Canonization and the Color of Sound Studies

Budhaditya Chattopadhyay

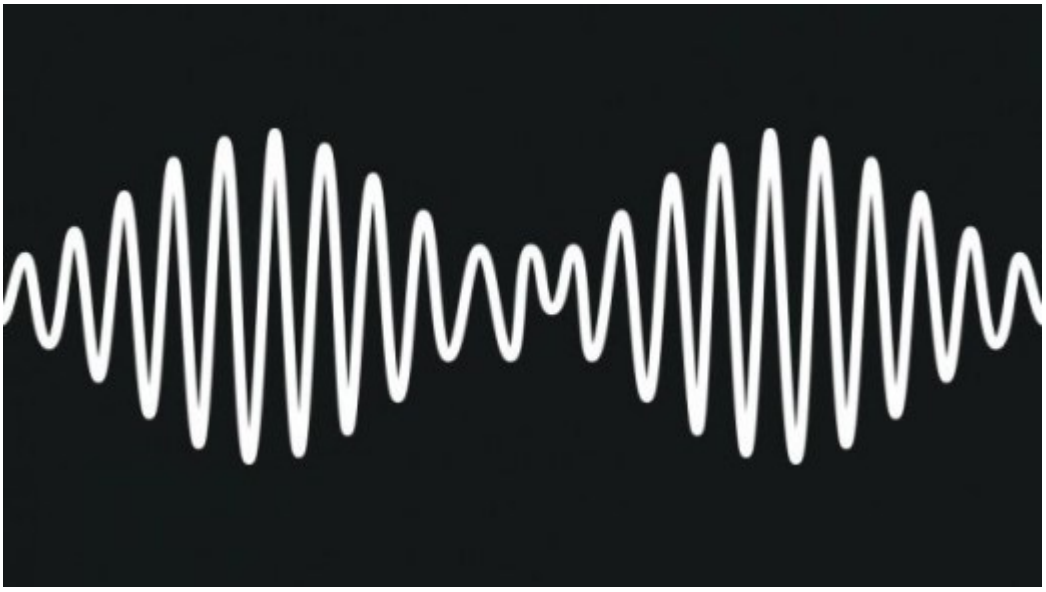
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Abstract

Last December, a renowned sound scholar unexpectedly trolled one of my Facebook posts. In this post I shared a link to my recently published article "Beyond Matter: Object-disoriented Sound Art (2017)", an original piece rereading of sound art history.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Humanism, Identity, Information, Methodology



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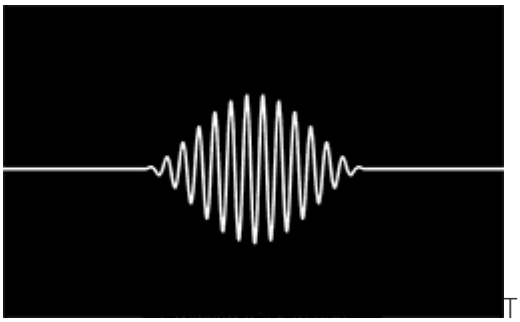
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Last December, a renowned sound scholar unexpectedly trolled one of my Facebook posts. In this post I shared a link to my recently published article "Beyond Matter: Object-disoriented Sound Art (2017)", an original piece rereading of sound art history. With an undocumented charge, the scholar attacked me personally and made a public accusation that I have misinterpreted his work in a few citations. I have followed this much-admired scholar's work, but I never met him personally. As I closely read and investigated the concerned citations, I found that the three minor occasions when I have cited his work neither aimed at misrepresenting his work (there was little chance), nor were they part of the primary argument and discourse I was developing.

What made him react so abruptly? I have enjoyed reading his work during my research and my way of dealing with him has been respectful, but why couldn't he respect me in return? Why couldn't he engage with me in a scholarly manner within the context of a conversation rather than making a thoughtless comment in public aiming to hurt my reputation?

