, the output of our music research-creation project is *more-than-representational*: Each song is a representation of something but also attends to how it recirculates—“issues forth”—the affective intensities registered at the time of its composition. More-than-representation unfolds along a queer temporal contour: Each more-than-representational artifact is a “pressing together of ever-multiplying spatial, temporal, and affective emplacements that could never have touched, but are here relived and re-represented in a queering of chronological time” (Truman & Shannon, 2018, p. 64). It is “No deliverable. All process” (Massumi, 2015, p. 73). As more-than-representational artifacts, the songs that make up our project *Queer the Landscape* not only demonstrate the dark, creepy, oozy, piercing, bizarre-ity of

walking a great distance but also (re)circulate that bizarre-ity to be (re)experienced by the audience, as well as feeding further thought. Similarly, our continued practice as *Oblique Curiosities*, such as the song *Propel*, is a continued more-than-representational thinking with the (not)product from *Queer the Landscape*.

In *The Space Project*, Dr. View (DJ View, 2018; Johnson, 2019) composes Hip Hop with African American male students in historically white universities. Dr. View cocreates what might be thought of as more-than representational artifacts as a mode of resistance to anti-Blackness. While the lyrics in the music are “about” this, and the artistic intent in producing the music is to represent this, each track also more-than-represents in that it provokes an embodied response in the listener: for instance, the repetition of “I said I can do it myself, I don’t need your help” on *I Can Do it Myself*, or the gnarly exuberance of the lead on *Headphones & Hoodies*.

### **(Don’t Separate): Imbricate!**

Rather than conspicuously inaudible, we are flamboyantly audible in each of our songs: We are part of the soundscape. This proposition illustrates (music) research-creation’s researching of (sound) method: In this case: “How do you make the researcher audible without doing ‘sonic selfies’?”

Singing songs is (almost) a comical sidestep of this inheritance, given that it renders the researcher hyper-audible in the audio recordings. Our affective imbrication in our recordings is also demonstrated through our privilege: first as white, cis-gendered, en/abled wealthy Europeans but secondly in drawing from our relevant training and experience in arts practice.

Yet other sound scholars have theorized how they are imbricated in their own phonographic practices. Chapman (2015) suggests that the auditory presence of the recordist-researcher is apparent in their choices, such as where to walk. Similarly, Chapman describes the choices made in producing a final audio mix (which reduces however many hours of recording into a manageable piece of listening), as well as what gets centered in this. Even more transparently, Hildegard Westerkamp narrates the details of the effects units she applies to beach sounds in her audio composition, *Kits Beach Soundwalk* (1989), accentuating the editorial process. Again, Martin (2019) notes that even her “neutral” situation of a fixed-position “boom” microphone is still non-neutral, in that she decided where to situate it, and even that she *should* situate it.

### **Coda-Conclusion: The Anti-Inheritance Filter**

Our music research-creation is by no means unproblematic or unproblematicizable. We hope our work has served as an extreme explication of one way of troubling sound studies’ inheritances. We are *not* suggesting that all sound studies’ projects should become music research-creation projects. Nor are we breaking-up with other types of sound-based research. Rather, our work is one example of how sound studies might unsettle the white masculinist epistemological emphasis that is

often assumed of sonic method, albeit an example that takes these concepts to an extreme formation.

We also consider the importance of citational practices in attending to the “how” of listening to marginalized voices: That is, we cite them. In order to cite them, scholars must also ensure to *read* them. In other words, the “how” of listening has always been neglected (and not just within sound studies) because white masculinist scholarship often fails to listen/read outside of itself.

At the start, we positioned this article as carrying implications for critical sound studies, qualitative and post qualitative research, and research more broadly. Additionally, we have suggested that a politics of approach predisposes scholarship that draws from feminist new materialisms to particular unsettlingings of method. The following *anti-inheritance filter* might help you to check if your own scholarship is troubling methodological inheritances.

1. Do you IMBRICATE rather than separate? Are you ‘audible’ in your field recordings? Do they sound kind of like you? Is your sound recording very much only possible because *you* (and not us) went to that space? If yes, go to 2! If no, go to 7.
2. Do you PROVOKE rather than naturalize/neutralize? Are you complicating (rather than flattening) identity? Do you center music and ‘voice’ (in its widest possible conception)? If yes, go to 3! If no, go to 7.
3. Do you INJECT rather than capture? Are you attending to more than what the microphone can trace? If yes, go to 4! If no, go to 7.
4. Do you STRATIFY rather than essentialize? Does your recording think-with the ‘thick event’ of sound? Do you sonify the sonic *and* more-than-sonic layers of sonority? If yes, go to 5! If no, go to 7.
5. Do you CONTEXTUALIZE rather than decontextualize? Do the oozing creepinesses and lingering dog shit smells you may have encountered ring through your recording? If yes, go to 6! If no, go to 7.
6. Do you MORE-THAN-REPRESENT rather than represent? Trick question (kind of)! You are definitely circulating something. Are your recordings as-good-a representation as they are a more-than-representation? If yes, go to 8! If no, go to 7.
7. Your project is probably re-inscribing the inheritances of sound studies. Try again! Don’t give up!
8. Your project is *still* probably reinscribing the inheritances of sound studies (as we are), but it might also be productively problematizing them (as we hope we are).

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## Notes

1. Clearly, we don't know anything about parameciums, centrifuges, or biology: Good thing we're sticking to songs!
2. Black, Indigenous, and People of Color: See Shannon's (2019) "What could be feminist about sound studies?" for an overview of some of this literature.
3. See Gershon's (in press) "Hear Me Roar" for a detailed overview.
4. Digital Performer is a digital audio workstation and MIDI sequencer.

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