

SO! Reads: Roshanak Khesti's Modernity's Ear

Shayna M. Silverstein

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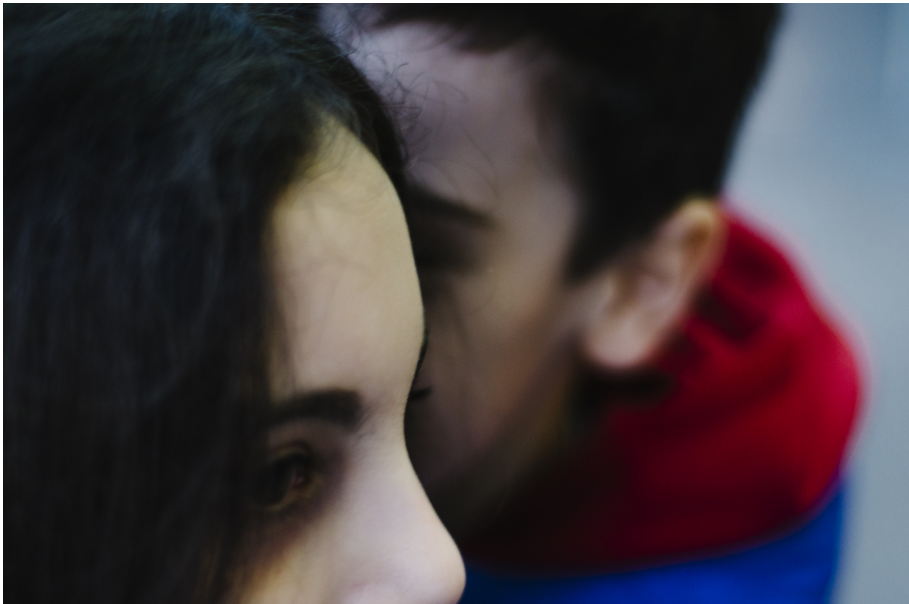
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Abstract

"I drifted to another place and time," reminisces drummer and musicologist Mickey Hart in his 2003 book about salvaging indigenous musical traditions, *Songcatchers: In Search of the World's Music*.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Black Studies, Book Review, Cultural Studies, Field Recording, History