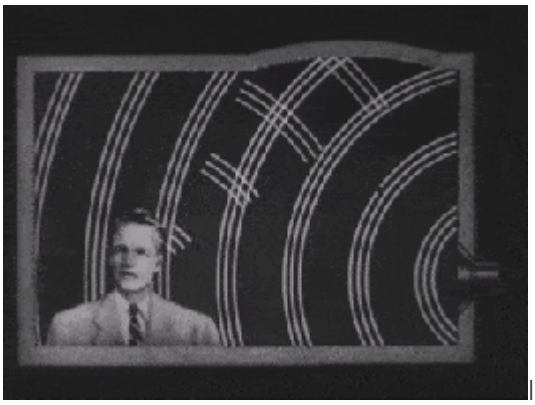
Consider the social positioning. This scholar is a well-established white male senior academic, while I am a young and relatively unknown researcher with a non-white, non-European background, entering an arena of sound studies which is yet closely guarded by the Western, predominantly white, male academics. This social divide cannot be ignored in finding reasons for his outburst. I immediately sensed condescension and entitlement in his behavior.



This is not new to me. Both my artistic work and a number of my scholarly works have been purposely ignored or undermined in previous occasions, perhaps due to my non-white, non-European background and epistemology. During the assessment of my doctoral dissertation in a well-known Scandinavian University, for example, the three-member committee harshly attacked the very foundations of my project because of my claim that case studies in Indian cinema could produce important new knowledge in the field of sound studies, media art and film history. However, Indian cinema, the largest producer of films in the global industry, is equally a part of world cinema as European and American cinemas, and studying its sound production would indeed add dimensions to the field of sound studies. Their resistance towards my object of study implied that choosing European cinema would immediately make my hypotheses acceptable.

If we take the field of sound studies as both a context for such objection and a case for observation, notable works such as *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies* (2012), *The Sound Studies Reader* (2012), and *Keywords in Sound* (2015) have been canonized in the global community of sound researchers by the sheer amount of citations and reviews but have a negligible number of non-White, non-Western contributors. Furthermore, there is a serious lack of

representation from the non-White, non-Western scholars and researchers in the bibliographic resources and reference list of these works, which are now considered classics.

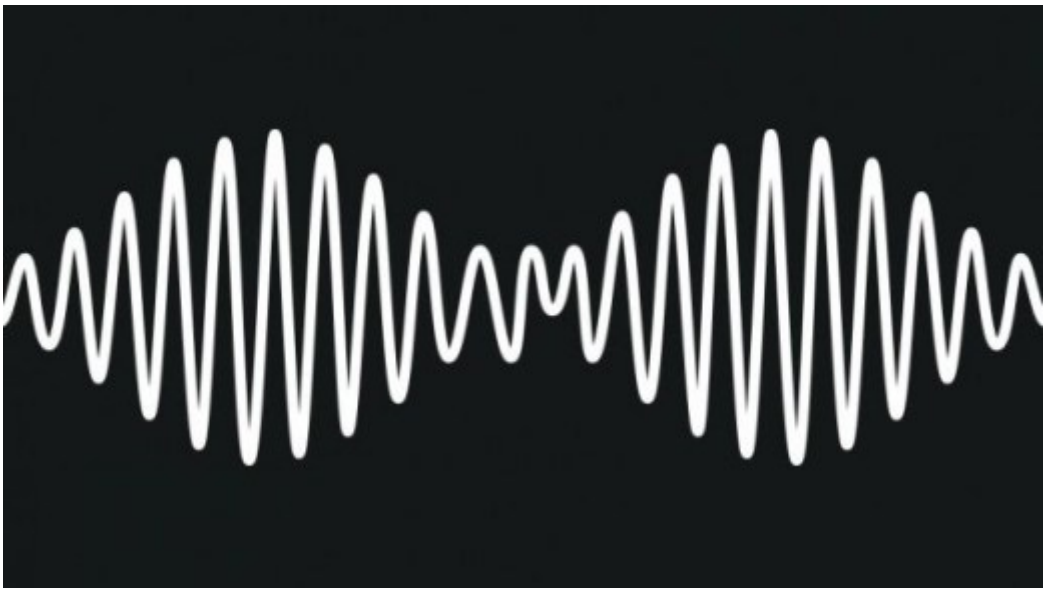


In his essay "On Whiteness and Sound Studies," Gustavus Stadler lamented that scholars of sound studies are overwhelmingly white, and this racial conservatism is limiting the fields' research as well as social outreach. It is indeed an act of complacent ignorance not to engage with African and Asian thinkers regarding their sonically rich cultures; indeed, many of their works are available, such as in the Harvard Oriental Series. John Stuart Mill noted, "He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that."

