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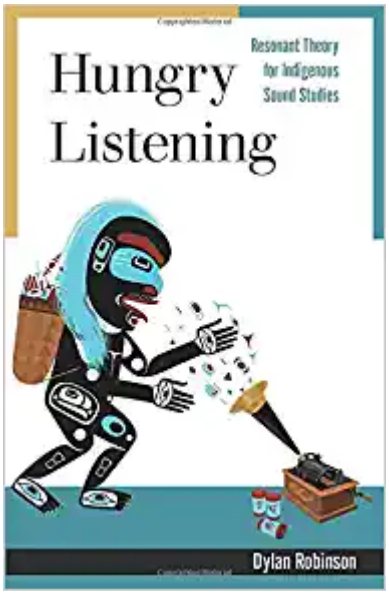
Listening for Worlds Without Me: A Book Review of *Hungry Listening*: *Resonant Theory for Indigenous Studies*

Review by Nathan Snaza

Dylan Robinson. *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Studies*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020.



The cover is a painting by Bracken Hanuse Corlett (Wuikinuxv/Klahoose/Kwakwaka'wakw) called "Atsi, gathering songs to return to our families." A figure wearing a backpack is gathering sounds as they emerge from a gramophone, placing them in the backpack to return them after they were stolen and recorded by "hungry listeners."

"Hungry listening" is, for Dylan Robinson, an English translation of two Halq'eméylem words: "shxwelítemelh" (an adjective indicating settler or white) and "xwélalà:m" (listening). This names "settler forms of perception," a way of listening as a settler that is unable to listen to Indigenous sounds, except through processes of violent inclusion that require Indigenous sound to play by the rules—rhythmic, timbral, performative, aesthetic—of settler music and its logics. I come to Robinson's *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* as a white settler in the midst of writing a book about feminist, queer, abolitionist, and decolonial esoteric practices: more-than-human knowledgings where knowing and care are co-constitutive, where specific modes of belonging and knowing compose limits. Esoteric knowledges sustain more-than-human collectivities precisely by not being universal or universally available (a hallmark of colonialist Enlightenment knowledge). As part of this project, I am thinking about the music of Maori and Tsalagi/Black doom metal band: Divide and Dissolve, and their decolonization of doom metal in relation to the specificity of place (via the sonic resonances of particular spaces) and time (where the slowness of doom, and the jazz-inflected horn performances cutting across it, unfold beyond settler time (Rifkin 2017)). I'm interested in the capacities of their slow, droning metal to enable listeners to feel sound as a material phenomenon implicated in settler orientations and also exceeding it, pointing toward a temporal and spatial politics of listening as decolonial disorientation. As the poem spoken by Minori Sanchiz-Fung on their song "Did You Have Something to Do with It" puts it: "this too is our time / It is waiting on us to decide / What it is that we will honour / While we are alive" (Divide and Dissolve 2021a, n.p.). Divide and Dissolve modulate doom metal as Man's ruin.[1] Or, in the words they used on an Instagram post: "This album is a prayer that land be given back to Indigenous people and that future

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generations no longer experience the atrocities and fervent violence that colonization continues to bring forth" (Divide and Dissolve 2021b, n.p.).

In this context, the thing about *Hungry Listening* that intrigued and excited me the most was Robinson's inclusion in the introduction of a section "written exclusively for Indigenous readers" (2020, 25). There is here an offering not for inclusion, but precisely for taking a step back, tuning out. The settler tuning-out is the precondition for Indigenous tuning-in, for a particular kind of gathering or visiting (Robinson 2020, 170–179) among Indigenous people as "political work" (177). At stake here is a specific kind of refusal—one Robinson elaborates as a "structural refusal" that can accompany "content refusal" as theorized by Glen Sean Coulthard (2014), Audra Simpson (2014), and Leanne Simpson (2017) stating: "forms of structural refusal counteract the epistemic violence of normative writing by exercising a range of interventions including forms of Indigenous resurgence (oratory, language, syntactical rhythm) and non-Indigenous aesthetic strategies (Brechtian *verfremdungseffekt*, the *détournements* of the Situationalist International)" (Robinson 2020, 23). Robinson uses the word "blockade" (following Coulthard 2014) for these interventions. The book is written not just about what Robinson calls "hungry listening," but *as an affective intervention* to block it, to create an "impasse" for it, to slow it down, to disperse its accumulative, extractive force in different space-times (2020, 257).

Theorizing these affective interventions involves an extended consideration of "critical listening positionality" (Robinson 2020, 10–11): "listening takes place as a haptic and proprioceptive encounter with affectively experience asymmetries of power" (11). Settlers, arrivants/immigrants, and Indigenous people do not listen in the same ways, or have the same affective experiences of the "the same" text. Robinson's analysis of the "O Siem" performance as part of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission is paradigmatic here. After eight hours of "testimony from survivors and intergenerational survivors" of residential schools, singers and settlers expressed belief that "to sing such a message ["we're all the same"] was enough to make it better" (Robinson 2020, 227). For Indigenous listeners like Robinson, the song "felt not merely inappropriate but like an act of benevolent violence," a violence that occurs precisely through the staging of sameness as a phenomenon that can be articulated through affective, aesthetic performance on settler terms (2020, 228).

Offering a more precise, intersectional vocabulary for listening as a political, positioned, process, *Hungry Listening* unfurls richly textured accounts of encounters between Canadian classical (and/or art) musics and Indigenous musics. These range from analyses of ethnographic recordings of tribal songs, new compositions that draw on or outright incorporate Indigenous songs, and collaborations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous composers, musicians, and dancers. At stake throughout is a kind of aural/listening discordance, where settler listening perceives Indigenous sound and performance as available not just for its possessive, acquisitive hungry listening, but always confirming a kind of *feeling* of reconciliation (Robinson 2020, 203). While Robinson is highly attentive to the capacity of music—especially in specific contexts where protocol allows the performance of sonic Indigenous sovereignties—for decolonization as worldbuilding, he is also deeply skeptical of how such affective reconciliation can offer settlers a way to sidestep "the need to establish *political* nation-to-nation relationships" (2020, 206, emphasis added). That is, what hungry listening does most perniciously is frame Indigenous music as "culture" divorced of its constitutive relationships to land, community, history, and politics: in detaching the aesthetic

from the political, it prioritizes the feeling of cultural recognition over political questions of sovereignty and autonomy.

What this book's extended readings of Indigenous sound offers, then, is a politics of listening that is highly attuned to more-than-human materialities, and intersectional nuances of listening. What it offers Indigenous readers, I cannot say, but what it offers settler readers is an invitation to sit with the discomfort of impasse, with confronting blockages, and with the violence of our impulses to know, to understand, to access. That parts of this book aren't for me, and don't invite me in, slows me down, allows me to listen differently. This is listening not as (multi)cultural appreciation but as a ceremonial movement toward the political work of decolonization—which is to say to dismantling hungry listening, to affirming the necessity of others gathering to dream worlds *without me*.

Notes

1. Man's Ruin was an important record label for doom metal in the 90s and early 2000s, but my use of it here is more indebted to Sylvia Wynter's (2003) work on Man as the colonialist overrepresentation of the human.

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