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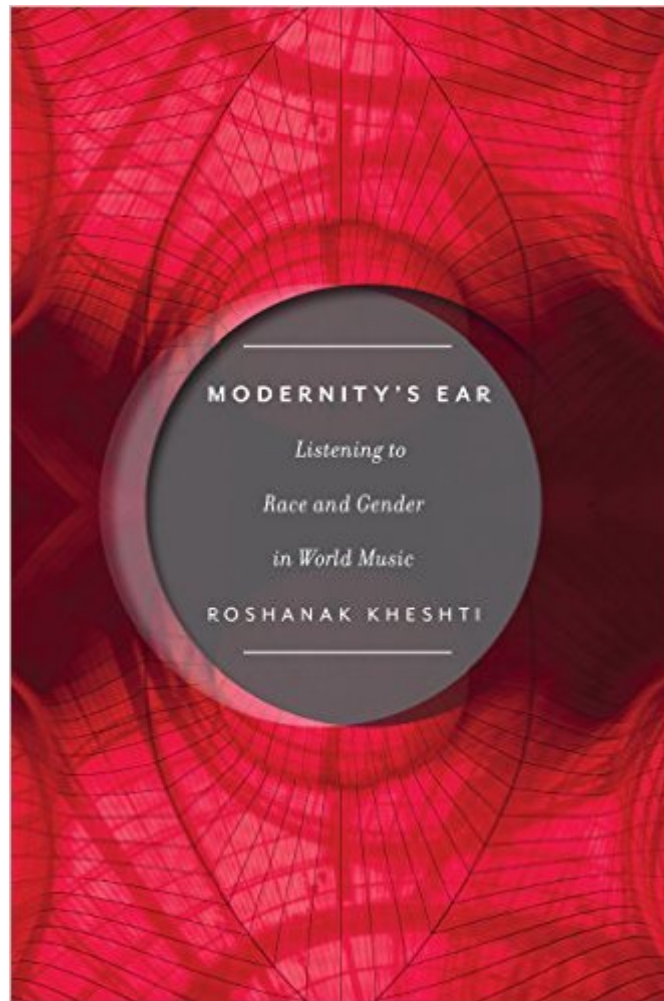
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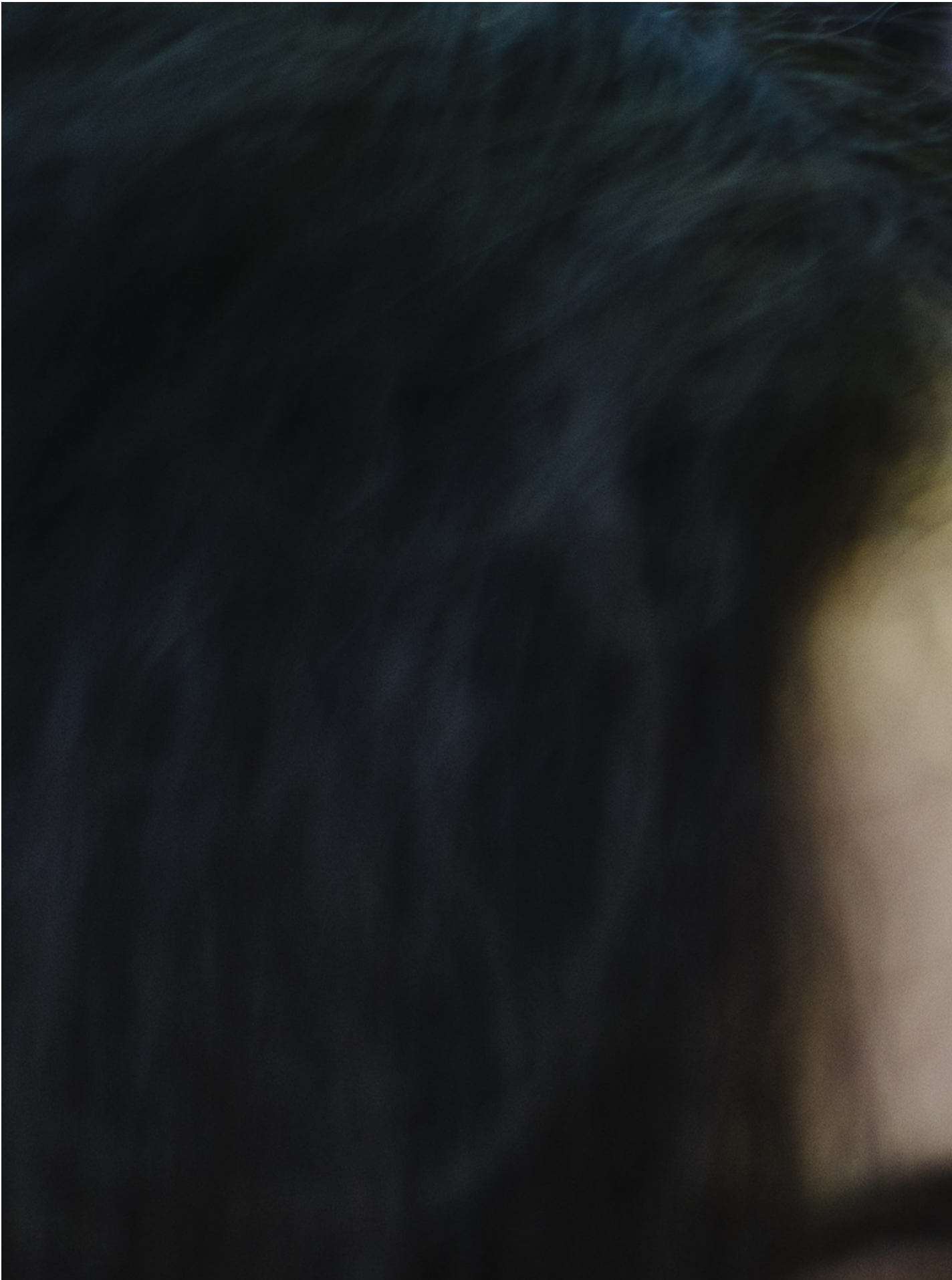


"I drifted to another place and time," reminisces drummer and musicologist [Mickey Hart](#) in his 2003 book about salvaging indigenous musical traditions, [Songcatchers: In Search of the World's Music](#). He continues, "Every day I rushed home, put on the sounds of the Pygmies [on the old RCA Victrola], and melted into their very being." For the Grateful Dead drummer and world music producer, this experience of disorientation would eventually shape his transformation into a "songcatcher," or one who seeks to preserve the intangible cultural heritage of indigenous music. In [Modernity's Ear: Race and Gender in World Music](#), author Roshanak Kheshti interrogates the "origin myth" presented by Hart, along with other collective fantasies and historical narratives that urge listening to world music. She argues that we must look beyond the political and economic exploitation of actual musicians to consider the economy of desire in which the conditions of possibility for such exploitation are formed. In contrast to a critical discourse on musical appropriation and exploitation among ethnomusicologists, one that [Martin Stokes](#) acknowledges is "marked by an anxious awareness of complexity and complicity" with world music (835), Kheshti deftly tunes into racialized and gendered yearnings for the recorded sounds of others.