I am inspired by my fellow colleagues and peers (of all colors) and personally grateful to some of them for their sympathetic ears, but as a young researcher I cannot help but be concerned about an unfair social divide upheld in sound studies that I feel must be addressed. In my work, both as a sound artist and sound researcher, I have endeavored to bridge this gap in my capacity. Much work needs to be made in pushing the horizons and shifting the perspectives of the field of sound studies. However, the untoward resistances my kind of young scholars from "other" cultural and intellectual traditions met make it difficult to be read widely, let alone be canonized.

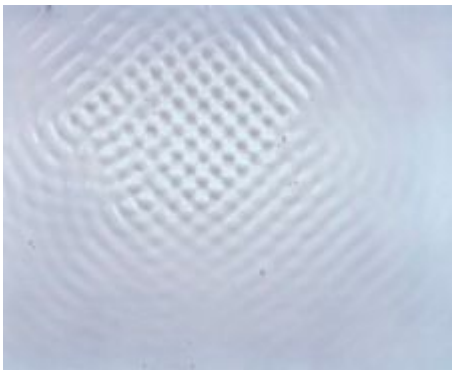
I am discussing here my experiences as a case for critical observation. Throughout the development of my doctoral project, "Audible Absence" in the aforementioned Scandinavian university, I had to face a recurring question in most departmental meetings and seminars: what's the point in supporting my project in the context of European knowledge production? I suspect this constant questioning of an original research contribution comes from a disdain for a non-Western subject. Also, more often than not, in many scholarly gatherings, I observed a tendency by the white-Western scholars to pigeonhole my work as "southeast Asian studies" or "Indian studies," identifying it only with mere cultural background, therefore deeming it ancillary to the larger fields of Arts and Humanities within which my research aspires for a general and more universal recognition.

Such divisive and sectarian attitude towards my work has perhaps been aiming to impose identity politics so that an overt sense of *difference* is underscored. This deliberate production and proliferation of difference has been the tool to marginalize the voice of the "other" in the realm of knowledge formation, which, in actual practice, is yet enjoyed and protected mostly for a certain class, color, and/or race. These social and prejudicial borders have been built on the politics of inclusion and exclusion by what cultural theorist Kandice Chuh calls "avoiding engagement with 'difference,' and especially with racialized difference."



In a recent interview, the renowned professor of psychology at Harvard Steven Pinker has argued that "identity politics is the syndrome in which people's beliefs and interests are assumed to be determined by their membership in groups, particularly their sex, race, sexual orientation (…) when it spreads beyond the target of combatting discrimination and oppression, it is an enemy of reason and Enlightenment values." No wonder, the resistance to accepting the scholarly perspectives from non-White scholars and non-Western intellectual traditions has perhaps made the field of sound studies insular to the formation and practicing of new knowledge. The protectionism embedded in encouraging and practicing color and racial difference is a great disservice to humanistic scholarship and enemy of an equal knowledge sharing. With the excuse of tradition and community, the safeguarding of certain groups while ignoring others based on their racial identities has resulted in grave ignorance.

How to engage with such an institutionalized and well-fed "White Canon" coming from outside of it? How to intervene substantially and fruitfully so that the color bias of scholarship is destabilized and there is equal recognition and interest for all intellectual traditions irrespective of color, race, culture and nationality?



Cymatics, Speaker vibrations through milk, Stock Image

As some historians have argued, this so-called "White Canon" is a social and political construct to push the non-White scholarship and knowledge production on the margin. Claimed to be a child of reason and Enlightenment values, the European intellectual tradition was deliberately posed with a "holier than thou" attitude for the imperialist and colonial (mis)adventures Europe had been making in the non-West. In his seminal work Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference renowned historian Dipesh Chakrabarty states: "In the social sciences, these are invariably thinkers one encounters within the tradition that has come to call itself 'European' or 'Western.' I am aware that an entity called "the European intellectual tradition" stretching back to the ancient Greeks is a fabrication of relatively recent European history."