Sounds in bodies

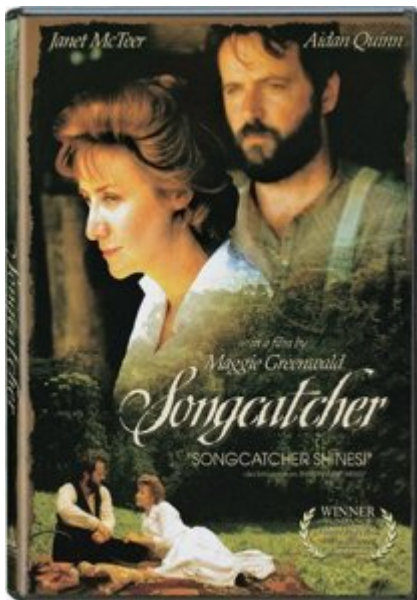
Crucial to Kheshti's argument is her radical proposition for what occurs as, to briefly return to Hart's aural memories, the sounds of others "melt" into our "very being." In a crucial maneuver that focuses on how what is being heard is shaped by the embodied experience of listening, Kheshti proposes that "the object [of listening] becomes a part of the self by being taken into the body" (41). Thus when "sound, the listener's body, escape, and affect fold into one another" (54-56) in the act of listening (a Derrida-derived encounter that Kheshti dubs "invagination"), selfhood is performatively constituted through the aural other. Moreover, the pleasure of imagining the other through listening, writes Kheshti, is not only the hegemonic form of listening within the world music industry but an experience of desire that Western media markets have historically capitalized upon.



"Whispers" by Flickr user Nicola Colella, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

Given the ways in which listening embodies an economy of desire, Kheshti tells the history of this libidinal economy through a narrative in which modern selfhood is constructed through the racialized and gendered aural other. The Godzilla in this narrative is the World Music Culture Industry (WMCi), an entity conjured by Kheshti in reference to the historical juncture of comparative musicologists in the early twentieth century with the popular music recording industry, a coupling that she argues spawned the globalized product of modern media known as world music. As a set of hybrid musical practices designed by and large for Western media markets, world music is the key object of her inquiry (in contrast to the diversity of musical practices worldwide).

The imagined listener



Though the book does not proceed chronologically, the first chapter seeks to interweave memory with history by opening with the early twentieth century. Stressing the pioneering role of white female sound archivists, this chapter is crucial for setting up the historical significance of the feminization of listening, a process familiar to readers of [Jonathan Sterne](#), [Louise Michele Newman](#), and [William Howland Kenney](#). Kheshti puts *Songcatcher* (2000), a feature film about a fictional comparative musicologist who dives into Appalachian country and “discovers” Scottish and Irish ballads thought to have gone extinct, into conversation with the iconic images of Frances Densmore, an ethnologist affiliated with the Bureau of American Ethnology in the 1910s, who famously staged phonographic recordings of the Blackfoot chief, Mountain Chief (Nin-Na-Stoko). The point of convergence between these materials is the gendered and racialized politics of who was sent where to record whose sounds: white female sound archivists, spurned by their male colleagues and sent to the periphery of their respective fields to practice their craft. Once in the field, these comparative musicologists, one fictional and one real, committed acts of racial appropriation and erasure. The song catcher deracinates Appalachia by stripping the region of its Native American and African-American histories in favor of the