The European intellectual tradition has been a fabrication of a recent history, as Professor Chakrabarty notes. Many postcolonial scholars like Chakrabarty have argued that the writing of this history had deep political and hegemonic implications, which was hard to avoid following the colonization of many part of the non-West by Europeans with violent oppression of other thoughts. Philosopher Bryan W. Van Norden, in his new book Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto (2017), have claimed that the general disdain, disrespect and ignorance most European scholars have shown to their non-Western counterparts, demonstrates that the European intellectual tradition, which is so obsessed with its communal whiteness and paranoid about the other (non-West), is narrow-minded, unimaginative, and even xenophobic.

Indeed, the most remarkable privilege that white European scholars enjoy—besides, of course, an empowered access to better jobs in the universities and institutional funding–is the entitlement to universal identification and canonization of their work in the respective fields of work, while non-white scholars are all too often pushed into the margins on the excuse of their racial, cultural or mere national identities. The scholars of postmodern studies have stated that the body of scholarship in the Arts and Humanities is biased because the traditional focus of academic studies of Western culture and history has predominantly been on works produced by Western white men. It is no surprise, philosopher Jay Stevenson argues: "[t]raditional literature has been found to have been written by 'dead white males' to serve the ideological aims of a conservative and repressive Anglo hegemony [...] In an array of reactions against the race, gender, and class biases found to be woven into the tradition of Anglo literature." Non-white scholars find it much harder to posit their research in the universal canonical consideration; if these scholars are also women-identified and/or queer, it's even more difficult. This is not only an astoundingly unfair position, but also a dangerous bias.



White acoustic ceiling, image by Flickr User Will Taylor (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

In the field of sound studies such biases can be found if looked through the lens of an outsider. The awkward silences in response to a new publication, lack of reviews, reluctance to include in canonized reading lists, repeated refusals by western publishing houses, and a lack of citation in mainstream publications, add to this the sporadic incidents of trolling such as the one that I described in the beginning of this piece – all these that I, and many other scholars who come from other background and intellectual traditions, constantly face, act against the foundation of knowledge production, sharing and scholarship.It is not difficult to observe that this vision has major contradictions with the very reason and Enlightenment values from where the tradition claims to originate. This is a serious charge, but one that tries to explain why the rich philosophical traditions of China, India, Africa, and the Indigenous peoples of the Americas are ignored by almost all philosophy departments in Europe and the larger West.

As my story shows, the paranoia with which the other voices are greeted in the white canonized community reveals how new voices capable of talking in 'their' language freak them out. Heard from this perspective, the social media outburst of the scholar mentioned earlier is not surprising. It is a question of privilege that bothers many of the Eurocentric and white-obsessed scholars, who don't seem to like–or feel that they even have to acknowledge–that the other voices from outside of the protected areas aim to enter the field and eat the proverbial "cake."My work–among many other (re)emerging Asian, African and other non-Western researchers–does not seek to snatch part of this same limited "cake," however, but rather aims to build an improved and larger plate and a wider table altogether, capable of hosting a multiplicity of tastes, colors, and splendors, and holding great pleasure in sharing knowledge among ever-curious and open minds.

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Featured Image: *White Baffling Material, Stock Image*

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***Budhaditya Chattopadhyay** is an Indian-born media artist, researcher, and writer, with a PhD in sound studies from Leiden University, The Netherlands. Prior to his PhD, Chattopadhyay has graduated from the national film school of India specializing in sound, and received a Master of Arts degree in new media from Aarhus University, Denmark researching on sound art. Focussing on sound as his primary medium, Chattopadhyay produces works for installation and live performance broadly dealing with contemporary issues such as climate crisis, human intervention in the environment and ecology, race and migration. Chattopadhyay has received numerous fellowships, residencies and international awards, and his works have been exhibited, performed or presented across the globe. Chattopadhyay has an extensive list of scholarly publication in the areas of contemporary media, cinema and sound studies in leading peer-reviewed journals.Chattopadhyay will be joining the American University of Beirut from 30 August 2018 as a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in sound studies.*

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