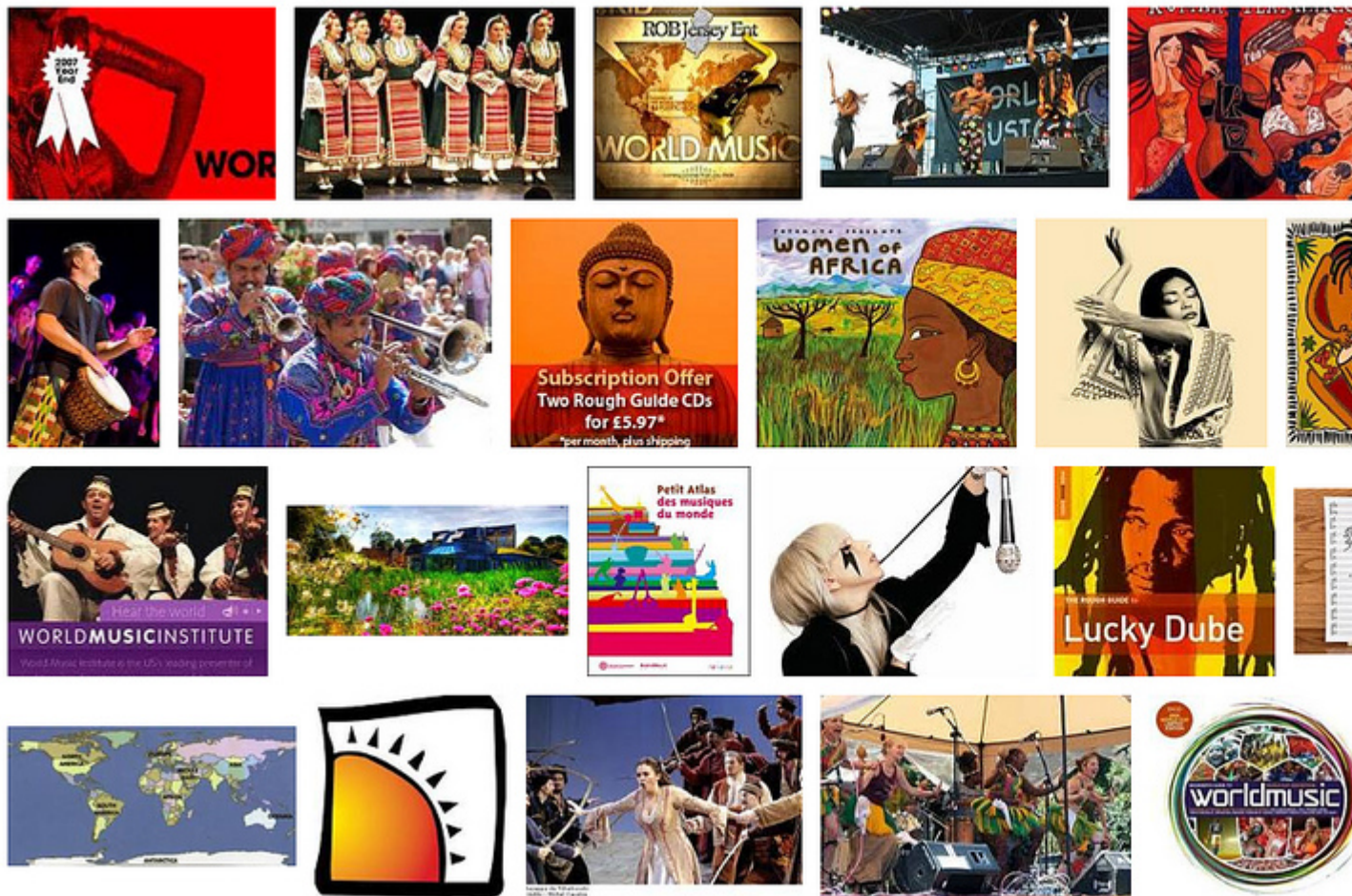
'collective origin fantasy' that links European and American genealogies, while Densmore, among others, domesticates indigenous sounds in her work for the Bureau.



Frances Densmore recording Mountain Chief. Picture by Harris & Ewing [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

The very presence of these upwardly mobile women in the sonic-social worlds that they listen to leaves a trace on their phonographic recordings. These aural traces, Kheshti contends, mark the processes of settler colonialism and salvage ethnography by which indigenous bodies are subjected and made subject through phonographic recording techniques (what she calls 'phonographic subjectivity'), and in particularly gendered and racialized ways. Kheshti traces the performative effects of these aural traces on contemporary world music in her fieldwork with a Bay area world music label in the early 2000s. In particular, she reveals that the target listener for contemporary world music is white and female, and, that this fact is an apparent truism among music executives, or at least the executive who she worked for. This revelation is the cornerstone for Kheshti's unfolding of the aurality of this figure, the white female listener of contemporary world music.

Though the book tends to favor intensive re-readings of critical and psychoanalytic theory (from Adorno and Benjamin to Freud and Lacan) over thick ethnographic description, Kheshti touches upon key encounters in this culture industry to explain how listening to world music engenders modernity's ear. For instance, she transcribes segments from a radio show in Northern California in which the host, a middle-aged white female, discusses what constitutes "African rhythms" with a record label executive. The two banter about this misnomered subject for some length. The host interprets what she is hearing as "African rhythms coming through." Her visitor, an expert in world music, affirms and clarifies this attribution: "Yeah, absolutely. The rhythm on this particular song... is from a style of music called Afro-beat... that rhythm you're hearing is definitely African, so, you don't know nothing, you're learning" (52). Kheshti interprets this banter as an example of how world music listeners "cherish" the experience of listening to sonic difference as a moment to live out "fantasy and imaginative play" (54), in other words, that the pleasures experienced through aurality have become definitive of twentieth-century modernity.



“world music 2” by Flickr user wayne marshall, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

In other chapters, she details how record labels fulfill this fantasy through the production of hybrid sound media. The orchestration of these sounds in the studio not only enables the listener to feel “lost” and transcend the contingencies of the listening event, they also “pronounce and suppress presences and absences of all sorts of bodies and grains” (77). Drawing on phenomenological descriptions of her own listening experiences as well as liner notes and other commercial media, she describes how non-Western sounds are encoded as feminine, whereas the synthetic production and digital manipulation of sounds are rendered techno-logically modern and masculine. Racialized and feminized bodies are put to work in constituting the modern cosmopolitan listener. Furthermore, Kheshti argues that market mobility and aesthetic mobility are gendered male and alterity is gendered female in ways that link, for her, to miscegenation. The listening self reproduces dominant forms of heteronormativity in the consumption of modern sound media.

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Kheshti offers a radical alternative to these normative listening practices by turning to field recordings taken by Zora Neale Hurston between 1933 and 1939. Trained by Franz Boas in the

traditions of nascent cultural anthropology, Hurston is kin to Densmore and those who worked for the Bureau of American Ethnology a few decades earlier. Like them, she goes to record America's aural others, or "black folk." But unlike her white foremothers, Hurston does not attempt to splice out the "noise" of the recordings. She "refuses fidelity" (126). Instead of staging field recordings, she made studio recordings of herself performing songs and discussing rituals. When recording her interlocutors, she interrupts, interjects, and poses directorial cues that Kheshti reads as an attempt to resist the desire to faithfully (re)produce an archive of phonographic subjects.



ca. June 1935, Eatonville, Florida, USA — Author and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston sitting on a porch in Eatonville

Recommended for advanced graduate students and faculty, this virtuosic and tightly rehearsed tour through critical and psychoanalytic theory offers an ambitious and groundbreaking retake on an industry that we thought we understood, perhaps too intimately. Kheshti asks her readers to hold themselves accountable to their own forms of aural pleasure. In so doing, she offers a fresh perspective on the role of embodiment in relation to knowledge production. Rather than embracing somatic methods of inquiry as a welcome challenge to inductive reasoning, she argues that taking pleasure in listening enables the commodification of desire that sustains the world music culture industry.

Kheshti shifts the discussion of world music qua music (aesthetics, history, representation) towards issues of alterity and sound. As such, this book contributes to sound studies by holding the field accountable for difference, and, by inscribing this accountability within the history of the field itself. Indeed, *Modernity's Ear* is about how the forces of desire that constitute the modern listening self are enveloped in the aural other as phonographic subject.

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Featured image: “ear” by Flickr user Leo Reynolds, CC-BY-NC-SA 2.0

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Shayna Silverstein is an assistant professor of Performance Studies at Northwestern University. Her research generally examines the performative processes of politics, culture, and society in relation to sound and movement in the contemporary Middle East. Her current book project examines the performance tradition of Syrian dabke as a means for the strategic contestation of social class, postcolonial difference, and gender dynamics in contemporary Syria. She has contributed to peer-reviewed journals and several anthologies including *The Arab Avant-Garde: Music, Politics, and Modernity*, *Islam and Popular Culture*, the *Sublime Frequencies Companion*, and *Syria: From Reform to Revolt*. Previously a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in the Penn Humanities Forum, Shayna received her PhD in Ethnomusicology from the University of Chicago and her BA in History from Yale University.

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